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A Firsthand Experience with Mine Action: On the Ground with the Organization of American States in Nicaragua

Founder and chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., Mark Hyman, has been actively working with the global landmine issue for the past three years. This past June, he visited Nicaragua to witness the effects of landmines firsthand and to find out how his middle schoolers could help. This piece describes what he found there.

by Mark Hyman, Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

Introduction

For the last three years, as coordinator of the Tenafly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club of Tenafly, New Jersey, and founder/chairperson of the student-inspired campaign for humanitarian service organization, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., I have assumed the responsibility for introducing middle school students to the facts, topics and humanitarian issues regarding the global landmine crisis. Since the beginning of this process, I have recognized both a strong desire and educational need to augment my understanding of the humanitarian dimensions of mine action, and in turn that of my students, through a field trip to a mine-affected country.

This June I reached this goal through a trip to Nicaragua under the guidance and supervision of the Organization of American States (OAS). The visit, organized by William A. McDonough, coordinator of the OAS Mine Action Program, provided an extraordinary opportunity for me to gain a firsthand understanding of demining and victim assistance programs supported by the OAS. Additionally, this trip afforded me an opportunity to develop a sense of the landmine crisis. The purpose of this article is to share my discoveries regarding the humanitarian mine action program offered by the OAS, as well as, to provide my impressions, where relevant, of life in Nicaragua.

Background

The Catalyst for the Formation of a School-Based Mine Action Initiative

My decision to visit Nicaragua was a natural outgrowth of a three-year mine action initiative organized and developed by the staff of the Tenafly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club and myself. Our initial interest in the global landmine issue emerged from a keynote address delivered by American landmine survivor and activist, Ken Rutherford, at a human rights day event held at Tenafly Middle School on February 26, 1999. In addition to Mr. Rutherford’s powerful and moving testimony regarding his life-changing encounter with a landmine, representatives from the UNA-USA delivered presentations to our entire student body regarding their Adopt-A-Minefield program. A display of a landmine exhibit in our school lobby, on loan from UNICEF, provided a powerful visual component to the overall landmine education offered on Human Rights Day.

This powerful exposure to the global landmine issue and its impact on innocent lives provided the impetus for forming our middle school landmine awareness club and adopting a mine-affected village.

Global Care Unlimited’s Successful Adventuring of a Mine-Affected Village

After guiding the students through research about the global landmine crisis, the students and I selected the mine-affected village of Podzvid in the La Paz province, Nicaragua. Following the formation of Global Care Unlimited, Inc. in February 2000, we began a year-long mine action initiative aimed at educating Tenafly and surrounding communities about global landmine issues and raising sufficient funds to demine an emergency area of Podzvid near the La Juice School. After a year of tireless work on the part of the students, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., supported by a matching grant from the State Department Office of Humanitarian Development (PM/HDP), achieved their goal of raising $30,000 for demining Podzvid. This achievement was celebrated at Tenafly Middle School on February 8, 2001, through a signing ceremony between Jernej Cimperek, Director of the Slovenian International Trust Fund; Donald Paterson, Director of the PM/HDP, and myself, on behalf of the students and supportive adults of Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

A Connection Between Global Care Unlimited and a Landmine Survivor Featured in Nicaragua

Prior to Global Care Unlimited’s planning for its 2001–2002 mine action initiative, I was contacted by filmmaker Bob Alman, who was developing a documentary about landmines based in Nicaragua for the Hallmark Entertainment Channel. Mr. Alman’s goal was to create a dramatic story that would represent the plight of mine-affected citizens worldwide. He hoped such a visualization of the impact of landmines would inspire the participation of American youth in learning more about landmines, as well as to promote the capacity of youth to make a constructive difference in mine action.

Although our demining funds had not yet been given to assist a Bosnian village, Mr. Alman felt strongly that Global Care Unlimited, Inc. represented an exemplary program for youth participation and leadership in mine action. Consequently, he decided to cite Global Care Unlimited, Inc., as the student organization responsible for assisting in the demining of the mine-affected Nicaraguan village featured in his movie, “The Garden.”

