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United States Southern Command, SOUTHCOM

SOUTHCOM has humanitarian demining programs in several Central American countries. With help from the OAS, SOUTHCOM is able to make progress in helping this area become mine free.

by MAIC

This article is based on Mr. Scott Getter's presentation at the Military Coordinators in Humanitarian Demining Conference held in Tampa, Florida, in January 2001. Mr. Getter is the Program Manager for Humanitarian Demining Operations at CINCSouth.

Background

SOUTHCOM uses the US Army Special Operations Force (SOF) to conduct humanitarian demining. It is fortunate to be able to provide support in Central America, Peru and Ecuador through a regional organization, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB). These organizations assist in developing self-sustaining humanitarian demining programs. SOUTHCOM has supported OAS/IADB in Latin America since 1995.

Promoting Mine Awareness

In 1998, SOUTHCOM started a humanitarian demining program in support of the Peruvian/ Ecuadorian peace accords. Missions are task organized using SOF and integrating Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) into missions starting this year.

The Psychological Operations (PSYOP) detachment provides mine awareness programs using surveys to determine the best way to distribute the information. This program has used standard mine awareness signs, as well as posters, Superman comics, printed t-shirts and school supplies to promote mine awareness. The detachment will be conducting post-tests of the program's effectiveness.

Organizations of American States Mine Action Program

Countries worldwide are supporting OAS' efforts to clear landmine-stricken areas in Central America by implementing a mine action program that will teach courses in demining techniques and supervise and monitor mine clearance operations.

by Jaime Perales and Carl Case, OAS

The Problem

Central America was a theater for military conflicts for several decades leading up to the 1990s. During these conflicts, landmines were often used by both government and irregular forces. The majority of the mines used were manufactured outside the region, but some improvised explosive devices were also used by armed insurgent groups. In some cases, minefields were recorded with varying degrees of accuracy and detail but in many instances, they were neither marked nor documented in any way. Mines were placed around military and economic facilities, including telecommunications installations, power lines and bridges, as well as along trails and roads.

Long after these conflicts have ended, their deadly legacy remains in the form of thousands of anti-personnel mines that continue to threaten large numbers of people living in Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala. In many rural areas, the local population fears this threat, and the re-establishment of normal patterns of life remains elusive. Numerous tracts of needed agricultural land remain unusable, placing an added economic burden on these areas and leaving entire communities isolated and economically depressed. Even with the increased risk of living and working in or near mine fields, the pressures of the population and the economy have forced many people to remain in these areas. The danger to the physical well-being of the people of Central America, as well as the impediment that landmines pose to economic recovery and democratic governance, have made their elimination an urgent humanitarian task.

The Response

The Central American peace process, which took root in the past decade, helped resolve the internal conflicts in the region and created a favorable climate for strengthening economic development and democratic institutions. As these nations struggled to consolidate peace, their governments asked the Organization of American States (OAS) for assistance in addressing landmine issues. In 1991, the Secretary General of the OAS, with technical advice from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), requested that the member states and the permanent observer of the OAS cooperate in this task. Under a series of mandates from the OAS General Assembly, the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy of the OAS General Secretariat assumed overall responsibility for the conduct of this pioneering and innovative initiative, which became known as the Assistance Program for Demining in Central America (PADCA).

Since the program's inception, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, the United States and Venezuela have provided military engineers and other specialists to teach courses in demining techniques and supervise and monitor mine clearance operations. Other countries, including Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States have provided assistance in a variety of ways.