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An overview of the Argentine Sand War and its implications for Latin American peace and security.

Argentina

by Zach Wall [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The heart of the Argentine landmine/unexploded ordnance issue is a territorial dispute between Argentina and the United Kingdom. Argentina acknowledges that contamination exists in the U.K.-occupied Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas), 800 kilometers (500 miles) off the South Atlantic Ocean’s southern coast. However, the government challenges British claims to the islands, and has asserted its sovereign rights over not only the Falklands, but also South Georgia, the South Sandwich Islands, and surrounding areas. The Falkland-Malvinas Islands were mined by both Argentine and British forces during the 1982 conflict between the two nations. Because both nations claim sovereignty over the contaminated areas, both share responsibility in complying with the Ottawa Convention’s guidelines for mine clearance. According to a Cranfield University field survey of the Islands, Argentine forces laid approximately 20,000,000 personnel and 5,000 anti-vehicle landmines during the conflict.

Mine Action

On 1 March 2008, Argentina became a State Party to the Ottawa Convention, and under Article 5 of the Convention, Argentina is required to complete clearance of all mined areas by 1 March 2010.20 Argentina’s mine-action program is conducted by the Humanitarian Demining Officer under the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. However, clearance efforts on the Falkland-Malvinas Islands have generally been hampered by the ongoing dispute between Argentina and the United Kingdom. At the Ninth Meeting of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention in November 2008, the United Kingdom—claiming full sovereignty over the Falklands—submitted an extension request for 10 years, the maximum period allowed by the Convention.21 The International Campaign to Ban Landmines criticized this request, calling the lack of demining progress to date “extremely disappointing.”22

The United Kingdom and Argentina signed a joint agreement calling for a study on the feasibility of mine/UXO clearance on the Falkland-Malvinas Islands in October 2010, and, in 2006, Cranfield University answered that call by undertaking an environmental impact assessment in the Islands. Sponsored by the British-Armenian Joint Working Party, the study received 90 percent of its funding from Armenia. The results of the Cranfield EIA were published in a final report in late 2007. The Cranfield EIA concluded that 127 minefields on the Falkland-Malvinas Islands remain active today.23 Despite the humanitarian outcry for landmine clearance, certain invasive demining techniques can cause adverse effects on the local ecology. With this consideration in mind, environmental precautions for demining in the Falkland-Malvinas Islands—home to several rare species, including penguins and other seabirds—will be necessary. Remediation methods for more invasive demining techniques will need to be developed and tested before wide-scale clearance will be possible. In a few sites, penguin colonies might be particularly problematic for demining efforts, and these areas will require special attention.

Cluster Munitions

During the 1982 Falklands conflict, BL-755 bombs24 were deployed by British forces against the Argentine troops at Port Stanley, Port Howard and Goose Green, marking the first use of cluster munitions in the Western Hemisphere. Since then, cluster bombs have been utilized in just one other instance in the Americas (during the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983).25 Argentina, briefly a cluster-munitions producer, officially became involved in the international campaign to eliminate these weapons by signing the Convention on Cluster Munitions that came into force in May 2008, and subsequently signed the Protocol Against impunity for the Crimes Committed Against the Humanitarian Law and Conventions and the Victims of such Crimes.26

Small Arms/Light Weapons

In June 2007, the Permanent Mission of Argentina to the United Nations issued the comprehensive Report of the Argentine Republic on the Implementation of the Program of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Forms.27 This document outlines the recent legislative and law-enforcement efforts to curb arms trafficking in Argentina. The report also highlights the national campaign to raise awareness about arms and promote disarmament. In December 2006, the government enacted Act No. 26,216, which declared a “national emergency in relation to firearms, explosives and controlled substances,”28 and called for a national arms-control awareness campaign. The ongoing National Program for the Voluntary Surrender of Firearms, resulting in the collection of more than 70,000 weapons and 500,000 rounds of ammunition in its first year alone. Participation in...
the program is anonymous, and the government offers economic incentives for handing over personal firearms. According to Andrés Metzner, Director of the National Arms Registry (RENAR), while men make up 97 percent of gun users in Argentina, women Registro (RENAR), while men make up 97 percent of gun users in Argentina, women have thus far been more receptive to the awareness campaign. The challenge will be to reach out to more women.

At an event co-hosted by RENAR and the Argentine Network for Disarmament in October 2007, more than 20,000 of the collect- ed weapons were melted down at a steel plant in Campana, in the city of Buenos Aires.14 The destroyed weapons were collected from local RENAR posts throughout the coun- try. The national disarmament program has been widely hailed as a success since the end of 2007. RENAR has collected close to 100,000 voluntarily surrendered weapons.

