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AICMA Helps Demine Nicaragua's Gocen District

The Gocen district of the Mateare municipality in Chiltepe Peninsula, 20 km (12 mi) outside of Managua, Nicaragua, was contaminated with explosive remnants of war from the artillery school that operated nearby. With support from *Acción Integral Contra las Minas Antipersonal* (Comprehensive Action Against Antipersonnel Mines, AICMA), a program of the Organization of American States, a large portion of the contaminated land in Gocen was cleared and released in 2012.

by Addison Embrey [Monterey Institute of International Studies]

Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution (1974—1979) claimed 35,000 lives and the Contra War (1979—1990) claimed 43,000 lives, with a total death toll of 78,000 people after the two conflicts.¹ Although the Esquipulas II Accord was signed in August 1987, a cease-fire was not achieved in Nicaragua until 1990.² Guerrilla groups and military forces left behind landmines and unexploded ordnance throughout the country, including UXO at training sites such as the one at Gocen. By the end of 2011, there were known casualties due to landmines, UXO and other devices (92 killed/1,207 injured).³

The roughly 600 residents who reside in the Gocen district were subject to this daily threat. The current inhabitants retired from the army before settling on the lands at Gocen near Lake Xiloá. Their petitions to the government resulted in the legalization of the plots they claimed. Community coordinator, Geovanny Pastora facilitated among the different entities involved, and each family received an average of roughly 1 hectare (2.5 ac) of land. This land however, had formerly belonged to the Nicaraguan Army School of Sergeants (noncommissioned officers), and students used it as a firing range to practice artillery gunnery. When the settlers began working the land, they realized that UXO littered the area. Because the district is considered impoverished, concern arose that citizens would collect explosive remnants of war to sell as scrap for income, increasing the risk of injury or death.³

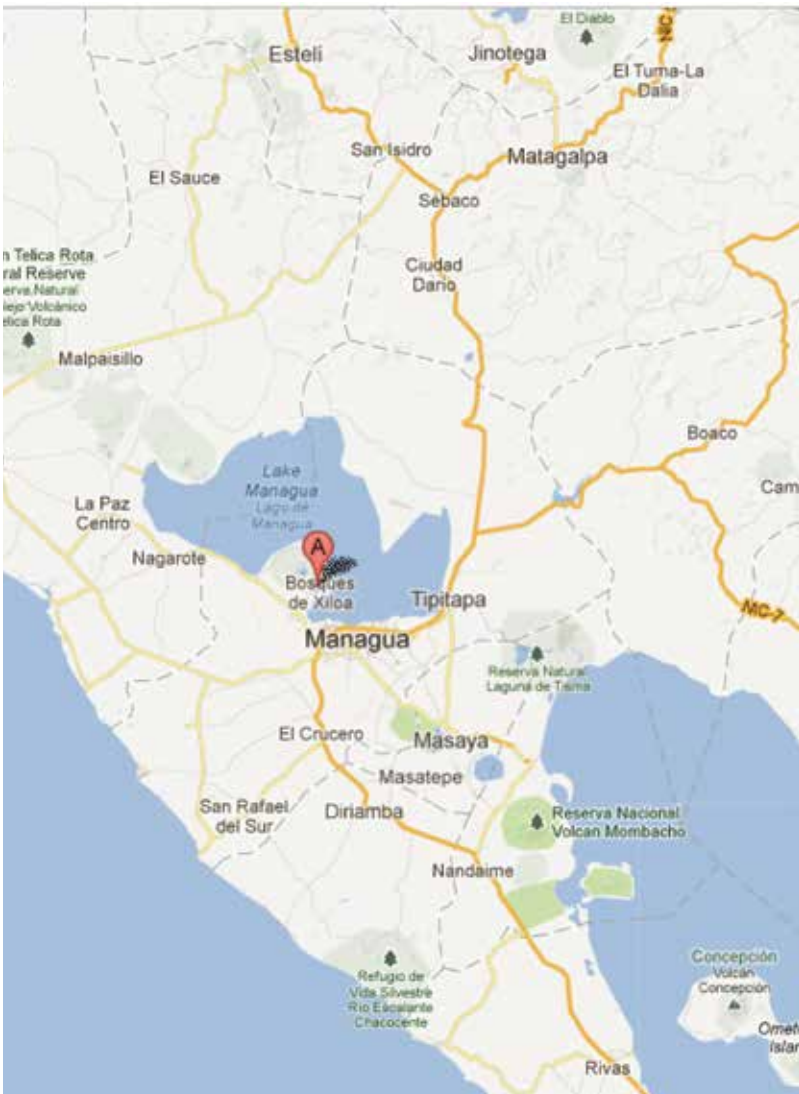
The Organization of American States partnered with the Nicaraguan Army Engineer Corps and Golden West Humanitarian Foundation to conduct a land rehabilitation project. Residents from the communities within the Gocen district experienced firsthand how they, their local authorities, the Nicaraguan military, OAS and the GWHF transformed lives through effective collaboration. OAS provided political and diplomatic support for the project. *Integral Contra las Minas Antipersonal* (Comprehensive Action Against Antipersonnel Mines, AICMA) partnered with GWHF to conduct technical field surveys and training, and the Nicaraguan Army Engineers provided equipment and personnel support.