Turning Our Attention to Nicaragua, the Organization of American States and Programs to Assist Landmine Survivors

The anticipated attention and credit afforded Global Care Unlimited, Inc., by Mr. Alman’s upcoming landmine film propelled me to research the actual landmine problem in Nicaragua to find out how we might actually assist Nicaragua. During this process, I contacted William A. McDonough of the OAS Mine Action Program. Our conversation revealed a perfect match of timing and attendance. While the cost for supporting demining operations in Nicaragua was prohibitive, Mr. McDonough informed me that the OAS had just contracted with INATEC, a local vocational skills training center in Bebas, to provide job training to Nicaraguan landmine survivors. For approximately $1,500 per client, INATEC would provide courses in a wide variety of vocational skills aimed at assisting the reintegration of landmine survivors into their local workplace. After this correspondence Global Care Unlimited, Inc. committed to supporting landmine survivors attending the INATEC program.

Global Care Unlimited Organizes and Hosts a Mine Action Conference for Youth

On March 7, 2002, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. hosted a mine action conference aimed at educating middle and high school youth about the global landmine problem and encouraging their participation in our burgeoning youth coalition for mine action initiatives. The conference featured a keynote address by Ken Rutherford, a prominent array of mine action presenters, including landmine survivors, demining professionals and mine action advocates from the OAS, the United Nations, the State Department, Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and Landmine Survivors Network.

In addition to donating $10,000 (including a matching State Department grant) toward the demining of another Baltic minefield in Gornja Soponica, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. officially became the first mine action organization to support the OAS-sponsored job training program at INATEC by providing $1,500 to sponsor Meylin, a Nicaraguan landmine survivor who had lost both her legs at the age of nine.

Following the March conference, Mr. McDonough and I arranged an itinerary aimed at providing a full picture of the OAS Nicaraguan mine action program. The itinerary included visits to CENAPIRORO and INATEC to show OAS-sponsored rehabilitation programs for landmine survivors, as well as a trip to a minefield and attendance at a national stockpile destruction of 10,000 landmines.

General Impressions of Nicaragua

The Persistence of Poverty

I arrived on June 15, 2002, for a ten-day stay in Nicaragua. While I had watched numerous videos and read extensively about the landmine issue, I had never traveled outside the United States and Canada, much less to a third world country such as Nicaragua. I knew that Nicaragua was considered possibly the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, while I was driven from the airport to my hotel in the capital city of Managua, I found myself riveted to the images presenting themselves before me. I was stunned by the extent and nature of the poverty evident along the streets of Managua. The majority of homes appeared to consist only of pieces of discarded aluminum or other scrap material nailed together to provide the most basic shelter. Uncollected garbage and stray debris was commonplace, as...
were people selling various cheap items along the streets and at shops. It was truly an encounter with poverty unlike any I had ever imagined.

During the two days prior to the beginning of my official itinerary with the OAS as well as for several days afterwards, I took the opportunity to explore Managua and much of the surrounding countryside and to gain an orientation regarding landscapes, currencies, culture, topography and socio-economic conditions. The pervasiveness of the poverty threatened produced, as it was its most dominant and haunting attribute. On more occasions than I wish to admit, I found myself pointing in the direction of a roadside dwelling and asking my guide, "Is that a home?" The few houses that revealed some degree of wealth were usually flanked by very poor dwellings. Even by trip's end, I was not able to accept or fully internalize the level or extent of poverty in Nicaragua, and the commensurate suffering and socio-economic handicaps such suffering suggested.

An Overview of Survivor Assistance Programs Supported by the OAS

Fitting of Prostheses and Physical Rehabilitation: A Necessary First Step in Treating Landmine Survivors

During the first two days of my visit, I was able to visit the OAS national office for mine action (OEA) as well as the Panamanian Ministry of Defense, where I met high-ranking Nicaraguan officials, Defense Minister Dr. Jose Adan Guerra and the Defense Vice-minister and Executive Secretary of the National Demining Commission. These meetings oriented me with some of the key players in Nicaraguan mine action.

