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Latin Victims are Invisible to the International Media

Colombia continues to be the country with the highest number of new anti-personnel landmine victims in the world, with 10 other countries on the American continents having problems with mines as well. This situation, however, seems not to exist for the international news media. Even specialized publications seldom show a picture or publish an article about Central or South America; consequently, most people still believe that the landmine problem is confined exclusively to Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

by Vinicius Souza and Maria Eugênia Sá | MediaQuatro

I n November 2008, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines issued the Landmine Monitor Report 2008: Toward a Mine-Free World, which shows Colombia (from 2005 until the present) as the No. 1 country in the world for new anti-personnel landmine victims. Allow us to repeat this important fact: Presently, no other country in the world has more accidents from landmines than Colombia. Repetition of this statement is necessary because the international media and public continue to ignore Colombia’s situation.

As freelance photographers, researchers and documentarians, we have participated in countless conferences, seminars, exhibitions, forums, interviews and film festivals across Latin America since 2004, denouncing this situation and informing others that, in addition to Colombia, 10 other Latin American countries also deal with mines in their territories. Of the thousands of people that participated with us in these events, the ones who were not astonished by this information were rare, and most of them were from Colombia. Even in Peru, Venezuela and Mexico, only the representatives of organizations directly connected to mine action were aware of the issue.

In Brazil, we obtained support from TV Brasil Canal Internacional, which produces a daily newssheet about South America, for the finalization of our documentary, Mined America. None of the people we worked with were aware that their neighbors walk on minefields. In the foreword of our book by the same name, the renowned photographer Tim Page, a mine victim himself, attests that Mined America “is the first … light on the issue from Southeast Asia and the Balkans for over 10 years, had no knowledge about the seriousness of Colombia’s plight. How could the media have ignored such an alarming fact for so long? In addition, what are the consequences of this lack of knowledge for the population of the affected areas?”

The Big Media

Traditionally, the media, in part through the actions of celebrities and the entertainment industry, have highlighted the issue of mines in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Princess Diana never visited the mine victims in Nicaragua. Angelina Jolie has not searched for orphans to adopt among American and especially Colombian victims, in countries not having a “traditional history” of mines, the vine is usually Europe, with works such as No Man’s Land in Bosnia and Beyond Borders in Colombia.

It is important to emphasize the difference between the stories invented by donors in nations that are widely known to suffer from the mines issue, such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Lebanon and the countries in Africa, and the monetary expenditures in Latin American countries, especially Colombia. In spite of having officially registered 1,110 new victims in 2005, 1,056 in 2006 and 995 in 2007, Colombia is ranked only 10th in funding for anti-mine activities in 2007, with a total amount of US$8.8 million. By way of comparison, Cambodia, with 352 victims listed in 2007, received $30.8 million for mine action in that year. The situation has improved a bit since 2000, however, when Colombia was listed as 10th in the investment ranking with $4.3 million. This was a lower ranking than Nicaragua, which, in that year, registered only seven victims and was granted $5.7 million.

Symptomatically, this also occurs with regard to the presence of pictures of Latin American and especially Colombian victims, both in specialized publications and in newspapers and magazines with general content. In Brazil, for instance, with the exception of publishing a few of our articles in vernaculars such as Folha de S.Paulo and Rolling Stone (a magazine focused on pop music and culture) in recent years only the Globo newpaper has published a substantial front-page article about the subject. The article featured eight pictures of victims and was placed in its Sunday magazine on 11 November 2007. This publication, however, had no influence whatsoever on any newscast of TV Globo, the largest and most important television network in the country. Even in the Colombian press, the publications with detailed reports on the subject are scarce. Paradoxically, the Brazilian edition of Rolling Stone published an article. In the same vein, a series of articles showing some very touching pictures of Colombian mine victims was published in Issue 98 of the men's magazine Lhôs.

Specialized Media

With regard to specialized publications, things are not that different. Over the years, the Executive Summary of the Landmine Monitor Report, published by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines since 1999, always includes pictures of mine victims on the cover; however, on only two occasions the pictured individuals were Latin American. Not surprisingly, in its first issue, the cover showed pictures of a Cambodian child who had been photographed four years earlier in 1995. Inside, the pictures emphasized Asian and Afghan victims, despite the publication already reporting that Colombia was the only country in the Americas where landmines were still being employed, and that Colombia and Nicaragua had the biggest contamination problems on the continent. Only in the following year (2000) would the publication show the first pictures of Colombia, the photograph of a quichebates (“paw-breaker”) on page 20 and another of a victim of the Bolivar departments (state) on page 23. The 2001 report listed, for the first time in the Executive Summary, the official number of victims in Colombia in 1999-2000 as a total of 98, which was substantially less than the more than 1,100 victims in Cambodia but double the approximate 50 victims in Nicaragua estimated then by the Nicaraguan Red Cross.

