August 2001

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U.S. Humanitarian Demining in Latin America

The United States coordinates aid across Latin America through mine awareness and clearance operations. Channeled mainly through the OAS, U.S. funds support comprehensive mine action programs as needed in Central America.

By Stacy L. Smith, U.S. Department of State Fellow

Mission

The United States seeks to relieve human suffering caused by landmines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) while promoting U.S. foreign policy interests. U.S. objectives are to reduce civilian casualties, create conditions for the safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, and reinforce an affected country's stability. The United States seeks to accomplish these objectives by helping to establish and support sustainable indigenous mine action capabilities in mine-affected nations, where appropriate. Since Fiscal Year 1993, the United States has committed almost $500 million (U.S.) to global mine action initiatives, including research and development.

Latin America Involvement

Among the nations of the Western Hemisphere, 13 are considered landmine/UXO-affected. The United States provides humanitarian demining assistance to seven of these countries. They are Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, and Colombia. The United States will complete its assistance to Costa Rica after it reaches the sustainment phase in its humanitarian demining efforts in 2001. Although the United States has established bilateral programs in Peru and Ecuador, the U.S. Government (the Department of State's Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (HDP) and the Department of Defense's Office of Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance) provides most of its mine action assistance in the Western Hemisphere through the Organization of American States (OAS). The OAS Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINCA) conducts demining operations in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Future State Department assistance to Peru and Ecuador will also likely be provided through the OAS, pending the results of a State Department funded OAS pilot program in both of these countries. Through the U.S. Southern Command, the Department of Defense provides training, technical advice, and logistical support to the OAS through the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB). The U.S. Department of Defense funds assistance to MARMINCA via the IADB.

The Landmine Problem

U.S. assisted countries in Latin America are estimated to contain between 300,000 and 500,000 landmines left over from civil war and external conflicts with neighboring countries. Although clearance operations have reduced this number significantly, the difficult terrain and impact of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 have hindered demining efforts in some countries. Much of the Latin American landscape is mountainous with areas enclosing tropical jungles and occasionally volcanoes. This terrain often complicates demining, making some identified mine fields accessible only by helicopter. Much of the problem caused by Hurricane Mitch in both Nicaragua and Honduras lies in the slow process of re-identifying mine fields that were previously marked. Many of these areas have shifted under harsh weather conditions and must be surveyed again.

U.S. Assistance to Latin America

Since 1997, the United States has allocated approximately $13.5 million to the OAS, Peru, and Ecuador for humanitarian demining assistance (see chart). This contribution has funded numerous mine awareness campaigns, mine clearance operations, mine de-tection dog units and survivor assistance programs.

Mine Awareness

In September 1998, DC Comics distributed 55,000 copies of a special edition Superman/Wonder Woman comic book written in Spanish. The book, funded by the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, was intended as a mine awareness tool for younger populations in Costa Rica and Honduras. Soon after the comic book was distributed, two landmines were reported to a schoolteacher who had recently received mine awareness training. The United States also recently provided UNICEF with a grant to support mine awareness efforts in Colombia.

Mine Clearance

In 1992, the United States commenced its support of mine clearance operations in Latin America. Nicaragua, the first country to receive U.S. demining assistance and the most
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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Guatemala

U.S. Special Operations Forces trained 60 Army deminers and 40 volunteer firemen. This training expanded Guatemalan military capabilities and created opportunities for the military to participate in demining operations. The Guatemalan Army began demining operations in November 1998 in Jucatán. The United States also supports the multinational mine removal venture, MARMINCA, that provides direct supervision and support to Guatemalan Army demining units. To date, U.S. support has helped Guatemala clear more than 160 mines and has restored almost 7,200 square meters of land for re-settlement by persons displaced by Guatemala's 30-year internal conflict.

Costa Rica

Under the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program in Costa Rica, Ministry of Public Safety (MPS) personnel were trained and equipped for demining operations. Funding assistance was used for emergency medical and demining procedures, a communications base, vehicles, field equipment and generators. With this infrastructure in place, the MPS began mine clearance operations in January 1996. To date, MPS personnel have cleared almost 90,000 square meters of land and destroyed 236 landmines. Demining operations continued in December 1997 due to a lack of a medical evacuation helicopter to support the deminers. In 1998, a donation of $300,000 (U.S.) from the U.S. Corporation for International Development resulted in 240 trained dogs to support ongoing demining operations.

Honduras

Demining operations in 1998 were conducted along the Nicaraguan border and in the area of San Carlos-Las Barrancas. While the majority of the demining troops are Hondurans, other participants in the operation are technical advisors from several countries, including the United States. The Honduran operations have successfully returned mine-affected land to productive use. To date, the U.S.-trained Honduran demining unit has cleared nine major mine fields measuring approximately 335,000 square meters and destroyed more than 2,200 mines and several hundred pieces of UXO.

Peru and Ecuador

Both Peru and Ecuador's U.S.-supported humanitarian demining programs are in the nascent stages of development. In Fiscal Year 1999, the United States provided Peru and Ecuador more than $1 million (U.S.) each for training and equipment. In each country, the funds were used to demine areas where 30 border markers were to be placed—an integral step in the peace accord between the two countries. From April to July 2000, U.S. Special Operations Forces were deployed to Peru and Ecuador to conduct the second phase of humanitarian demining training. Both countries received 12 dog teams (a U.S. and 10 from Special Operations Forces' training, these funds will be used to provide vehicles and equipment support and training for several more classes of deminers. To date, approximately 3,700 landmines have been destroyed.

Mine Detection

In 1999, HDP began supporting the use of mine-detecting dogs in Central America under the provisions of its Integrated Mine Action Support Contract with RONCO Consulting Corporation and its contract partners, Global Training Academy. In 1999 and 2000, RONCO trained 12 dog and handler pairs to assess the extent of the post-Hurricane Mitch landmine problem in Honduras and an additional 12 dogs to conduct demining operations in Nicaragua. Early in 2000, the Nicaraguans requested four dogs to support ongoing demining operations. The United States has also agreed to explore the possibility of establishing a mine-detection dog program in Peru and Ecuador.

Survivor Assistance

In January 2000, USAID's Leaky War Victims Fund (WVF) began to support the Central American Tripartite Landmine Initiative for providing comprehensive assistance to rehabilitate people with disabilities, including landmine survivors. Objectives of the Initiative include increasing the participation of Central Americans in technical activities sponsored by the Initiative and extending savings and credit programs to landmine survivors.

A particularly compelling case involved a 12-year-old Nicaraguan boy suffering severe injuries to his eye and left arm as a result of picking up a piece of metal. Under a State Department (HDP) grant, Julio Tinoco Perez was flown to New York City, examined by specialists, and treated for his injuries with help from NGOs such as the Marshall Islands Institute, Frank Beady of Medical Missions for Children, and the Humpty Dumpty Institute.

Future Initiatives

In 2001, HDP projects to spend over $3 million (U.S.) supporting demining activities in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, which is receiving a mine awareness support under an HDP grant to UNICEF. With continued assistance from the U.S. Government and other donors, HDP is expected to declare itself mine-safe in 2001, and the United States estimates that Guatemala will be able to declare itself mine-safe in 2003.

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