However, the highlight of these two days occurred on June 18th with my visit to CENAPRORO. The National Center for Prostheses and Orthoses. The OAS-sponsored center provides a full spectrum of rehabilitation services to landmine survivors in addition to housing a factory for the creation of artificial limbs and feet, the center maintains a professional rehabilitation team consisting of a psychologist, social worker and physical therapist, a training area for assisting clients with the use of their prosthetic orthosis, and a dozen or so beds for clients in need of inpatient care.

CENAPRORO offers the necessary first steps in the process of rehabilitating landmine victims. The Critical Next Step in Rehabilitation: Developing Vocational Skills in Landmine Survivors

The following day, I visited INATEC to see firsthand the skills being taught to landmine survivors following their "graduation" from physical rehabilitation programs offered by CENAPRORO. This visit was of particular importance to me and my students back in New Jersey because of Global Care Unlimited's sponsorship of Meylin, as well as our expressed interest in sponsoring other landmine survivors. After an orientation by the program directors, we proceeded on a tour of the facilities. (It should be noted that, in addition to landmine survivors, other personnel dysfunction also qualified for and received vocational services.)

I was escorted into several work areas in which clients were performing and practicing a variety of tasks and skills, such as woodworking and welding. The sounds of drilling, chiseling and hammering promulgated the work of a variety of independent projects. All the clients in these work areas were men; the majority appearing to be between 20 and 40 years old. Their demeanors were serious and focused, but they were very willing to speak at length about their accidents, their acquisition of skills at INATEC, and their aspirations for employment upon completion of their courses.

Each of the men I interviewed had suffered a distinctive physical disability due to a landmine. One survivor needed prosthetics for both legs; a second client had suffered a double amputation of a hand; a third had suffered extreme facial disfigurement. This last client spoke quite graphically but matter-of-factly about the most common right-hand direction. He related the circumstances of their landmine accidents freely and without overt sadness or anger. Instead, I got the unmistakable impression that these man with disabilities, without adult escort, had won battles with despair and hopelessness that must initially have plagued them, and now were striving wholeheartedly toward ascending the vital but rough step of their rehabilitation journey: acquiring a skill that might help them gain employment. Each man expressed this latter wish with obtaining work with deep conviction. Independent employment for these survivors was tantamount to fully reclaiming their wounded lives.

In addition to these men, I had the privilege of meeting Meylin in INATEC's computer lab. At the time of my visit, Meylin was the sole female client at INATEC, an indication of the prevalence of landmine accidents among males in Nicaragua. She had lost her legs at the age of nine, and now 12 years later, she was striving to obtain sufficient competency with word processing. After I had explained my connection, as chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., to her sponsorship at INATEC, she smiled and spoke about her accident and her professional aspirations. However, I detected a sadness in her that was present even beneath her smile. Shortly, I hoped that her inner strength, as with all these clients, would ultimately win this battle for her land and her job, and the heightened sense of dignity and self-worth that it would provide.

Visiting a Minefield in Montagnás

"Peligro Campo Minado"

The same day of my visit to INATEC, I was escorted to Front Three of the Naraguan demining operations in Montagnás to gain my first experience at the site of an actual minefield. This experience left an indelible impression upon me.

As I was escorted in the OAS van on the dirt road leading to the minefield, I passed two young girls walking in the same direction. They carried backpacks and wore the white shirts and blue skirts commonly worn by Nicaraguan schoolgirls. They appeared to be about nine or ten years old, the same age as Meylin when she suffered her mine accident twelve years ago. They walked along the same road.

Our van had traveled more than the length of a football field when yellow caution tape attached to tree stumps appeared along the left side of the road to mark the perimeter of a minefield. The tape contained a repeating message throughout its length, "Peligro Campo Minado," or "Danger Minefield.

Between each repetition of this eerie refrain resided a black image of a skull and bones. At intervals just inside the minefield, warning signs containing the skull and bones image also appeared. This universal symbol of imminent danger and lurking death produced an ominous and forbidding feeling. I thought of the schoolchildren who would soon be passing this minefield and its accompanying signs and warnings, and I wondered how these images might affect their view of the world: their underdeveloped minds, their undeveloped visions, the adult world resolves its differences.