The 2001 Landmine Monitor Report shows one of the most beautiful images of the whole series on its cover: the sepia picture of a crouching child occupying the space between a crutch and the healthy leg in a wheelchair in the background. The child’s surroundings are also photographed, in addition to the Spanish inscription on the T-shirt of the young man in the background.
“Aguas mirana, San Salvador” (“Somebody loves me, San Salvador”), a song that was a hit in the victim’s country of birth. According to the report, it was not possible to quantitatively number the victims of landmine victims from El Salvador between 2010 and 2001—the most pessimistic estimate was 23 injured individuals.

Regarding the showcasing of Latin American images within the 2011 LMR Executive Summary, there was only one picture of mine being destroyed in Argentina, one of the donation of used prostheses and another of prostheses being manufactured, these last two in Nicaragua. On page 34, there is one photograph of a Latin American victim, taken in January of 2000. From January 2000-June 2001, 23 victims in Nicaragua were reported, while in the same period, Colombian victims registered 27. Even with this large increase of victims, the publication failed to provide any images to illustrate the problem on the report pages.

In subsequent editions of the LMR, this pattern persists. Despite the continued increase in the casualties by mines in the Americas (documented in the pages of the report), the pictures of the area are mostly of treaties, exhibitions and festivals, denoting work and destruction of stored mines, which are invariably shown in the central pages of the report. The covers are reserved for victims in Africa (Angola, 2002 and 2005), Asia (India, 2003 and Cambodia, 2006) and Eastern Europe (Estonia, 2004).

The first pictures of Colombian victims appear only on pages 53 and 54 of the LMR Executive Summary for 2005. It was in the edition of the following year, 2006, that the image reached the top position on the global ranking. A true portrait of a Colombian mine victim on its cover, with 1,373 individuals affected between January 2004 and August 2005. In the edition of the following year, 2007, it became clear that no other country would take Colombia’s place anytime soon. Despite of these circumstances, the report opted to publish a portrait of a Colombian mine victim on its cover, the only picture of Latin Americans showed a soccer game with aouder born mine victim.

Not until the 2007 edition would a Colombian victim be granted a Landmine Monitor cover photo. In the same edition, two additional pictures of Colombian victims would appear on page 28 and 43. These last two were taken in the late summer of 2006 in Nicaragua and the Americas. A soccer game, again of a soccer game with disabled individuals), a sole Colombian, and a person whose nationality was not disclosed. This was the first time in which the report placed a photo of a former guerrilla and a soldier killed walking over the victim seen in the picture in the publication, and four of them depict Colombian accident victims.

The Journal of ERW and Mine Action

Unfortunately, the same situation has been occurring in The Journal of ERW and Mine Action. The first pictures of Latin American mine casualties could be seen in the publication, in its third edition, Issue 2.2 (June 1998), displays a controlled explosion in a Falkland/Malvinas Islands. Images of Latin Americans, however, would only appear much later, in Issue 5.2 (August 2001), which was entirely dedicated to the subject of the Americas. This issue of The Journal was also the first time in which the situation in Colombia was more adequately presented.31,32 Images used included a photo of children playing with a metal detector, a Colombian veteran with a metal detector in his hand, and another of prostheses being manufactured, these last two in Nicaragua. No picture of a landmine victim from the Americas was shown in the publication, in its third edition, Issue 2.2 (June 1998), displays a controlled explosion in a Falkland/Malvinas Islands. These images are the only pictures of South and Central America. This issue of The Journal was also the first time in which the situation in Colombia was more adequately presented.31,32 Images used included a photo of children playing with a metal detector, a Colombian veteran with a metal detector in his hand, and another of prostheses being manufactured, these last two in Nicaragua.

In Issue 5.2, the only pictures of Latam American victims that stood out were taken by professionals and came with a short caption describing the scene. A good example of this was the picture in the article showing Salvador Santamaria River, a former guerrilla and victim of landmines—especially considering that the Colombian

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