Members of Nicaragua's Army Engineer Corps use UPEX-740 metal detectors to find unexploded ordnance in Chiltepe, Gocen district, Nicaragua.
All photos courtesy of the Organization of American States.

AICMA

In 2011 an individual from the Gocen district was injured when UXO detonated near him. In the following days, the



The Gocen District of Nicaragua.
Figure courtesy of Google Maps.

communities in the district filed a joint complaint when 37 additional items of UXO were discovered in the surrounding area. Military officials reviewed the complaints and rapidly coordinated with the OAS program, AICMA.

AICMA assistance to Nicaragua dates back to 1991 when AICMA and Nicaragua developed a national demining plan after the country requested assistance from the Secretary General of OAS. Of Nicaragua's 15 departments, 14 were found to be contaminated with anti-personnel mines.⁴ The national demining project took about 19 years to complete. Entire minefields were discovered within a kilometer of at least 284 communities. In total, an estimated 181,000 AP mines were emplaced over 1,029 areas throughout the country.⁵ In April 2010 Nicaragua completed its national demining plan and declared Nicaragua and the entire region of Central America mine-free.

Mine-free, however, does not refer to other UXO left from the conflict or related activities. Since 2010, the OAS program has designed projects to assist Nicaragua in destroying 258,086 munitions of varying types and calibers, a total exceeding 900 tons. In 2011 AICMA helped clear 721,900 sq m (178 ac) of land in Las Palomas in the Matagalpa department. In completing these clearance projects, AICMA focused on three fundamental pillars: victim identification and assistance; prevention and response to reports; and rehabilitation of cleared land.

Gocen District: A Success Story

During the preliminary stages of the Gocen district project in 2011, which involved establishing long-term relationships with affected communities, AICMA proposed a plan to conduct clearance of those plots of land presenting the greater risks to the community. AICMA and Nicaragua's Corps of Engineers drew upon past in-country accomplishments and experiences. In the international development world, best practice is the duplication and modification of previous experiences to produce similar results. To clear contaminated lands, the communities in Chiltepe peninsula also received technical assistance and consulting services from GWHF. Specific to Chiltepe, GWHF trained Nicaraguan military engineers on how to operate the UPEX-740 metal detector, a novel large-loop device to locate buried caches.

The residents of the Gocen district provided their knowledge of the area and guided experts and officials to the UXO. This helped to set the priorities for clearance, minimized the risk of the operation to the military engineers and demonstrated how the local residents—who make a living from the



Unexploded ordnance cleared from land in Gocen district, Nicaragua.

land—played an active role in building their community's future. This specific, sustainable and unique aspect of the project is one of the main reasons why OAS member states continue requesting AICMA's assistance.

In addition to coordinating priorities in clearance operations, AICMA also conducted community liaison at the Gocen district, working to obtain support for the project from the general population and community leaders. Also, because the Gocen District could not be cleared completely at the time with available resources, AICMA conducted awareness campaigns to encourage safe behaviors among local youth, the most at-risk group in the region.

In July 2012 the project was completed and the immediate surrounding area declared safe. The project consisted of clearing an area of 79,142 sq m (20 ac) and the subsequent removal of 909 items of UXO that were discovered, of which 904 were high caliber and 47 were unstable. In addition, more than 6,000 pieces of metal debris were discovered and removed during the clearance process. The land has since been turned over to the Gocen district communities; the military, AICMA and GWHF no longer operate in the area.

According to the OAS–AICMA project coordinator, as of 2012, 10 plots of land were successfully cleared, and local residents began cultivating crops. Local actors and residents of the Gocen district, the Nicaraguan Army Engineer Corps, AICMA, civil society and GWHF worked together to remedy the contamination from an otherwise productive land, working toward a landmine- and ERW-free future for Nicaragua. The collaborative leadership exemplified in this project is a success story. Here, the accumulated momentum will help encourage needed clearance operations in the future. Through the AICMA program,

which was responsible for implementing munitions clearance and land remediation in the Gocen district, Chiltepe peninsula, OAS helps other member countries fulfill their national demining goals and collaboratively destroy remnants of war. ©

See endnotes page 75

The author would like to thank Carlos José Orozco, AICMA's Regional Coordinator for Central America, for his assistance with this article. Note: Mr. Orozco, in coordination with Nicaragua's Corps of Engineers, devised the land rehabilitation project in Nicaragua's Gocen district.



Addison Embrey holds a master's degree in international policy studies from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California (U.S.). He was recently part of a research team that developed knowledge-management software for the International Small Arms Control Standards in partnership with the United Nations Institute of Disarmament Research. During 2012, he was an intern at the OAS–AICMA program.

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2. Oliver, Johanna. *The Esquipulas Process: A Central American Paradigm for Resolving Regional Conflict*. Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. Accessed 14 January 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/ckp5ajo>.
3. "Nicaragua: Mine Ban Policy." *Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor*. Accessed 14 January 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/ccm5exz>.
4. Departments are subdivided portions of a country much like a state, province, or county. Set up by the country's government, they are sometimes overseen by semiautonomous governing bodies.
5. "Nicaragua: Contamination and Impact." *Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor*. Accessed 12 January 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/ad9xw6d>.