An Orientation: 17,000 People Affected

Upon arriving at the army demining tent, I heard a presentation, complete with a national map and detailed charts, regarding the accomplishments of the demining team at Front Three, the status of the demining in progress, and the goals, strategies and timetable for completion of their mission. (It should be noted that, in Nicaragua, demining is conducted by army personnel, under the supervision of an OAS team from Central and South America.) Implements for the detection, tagging and removal of landmines were visible on a table inside the meeting tent.

During his presentation, the demining supervisor stated that 17,000 people lived in the vicinity of the minefield. I thought again of the unescorted children walking up the path, and recognized vividly the importance of providing this road for both adults and especially children, living in mine-affected communities.

Demonstration of the Manual and Dog Detection Technique

The next phase of our experience involved watching the procedure used to detect and tag a landmine, as well as to prepare the ground for its removal. The process included the
use of a mine-sniffing dog for mine detection, followed by the placement of a yellow flag to mark the presence of a possible landmine. Then the human or manual deminer used a probing device to determine the precise location of the dog's discovery. Since in this case a mock mine was found (as opposed to a piece of scrap metal, for example), the deminer proceeded to meticulously strip and cut the surrounding grass and vegetation to prepare the ground for the landmine's laser removal.

The process lasted about twenty minutes. Despite the knowledge that this process was being conducted under simulated conditions, within a mock minefield and containing fake landmines, it was not hard to imagine the presence of a real landmine and the accompanying danger associated with its detection and removal. The mood of extreme seriousness and concentration transmitted by the deminer and the observing army personnel reinforced the gravity of this procedure.

**Rota ry Conference**

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Ending the Tragedy of Landmines Through Innovation and Cooperation

Rotary International, the U.S. State Department and James Madison University's Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) gathered with many of the world's leading mine action authorities to quantify the global landmine crisis. It was everyone's hope that the conference would yield a greater level of understanding, as well as harness the considerable resources of the Rotorians. Given the overwhelming response and participation, it appears that those wishes will be granted.

by David Hartley, MAIC

**Introduction**

Seattle's recent landmine conference was a meeting of the minds, a free exchange of ideas and, most importantly, a cry for help. On September 30th and October 1st of 2002, Rotary International, a worldwide network of volunteers and leaders dedicated to ethical and moral advancement, witnessed an enthusiastic outpouring of a wide variety of members of the mine action community. With special appearances by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Queen Noor Al Hussein of Jordan—as well as a speech by Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action Lincoln P. Bloomfield—the conference featured many high-profile mine action figures. According to Mr. Bloomfield, the two-day event was an opportunity to "create new cooperative initiatives to help make the world mine safe" by "brought Rotorians from around the world together with mine action experts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are already partnered with [the U.S. State Department]." Powell agreed: "this Seattle meeting can help to forge powerful public-private partnerships that save lives and bring new hope to men, women and children who live in mine-affected regions, and that help to end the suffering is hopefully nearly over. Emmanuel Akuos, who lost both of his hands in a landmine accident more than 20 years ago, provided living evidence of both human resilience and shocking tragedy. His first pair of prostheses lasted 17 years (a typical prosthesis should last no more than 2 years)." Powell emphasized that millions of deadly landmines still remain buried, waiting to kill. The challenge of eradicating the world of landmines is finite and realistic. The task, however, will require dedication and persistence. Many of the attendees were also quick to point out that the world will probably never be mine free, making the world mine safe, however, is a realistic and desirable goal.

Ken Rutherford, the double-ampu­tee co-founder of the Landmine Survivors Network, was on hand for the dura­tion of the conference. His presence and words affirmed the tangible threat of land mines and UXOs for Americans it is easy to perceive the landmine menace as remote. For the millions of individuals living in mine-infested regions, however, the threat is horrifyingly real. Emmanuel Akuos, who lost both of his hands in a landmine accident more than 20 years ago, provided living evidence of both human resilience and shocking tragedy. His first pair of prostheses lasted 17 years (a typical prosthesis should last no more than 2 years). Powell emphasized that millions of deadly landmines still remain buried, waiting to kill. The challenge of eradicating the world of landmines is finite and realistic. The task, however, will require dedication and persistence. Many of the attendees were also quick to point out that the world will probably never be mine free, making the world mine safe, however, is a realistic and desirable goal.

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