Looking Ahead

Despite the existing landmine-contamination problem on the disputed Falkland/Malvinas Islands, the Argentine government remains committed to weapons reduction both domes- tically and on the international stage. The coun- try’s cooperation with international initiatives against cluster munitions use and the illicit SA- UW trade are evidence of a multi-faceted ap- proach to minimize the legacy of conflict.

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Chile

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Chile is also a member of the Human Security Net- work, where AP mine action is of great im- portance. Chile has ratified Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weap- ons, which restricts the use of mines, bom- by-traps and other devices. In 2008, Chile promised to put $59 million toward remov- ing its last 125,000 landmines, with a proj- ected end date of 2016, some reports stated 2012 as an early end date. CNAD works with the President of Chile and serves as the Inter- ministerial Coordinator for activities pertain- ing to the Ottawa Convention. CNAD’s main objective is to deter the use and production of landmines, working with organizations inter- nationally to eradicate Chile’s landmine prob- lem. Despite most landmines being burned in difficult terrains with ranging weather conditions, the remaining landmines are being removed in a timely manner. To do this, Chile has received financial assistance from Canada, the European Union, the Neth- erlands, Switzerland, the United States and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitari- an Demining. During 2007, Chile received $420,000 from international sources and put $1.2 million of its own money toward demin- aging. In September 2008, Chile used this money to purchase two MineWolf machines, as well as to fund a training workshop and buy spare parts for the machines. MineWolf provided training for an expert in Chile, who were ready to work in March 2010.

Victim Assistance

There were 88 landmine casualties between 1979 and 1999, 12 of which resulted in death. Five of the deaths and 15 of the casualties were among military personnel. According to the 2008 Landmine Monitor Report, there have been two landmine-related deaths since 2010. There is no conclusive evidence on how many injuries have been sustained. In 2006, as a part of CNAD’s remilitarization initiatives, a survey concerning injuries due to mines and other explosive remnants of war was sent to individuals living near minefields to provide better survivor assistance and compensation, and to determine how many injuries have occurred. Police de Investigaciones, the Chilean investigative police, has been given the responsibility of locating landmine victims and discovering incidents that have occurred since the Pinochet dictatorship, although its results have been widely questioned by non-governmental organizations. CNAD, along with the Chilean government, has provided monetary assistance to mine-accident victims and the communities affected by landmine explosions. Recently, Chile drafted a “law of reparations,” which focuses on standardizing compensation given to victims and their families.

Landmine Education

Chile has made many strides to educate its citizens on the prevention of further landmine casualties. CNAD has distributed pamphlets containing preventive procedures for those who reside in or transit through affected areas, while also marking existing minefields as a precautionary measure. This year, Chile’s mine-action goals include instituting the Campaign for Prevention and Mine Risk

New Report on U.S. Humanitarian-Demining Efforts Published

The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs recently released the eighth edition of To Walk The Earth In Safety, a comprehensive report on U.S. activities related to mine action and conventional-weapons destruction. The report covers efforts in 43 countries by the interagency U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program and the more than 60 partner organizations the State Department collaborates with to raise awareness and resources.

The United States government has contributed more than $1.4 billion to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance since 1993. The U.S. Department of State spent $213.1 million in assistance in 2008. The State Department continues to work bilaterally and multilaterally with international partners to provide humanitarian assistance and exact stricter controls on weapons, stemming the flow of illicit weapons and stabilizing regions.

The government works with many different international and national organizations on landmine removal, thereby building its own mine-action capacity.

Landmine Overview

By December 2003, Chile completed the destruction of 59,000 stockpiled mines with help from the Chilean Army and Army through the Organization of American States’ mine- action program, the Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal (Comprehensive Action Against Antipersonnel Mines). This goal was completed about two years before the Ottawa Convention’s required, proving Chile’s commitment to landmine removal. Chile signed the Convention in 1997 and became a State Party in 2010. As of April 2007, the Comité Nacional de Deminado (Chilean National Demining Commission) declared that 123,439 landmines remained in 181 minefields, covering 15 hectares (37 acres), mostly in hard- to-reach places with few inhabitants. The other 70 percent of mines laid during the Pinochet regime were destroyed after Chile signed the Ottawa Convention. Landmine removal was consistent with the United Nations’ International Mine Action Standards, and only a few thousand landmines have been retained for mine-action training purposes.