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Clearing Landmines and Building Peace in Colombia

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In 2015, the government of Colombia and las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) invited Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA), to develop a joint pilot project to survey and clear anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). The project was a first of its kind in terms of the composition of the teams: two warring parties working side-by-side, and a means to help build trust and de-escalate the conflict during the Colombian peace process. In 2016, NPA commissioned photojournalist Giovanni Diffidenti to visit Santa Helena and El Orejón to capture the historic demining project in action. Diffidenti’s photos for NPA are featured in this article.

In 2016, the government of Colombia and FARC-EP reached a peace agreement after four years of negotiations. The agreement ended one of the longest armed conflicts in South American history, and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December 2016.

More than 50 years of civil war has left Colombia with widespread landmine and ERW contamination. Clearing the country of landmines is an important pre-condition for the fulfillment of the peace agreement and a successful transition into post-conflict Colombia. It is also an obligation under the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC), to which Colombia is a state party and is required to complete landmine clearance by its Article 5 treaty deadline of 1 March 2021.

Two BIDES members walk through an area cleared of landmines in Alto Capitan (2016).
Photo courtesy of Department of Antioquia.
Landmines are dispersed throughout an estimated 40 percent of the national territory. More than 11,000 victims of landmines have been recorded since 1990.1 Due to the conflict, the Colombian population has suffered large-scale displacement, and the government has registered more than 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDP). Demining operations are essential for reducing the fear and risk of mine- and ERW-related incidents, and for making land available for safe and productive use (e.g., farming and other livelihoods), promoting development, and restoring access to infrastructure and public services.

NPA led, coordinated, and facilitated the demining pilot project from May 2015 to December 2016. The demining teams consisted of personnel from both the Government’s Demining Engineers Battalion (BIDES) and FARC-EP, accompanied by the Colombian National Authority on Mine Action, Dirección para la Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal (DAICMA). Part of NPA’s role in Colombia during the peace process was to build trust between the parties. NPA organized trust-building activities, such as football tournaments and barbeques. BIDES and FARC-EP lived under the same roof during the pilot project, which meant they got to know one another well and had conversations that were not limited to work-related issues.

The pilot project also encouraged both parties to work together to achieve a specific goal: clear landmines that endangered the population.

NPA’s role in the successful implementation of the pilot project consisted of three elements: a reference group comprised of one peace negotiator from the government, one member from FARC-EP, and one NPA representative; a steering group with members from all three parties; and a management field team in charge of implementing the project.

The geographical areas chosen for clearance operations were two highly contaminated areas of Colombia that had not seen any humanitarian demining previously. Santa Helena in the Department of Meta is situated in a flat area with heavy rainforest vegetation. Parts of this area were difficult to access because the roads were heavily damaged. The other area, El Orejón, is situated in the Department of Antioquia. It is a mountainous area with rivers and high rainfall, and difficult weather conditions frequently stopped the operations. Both communities are in need of socioeconomic development, including the construction of roads, and improvements to health services and education. The pilot project contributed by removing...
landmines, constructing a community house, and making improvements to a local road and bridge.

During the pilot project, NPA found 66 landmines and one item of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Another essential part of the project was to conduct MRE in coordination with DAICMA. NPA also trained four members from different villages who undertook MRE for their own communities.

In a war-torn country where support for the peace process has been low among the civilian population, the trust-building exercise between parties showcased positive results, and provided significant political and peacebuilding dividends. On 23 June 2016, the Colombian government and FARC-EP signed a historic bilateral ceasefire deal. The two parties formally signed a peace agreement on 26 September, but the deal was subsequently rejected by a narrow margin in a referendum on 2 October 2016. A revised peace accord was signed 24 November and ratified by Congress from 29 to 30 November 2016. On 27 June 2017, FARC-EP ceased to be an armed group, disarmed, and turned over more than 7,000 weapons to the United Nations at a ceremony in Mesetas.

Following the pilot project, NPA obtained full accreditation and registered as a clearance organization in Colombia. In April 2017, NPA started its own operations in Vista Hermosa, a municipality in the Department of Meta. NPA teams have conducted non-technical survey and clearance in Mesetas, also in the Department of Meta.

NPA is assisting DAICMA and FARC-EP in their mine action efforts. NPA has provided DAICMA with an
Above: Inside her tent, a light bulb illuminates FARC-EP’s Liliana Castellano and FARC-EP Commander Alfonso Cano (2016). Castellano comes from META, part of the Bloque Oriental military group and joined FARC-EP at the age of 15. “I entered FARC because I did not have the opportunity to study or to work. We don’t have any discrimination in our party (of women, men, black people or whatsoever),” says Castellano. She was a commander of a mobile campaign. “We always thought of peace since the beginning of war. There is lots to do, and I will follow the orders of my party.” The party, for Castellano, is everything—family, friends—and gives her a sense of security. She traveled to Havana and saw the sea for the first time. “The sensation of the sand and the sea under my feet ... I ran for three [kilometers], a sensation of freedom.”

Photo courtesy of Department of Meta.

Left: Alejandro Hernandes holds a photo of himself with his wife Yudi Garcia and their son Miguel Angel Hernandez in El Orejon (2016). Yudi died in a landmine accident not far from their home—she was 16 years old.

Photo courtesy of Department of Antioquia.
information-management adviser who will help enhance systems and undertake capacity building of the information-management team with the national authorities. NPA is also assisting FARC-EP in structuring its recently established organization for mine action, Humanicemos. Moreover, NPA collaborates closely with the national military humanitarian demining brigade on various topics, particularly on the training and accreditation of mine detection dogs in Colombia. 

