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Landmines in Chile: Who is at Risk?

Captain Patricio Undurraga of the Chilean Ministry of Defense discusses the mine problem in his country and describes present and future demining efforts of the Chilean army and navy.

by Elizabeth Beery Adams, MAIC

Elizabeth Beery Adams (EBA): Describe the mine problem in Chile. Where are the mines located? Who is most at risk by the landmine problem?

Captain Undurraga: What must be clear is that the mine problem in Chile is different from the problem that we have observed during this conference [Military Contributions to Humanitarian Demining, January 17–19, 2001]. In Chile the mine fields that exist are along the borders with other countries. They were installed 20 or 25 years ago with the purpose of defending us against aggression. As the mine fields are situated along the border, they are secure areas between the border of another country and our country. Therefore, there aren't any inhabitants in the region. This means that in our country, civilians aren't affected by the mine fields. We have the areas well marked, and we haven't had any accidents or deaths because of the location of the mine fields. That being so, we have military fields that were installed with the military function of defending against aggression. There is no risk for the civilian population. This is what allows us to plan with ease and look for the best techniques to be able to demine if the Ottawa Convention is ratified.

EBA: How long have demining efforts been underway? Have there been any problems in starting demining programs?

Captain Undurraga: The program was initiated in 1997, and since 1998 the Chilean army and navy have been the institutions responsible for demining. In 2000 we already had the completed plan of what these institutions needed to be able to develop their demining strategy. In Chile there is a legal arrangement that does not permit the ratification of an agreement such as the Ottawa Convention if the finances are not available in order to comply with the obligations that are implied in the agreement. We are in the process of obtaining the financial resources necessary from our government to be able to begin the demining process.

EBA: In Chile, is demining principally considered to be a humanitarian or military effort? Why?

Captain Undurraga: I think that there is a tendency to confuse the terms. Humanitarian demining and military demining are the same—it's all demining. What has happened is that the NGOs have tried to put the "humanitarian" label on demining to make people more sensitive to the situations that they are seeing in countries like those in southern Africa. But, there is only one demining—removing mine fields—and the risk suffered by military personnel and by civilians when they are demining is the same. This is nothing more than giving it a different name; we are simply talking about demining.

EBA: Are there any plans for encouraging NGOs to help with demining efforts?

Captain Undurraga: In Chile we don't have such a plan at this time because it is already clear who has the responsibility of demining. They are the same institutions that planted the mine fields. The Chilean army and navy will be responsible for demining, so we have no plan of action for the NGOs. The political resolve of the Chilean government is to demine, and we as the military will put it into effect. We have all of the capabilities necessary to do that.

EBA: What are the challenges facing demining efforts in Chile? Are there any other challenges?

Captain Undurraga: The biggest challenge is gathering the necessary financial resources to put demining into effect.

EBA: Are there reliable surveys and mine field maps?

Captain Undurraga: Yes, there are maps of all of the mine fields, where they are located, what sector they cover and the position of all of the mines. The mine fields are clearly marked as well.

EBA: Are mine awareness and victim assistance integrated into the demining process? Why? How?

Captain Undurraga: Yes, one of the things that we have labeled as an "associated cost" of demining is to anticipate the assistance to whatever victims we might have, because the victims of demining are going to be our own people; they are going to be military personnel [who] are working. So, one of the "associated costs" is to be able to anticipate the assistance of those [who] suffer accidents while working. And more than just assistance, we want to have all the necessary infrastructure to be able to care for the person where and when they have the accident. We are also concerned with follow-up assistance for the victim in terms of assistance for the family, assistance during their recuperation and their reinsertion into society once they have recuperated.

EBA: Are there any efforts in place to increase public awareness of the landmine problem?

Captain Undurraga: In Chile there isn't a preoccupation with the mine fields at the civilian level. There isn't a preoccupation because the mine fields don't affect them. That is to say, if you go to Santiago, the capital, no one talks about mine fields because the mine fields are on the border and don't affect them. Historically, we haven't had any accidents, so the population doesn't talk about them. It is not that they aren't conscious of the mine fields, they know that they exist, but it is not a danger for them because, as I have said, they are identified and marked and serve a determined purpose. Therefore, there is no danger to the civilian population.

EBA: Where do you see demining efforts going in the next year?

Captain Undurraga: This year, 2001, our intention is to be able, with the financial commission, to secure the resources that will be necessary to the national demining plan so that we will be in a situation to begin demining in 2002.

EBA: How is the Chilean military involved in demining efforts outside of Chile?

Captain Undurraga: We are participating in all the meetings of the Ottawa Convention and in demining seminars with the purpose of exchanging

information and experiences to give us the ability to implement demining in Chile in the best possible manner.

Update

The Chilean Congress unanimously approved the Ottawa Convention on May 3, 2001. It now only needs the signature of the President of the Republic before the Ministry of Foreign Relations can ratify it. This signifies the coming destruction of the 250,000 anti-personnel mines that line Chile's borders with Argentina, Peru and Bolivia. ■



■ Soldiers supporting the coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet take cover as bombs are dropped on the Presidential Palace of La Moneda. c/o AP

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Captain Undurraga: The lands where the mine fields are located have no