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The Americas: Regional Mine Action Seminar in Peru

During a two-day conference in Lima, Peru, participants reaffirmed their collective commitment and dedication to becoming a hemisphere safe from AP mines.

by Julie Mullen, MAIC

Introduction

This summer, the Organization of American States (OAS), along with the governments of Peru and Canada, hosted the Americas Regional Mine Action Seminar. The conference was held in Lima, Peru, on August 14 and 15, 2003. Representatives from countries all over the western hemisphere, as well as many international organizations, gathered to review their efforts to rid the hemisphere of AP landmines. The two-day conference was dedicated to learning from each other’s experiences, preparing for the Fifth Meeting of the States Parties to the Ottawa Convention that took place in Bangkok, Thailand, in September 2003. As such, it included a mixture of presetkeynote speakers and a forum for participants to share their own experiences.

Victim Assistance Working Group.

Meeting of the States Parties to the Ottawa Convention in the Americas.

The general status and operation of the Ottawa Convention in the Americas.

- National goals and progress toward their achievement.
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Conclusion

Closing remarks focused on developing an agreement of regional priorities and goals. The meeting was preceded by a brainstorming session that attempted to frame key data collection and victim assistance issues. The ideas that surfaced there and the suggested “next-steps” were insightful that we thought it important to share them through this forum.

Data Collection and Use

Mine-affected countries in Latin America range from those still dealing with newly seeded landmines (e.g., Colombia) to those that are virtually mine-free (e.g., Costa Rica), therefore one might suspect that there would be very little consensus about the subject of managing mine action-related information. In fact, the countries of the region reached agreement on some valuable guidelines relating to this critical subject:

- As a start, identify what information is needed and how it will be used. This will result in collecting only need-to-know information and will result in a more streamlined methodology for collecting and using information. It also will not “burn out” the sources of direct, first-line information providers. It was observed that often too much information is collected that marks or renders pertinent information unusable. If preparation is made in defining needed information and the best methods for collecting and disseminating it is, much work, which might have to be done later, could be eliminated “up front.”
- Identify each agency or organization that has a valid interest in receiving landmine-related information. This will set the stage for productive pro quo relationship within the government and with coordinating organizations such as the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It may also create a demand for personnel information, thus insuring its continued support within the government. It can help “shape” the way data is collected and provided to others for the most efficient interface. The sharing of information will also facilitate mainstreaming of mine action activities within the broader context of socio-economic development.
- Utility of many sources of data collection.

Information systems can be more reliable when accumulated data is collected from a variety of sources. This not only provides a way to verify data, but can also provide data on a scale that is seen from various perspectives. Key sources of data are local newspaper articles, government agency reports, police and fire department reports, medical and hospital records, local government bodies, service clubs, and organizations, schools, etc.

- Provide feedback to sources of data.

Sometimes the sources of data want to use the polished information that results from the raw data. Sometimes data sources would just like to know that their efforts were justified. Therefore, it is important to provide positive and constructive feedback to data sources about the worth and use of the data they provided.
- Create a centralized database that nevertheless depends on and serves decentralized modes. Most data collection schemes are based on collecting decentralized data and then running that body into a centrally maintained, purified, and managed information system. It is important that the various groups (see first two points above) having need of information collected in the decentralized system have access to that portion of it that can further their goals. It is not necessary that all groups have access to all information, but it is necessary that legitimate uses of the information be given a way to gather the information relevant to their missions and goals.
- Create a system that does not compromise basic security, yet allows for the free flow of information. The information system must breed trust. Little by little the countries will develop a trusting system. Users must be properly trained so that frustration and ignorance do not compromise the system, and so that within the system, only those with a need to know (both up and down the information “food chain”) are granted access to sensitive information. There are two constituencies to be reached, the data sources, who must remain viable, and the user, who must be allowed access to pertinent information. This sense of balance is not easy to achieve, but becomes the basis for the best possible information management system.

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Emergency Medical Treatment

Another topic that came up to an “evergreen” mine action topic was emergency medical treatment to those suffering the tragedy of a landmine explosion. It was noted that most landmine accidents occur in rural areas where sophisticated medical treatment may not be available with the “golden hour”—the critical time period during which medical treatment is key to survival and minimizing damage.