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Colombia

by Matthew Voegel [Mine Action Information Center]



As a country plagued with landmines, Colombia has faced a number of challenges relating to victim assistance. To remedy this situation, various government programs have been developed, but their effectiveness has frequently been compromised. Thanks to a number of private organizations, strides are being made to improve victim assistance.

Background

Colombia is the most landmine- and unexploded ordnance-affected country in

the Western Hemisphere. It also continues to have the highest annual number of casualties worldwide from landmines, improvised explosive devices and other explosive remnants of war.^{1,2} Ultimately, many of these problems related to landmines and ERW can be attributed to more than 40 years of ongoing internal conflict between various armed, non-state groups and Colombian government forces.

Guerrilla forces—mainly the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo* and the *Unión Camilista–Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (known as FARC–EP and UC–ELN, respectively)—continue to emplace anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines. Those places impacted by guerrilla mining activity include rural and school areas, national parks and roads used by government forces, and the perimeters around guerrilla camps and around installments where illegal narcotics are produced.²

Unfortunately, the Colombian government's past mining activities still contribute to the list of landmine/UXO hazards; however, since signing the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention³ in 1997, the Colombian government has stopped the production and use of landmines.

Contamination and Its Effects

While the total area of contamination is unknown, Colombia's 2007 Article 7 Report⁴ revealed affected

areas included about 60 percent of the country's 1,098 municipalities.² These statistics are also reflected through the number of casualties and victims from landmines/UXO and ERW every year. From 2005 to 2006, Colombia registered more than 1,100 victims per year or approximately three new victims each day.⁵ While the majority of these victims were military personnel or guerrilla fighters, many of them were also civilians.² According to the National Mine Action Authority, landmines claimed 878 victims in 2007; as of 7 March 2008, the number of registered landmine victims in Colombia totaled 6,674.⁶ The total number of casualties due to landmines and ERW is unknown, since the number of registered victims is probably less than the actual total due to under-reporting. According to the 2007 *Landmine Monitor Report*, with an assumption of 20 percent under-reporting, there could be at least 7,500 casualties.⁷

Victim Assistance and Legislation

The Colombian government has certain types of legislation that offer benefits and services to those who have been injured and affected by landmines and ERW. While these pieces of legislation may look good on paper, the execution of these programs has been less promising. Benefits that have been promised to landmine victims are, in many cases, not being fulfilled. The incentives promised to victims include:

- Monetary assistance through lump-sum payments
- Medical coverage and available prostheses
- Transportation to medical facilities
- Government subsidies for housing
- Educational benefits and job training from state schools⁸

Unfortunately, many victims, health-care workers and local officials do not know about available services and benefits. Many victims are also unaware of their rights as citizens with disabilities, and when they inquire about these benefits, many survivors find it difficult to access them. Survivors are frequently unable to meet the short deadlines for financial assistance and are confused when completing forms and paperwork on their own. Unfortunately, little help can be had from health-care workers and officials who are themselves uninformed on the laws concerning these services.⁸ In some few cases, victims are refused treatment by hospitals, who are either unaware of the facilities' obligations or are worried about the financial implications of assisting victims. These victims often have multiple, serious injuries that are, in many cases, costly to treat; thus victims are viewed as a financial burden to the hospital.⁹

Prostheses are also difficult to obtain even though they are part of the medical care guaranteed by law. In many cases, survivors have been denied replacement prostheses, in exchange for their old ones, by state health authorities and the *Administradoras de Regimen Subsidiado*, which are the companies that act as administrative agents for the government's health-care programs.⁸ In one particular instance from 2006, a coordinator for the *Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas* in the state of Santander helped six or seven different survivors file legal complaints against health-care administrators in order to gain access to medication and prostheses that the survivors were guaranteed by law. All of the survivors won their respective cases, but without the assistance in filing the legal complaints, these survivors might not have been able to claim the benefits to which they were entitled.⁸

Helping Those in Need

Victim assistance is managed and overseen by the *Observatorio de Minas Antipersonal* technical subcommittee on mine victim assistance. This organization falls under the National Interministerial Commission on Antipersonnel Mine Action. For VA, the subcommittee works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Social Protection, the Ministry of Education and *Acción Social*, the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation.² In response to the increased numbers of landmine victims in the country, the government has made VA one the main foci of *Colombia's National Development Plan*

2006–2010. The plan focuses on different activities, including making use of efficient communication systems; guaranteeing the security of medical staff; providing better information about services to survivors and family members; and government prioritizing of survivor assistance as a whole.²

Various nongovernmental organizations—including the *Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas*, the Colombian Centre for Integrated Rehabilitation International, International Committee of the Red Cross, Handicap International and the *Mi Sangre* Foundation—have offered services to help victims. These NGOs work alongside government ministries and other organizations to provide victims with a variety of services, including physical rehabilitation, prosthetics, medical care, educational opportunities and financial assistance.² To provide one example of aid, in 2007 the ICRC assisted 253 victims of mines/ERW financially, and 41 patients received rehabilitation support thanks to the organization. A total of 43 prostheses have been funded or provided to victims through the ICRC. Along with giving monetary support, the organization is initiating programs that ensure victims are made aware of their rights and that government and health-care personnel are educated on their legal obligation to provide free services to these victims. Through leaflets, workshops and lobbying, the ICRC has helped victims receive the care they need and to which they are entitled.⁹ ↕

Biography



Matthew Voegel has been an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* since October 2006. He is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in print journalism at James Madison University.

Endnotes

1. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
2. "Colombia." *Landmine Monitor Report 2007*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2007/colombia.html>. Last updated 6 November 2007. Accessed 5 February 2008.
3. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 5 February, 2008. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention.
4. Article 7 of the Ottawa Convention requires signatories to report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations "as soon as practical, and in any event not later than 180 days after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party," on their implementation measures. After that, signatories are required to submit updated annual reports to the Secretary-General "not later than 30 April of each year." The Ottawa Convention is available at <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 9 June 2008.
5. "Colombia." *E-MINE: The Electronic Mine Information Network*. <http://www.mineaction.org/country.asp?c=8>. Accessed 2 April 2008.
6. "Italy Continues its Aid to OAS Mine-Risk Education and Victim Assistance Efforts in Colombia." *Media-NewsWire*. http://media-newswire.com/release_1061993.html. Accessed 26 March 2008.
7. "Colombia." *Landmine Monitor Report 2006*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2006/>. Accessed 5 February 2008.
8. "Maiming the People: Guerrilla Use of Anti-personnel Landmines and other Indiscriminate Weapons in Colombia." Human Rights Watch. <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/colombia0707/>. Updated July 2007. Accessed 26

March 2008.

9. "ICRC in Colombia 2007." International Committee of the Red Cross. Received from MarÃ§al Izard, ICRC Media Relations Officer for West Africa & Latin America on 14 March 2008.

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