See endnotes page 66

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Vanessa Finson is Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) Country Director in Colombia. Finson was born in London and raised in Italy and Norway; she has attended university in Mexico, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Finson has worked in mine action since 2009 as a desk officer for Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia, in addition to working as the Head of Donor Relations for NPA’s Humanitarian Disarmament department. Since 2014, she has worked with mine action in Colombia, having been part of the development, negotiation, and implementation of the historic pilot project on demining, which took place prior to the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP.

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Giovanni Diffidenti was born in Bergamo, Italy. His professional career as a photographer began in 1983 in London. His photographs have been published worldwide in many different magazines and newspapers, and he has been commissioned by various U.N. agencies and many international humanitarian organizations. The agencies he has collaborated with include Agence France Press, Associated Press, Contrast, Frank Spooner Pictures, Grazia Neri, and Reuters. He has traveled and lived in Africa, Asia, the Balkans, and Latin America. Diffidenti is the co-founder of the cultural association Di+ that combines photojournalism and contemporary art (www.associazionedipiù.org). He has exhibited his project on landmine survivors, “The Legacy of the Perfect Soldier,” since 1992. For more information on this project and Diffidenti’s publications, please see the photographer’s website at www.giovannidiffidenti.com.
Endnotes

Improved Explosive Devices and the International Mine Action Standards by Rhodes, Ph.D. [from page 4]

1. An IED is defined as a ‘device placed or fabricated in an improvised manner incorporating explosive material, destructive, lethal, noxious, incendiary, pyrotechnic materials or chemicals designed to destroy, disfigure, distract or harass. They may incorporate military stores, but are normally devised from non-military components’ (IMAS 04.10 3.134: 2013 & IATG 01.40:2011). Those victim–operated devices laid as landmines are referred to in this paper as locally manufactured landmines or improvised landmines.

2. The phrase ‘Humanitarian Mine Action’ is redundant as Mine Action by definition is humanitarian. In this paper Mine Action is used where others may use the phrase Humanitarian Mine Action.

3. Excluding EO of a nuclear, biological, or chemical nature; see endnote 13.


5. Email correspondence with MAG. Statistics current to August 2017.


7. IMAS 01.10 Section 5.

8. IMAS 01.10 Section 6.2.

9. Mine action operators must therefore conduct risk assessments that include proper assessments of the conflict in question and of the actors involved. Such assessments will examine whether areas being targeted for clearance are permissive environments, where explosive devices are no longer in use for the parties to the conflict, or whether conflicts are in the conflict area and therefore not appropriate for mine action operations.


12. For instance IMAS 09.11 concerns Battle Area Clearance including UXO, AVO, booby traps and failed, or abandoned, IEDs left behind after hostilities have ceased.

13. IMAS 04.10 and IATG definition: EO—all munitions containing explosives, nuclear fission or fusion materials and biological and chemical agents. This includes bombs and warheads; guided and ballistic missiles; artillery, mortar, rocket and small arms ammunition; all mines, torpedoes and depth charges; pyrotechnics; clusters and dispensers; cartridge and propellant actuated devices; electro–explosive devices; clandestine and improvised explosive devices (IEDs); and all similar or related items or components explosive in nature.

14. IMAS 04.10 anti-personnel landmine definition—’a mine designed to be exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person and that will incapacitate, injure or kill one or more persons’. The definition of an anti-personnel mine by virtue of its emphasis on the impact of the munition, as opposed to its construction, includes mines that have been constructed in an improvised manner. This is well documented in the negotiations for the treaty.

15. See extent of improvised devices from the operational statistics of one mine action operator, MAG: Figures 3 and 4.

16. Excluding EO of a nuclear, biological, or chemical nature; see endnote 10.

Quality Management and Standards for Humanitarian Improved Explosive Device (IHEID) Response Activities by Keeley [from page 9]

1. See the UNMAS mine action portal at http://www.mineaction.org/issues.

2. Assuming victim assistance is mainstreamed into health and disability sectors and supported by specialist organizations that may not be involved in the ‘field’ elements of mine action.


Crossing the Fence: Challenges of Operationalizing PSSM by Isikozlu, Krötz, and Trancart [from page 14]


2. Agreement that are in force in the region include the Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa, and Bordering States (2004) and most recently, the Kinshasa Convention (2017).


Promoting Secure Stockpiles and Countering Diversion by Berman and King [from page 18]

1. Any list of partners including Small Arms Survey projects would include the Danish Demining Group, The HALO Trust, Handicap International, Mines Advisory Group, and the United Nations Mines Action Service. Additional partners appear elsewhere in this short article. This list is indicative and not exhaustive.

2. MAG is an apolitical, informal, and multinational platform of a dozen or so like-minded governments that, to the extent possible, since 2005 have worked together to support each other’s efforts to improve stockpile management practices across the globe. See www.magsa.es.


4. The PSSM Best Practice Cards are available in Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS—in the Latin alphabet), French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili.

5. For example, over the past three years, the Survey has added eight incidents and deleted five during the period 1979–2013.


7. The UMS Database records 19 events as having occurred in the United States, which have resulted in four dead and two injured. By way of comparison, while casualty data for many incidents is incomplete (including for those in the United States), the average number of casualties recorded for the other 54 EUMS in the 100 other countries in the database comes to more than 50.

8. The RASR Initiative Steering Committee comprises the International Trust Fund (ITF) Enhancing Human Security, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), the RACVIAC Centre for Security Cooperation, the Southern Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearing House for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), and the Small Arms Survey. The nine participating states since 2009, when the Initiative was launched, include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. WRA provided funding from 2009 through 2015. The European Union funding RASR for the 2017–2019 period. Moldova has been invited to contribute to the Initiative. For more information. See www.rasrinitiative.org.


References


Strengthening Security in Mali With Weapons and Ammunition Management by Dupouy [from page 23]


Clearing Landmines and Building Peace in Colombia by Finson and Difffenditt [from page 25]


