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2008, A Year of Advances and Accomplishments

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2008: A Year of Advances and Accomplishments

Since 1990, the Organization of American States' national demining assistance programs have been working to educate citizens about landmines and eliminate existing minefields in Nicaragua. The OAS' program *Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal* has successfully worked to coordinate with the Ministry of Education, local representatives, community leaders and volunteers to promote awareness about landmines, protect people from further injuries and provide rehabilitation for survivors.

by Johanna García García and Erika Estrada Chau [Organization of American States]

The origin of today's Organization of American States' humanitarian demining assistance program dates to Nicaragua's request for assistance in 1990. Since the establishment of the program, several countries in the region have completed their respective national demining plans: Costa Rica in 2002, Honduras in 2004, and Guatemala and Suriname in 2005. Earlier this decade, the program extended its assistance throughout the Americas as it supported South American countries in complying with certain requirements of the Ottawa Convention.¹

As 2009 begins, Nicaragua remains the last mine-affected country in Central America. The mine problem in Nicaragua stems from the internal armed conflict that took place during the 1980s, leaving 13 of the country's 15 departments,² and both of its autonomous regions, contaminated by landmines.³ Some 284 communities throughout the country were determined to be located within one kilometer (0.62 miles) of mined areas.

At the conclusion of the armed conflict, the Nicaraguan Army registries recorded 115,851 mines throughout the territory. Since demining efforts began in 1990, additional minefields have been identified, and the most recent estimate of the number of landmines in Nicaragua is 178,751, distributed among 1,018 mined areas. Over the years, these mines have caused injury to more than 1,200 Nicaraguans and the death of hundreds.

The impact of anti-personnel mines in Nicaragua affected the security of the population and transcended into areas that limit the economic well-being of the population. The restriction of safety and movement within communities was the most serious consequence of AP mines. Access to communities, transportation, health, education, water and electric energy were also affected. Humanitarian demining efforts in Nicaragua have positively affected these aspects of daily life, which are relevant for the economic development of affected communities.

Following more than 16 years of effort on the part of the Nicaraguan government, the AP mine problem is now contained in the departments of Nueva Segovia and Jinotega. When clearance operations resumed in January 2009, 20 minefields remained to be cleared in accordance with the National Plan.

Accomplishments

The achievements obtained to date in Nicaragua, with the support of the OAS program, reached more than 96 percent of projections in the national demining plan. The completion of humanitarian-demining operations is projected for the end of 2009, providing there is continuous financial support from the international community. From January 2008–December 2008, several accomplishments were achieved. They are discussed in the text below.

Humanitarian Demining Operations

| | CLEARANCE | QUALITY CONTROL | TOTAL |
|-----------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|
| HOURS WORKED | 4,557.66 | 236.00 | 4,794.26 |
| SQUARE METERS CLEARED | 206,507.00 | 35,839.00 | 242,346.00 |
| OBJECTIVES WORKED | 49 | | |

Table 1. Humanitarian demining operations January–December 2008.

Humanitarian demining. The OAS program assists the government of Nicaragua in the execution and administration of its national demining plan by providing specialized equipment, administrative and logistic support, training for national personnel, technical advice and international monitoring. It also oversees the Information Management System for Mine Action database for Nicaragua. The collection and analysis of data by the national offices has taken on an increasingly important role in each of the programs regarding recording and tracking data on landmine victims; on suspected, confirmed and cleared minefields; and on areas where mine-risk education campaigns are conducted.

From January–December 2008, with AICMA assistance, important accomplishments reduced the threat posed by the presence of anti-personnel landmines in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Army

reported the destruction and certification of 11,856 mines and explosive remnants of war in 206,507 square meters (51 acres), thereby bringing the total number of anti-personnel mines destroyed or certified through clearance operations to 171,530 by December 2008.

Mine-risk education. MRE campaigns are designed after considering several elements:

- National mine-action standards
- Validated effectiveness in a given community
- Language and cultural aspects of the target population
- Certification by the *Comisión Nacional de Desminado* (National Demining Commission)
- Distance from affected communities to known danger areas
- Frequency of incidents

Mine-risk Education from January to December 2008

| DEPARTMENT | POPULATION | COMMUNITIES | MUNICIPALITIES | HOMES VISITED |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|
| LEÓN | 7,384 | 8 | 2 | 241 |
| MATAGALPA | 4,976 | 10 | 2 | 0 |
| BOACO | 313 | 1 | 1 | 36 |
| JINOTEGA | 12,954 | 40 | 3 | 1,880 |
| NUEVA SEGOVIA | 8,914 | 35 | 3 | 1,121 |
| TOTAL | 34,541 | 94 | 11 | 3,278 |

Table 2. Many individuals in León and Matagalpa received the message through the munitions destruction program. Source: PADCA OAS

Survivors Provided Rehabilitative Services from January to December 2008

| | MEN | WOMEN | TOTAL | PROSTHESES / ORTHOSES | SPECIALTIES |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------------|-------------|
| SURVIVORS | 328 | 26 | 354 | 221 | 133 |
| SERVICES | 1,273 | 109 | 1,382 | 881 | 501 |
| FIRST-TIME SERVICES | 36 | 6 | 42 | 16 | 26 |

Table 3. The survivors aided through the OAS program services have greatly increased since 1997. Source: PADCA OAS

Survivors Benefiting from Social Reinsertion Assistance from January to December 2008

| | MEN | WOMEN | TOTAL |
|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| SURVIVORS | 80 | 8 | 88 |
| TOTAL | 387 | 34 | 421 |

Table 4. Through INATEC, the OAS program assists participating survivors as they choose from 27 different training courses. Source: PADCA OAS

Excess Munitions Destroyed from April to September 2007 and January to April 2008

| PERIOD | TOTAL WEIGHT (KG) | NUMBER OF DETONATIONS | AMOUNT OF MUNITIONS |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 2007 | 414,010.11 | 116 | 85,365 |
| 2008 | 498,765.00 | 54 | 188,848 |
| TOTAL | 912,775.11 | 170 | 274,213 |

Table 5. Excess munitions from four storage sites were destroyed at the Nicaraguan Army's firing range complex at Papalonal, León department. Source: PADCA OAS

The methodology includes school visits, radio campaigns and house-to-house visits. Portable posters are used as the main instructional material, supplemented by distribution of school materials such as pens, pencils, notebooks and backpacks.

The objective of mine-risk awareness and MRE campaigns supported by the OAS-AICMA program is to reduce risk of injury or death by promoting safe behaviors and to correct risky practices seen among some in the communities. Frequent visits to affected communities and a variety of national radio messages and school programs strengthened—MRE campaigns for civilian populations.

Victim assistance. The AICMA program coordinates and pays for transportation, lodging, meals, medicines, surgery, physical and psychological therapy, and specialized medical attention for survivors of accidents from mines or explosive remnants of war. In similar fashion, the program provides for follow-up, and coordinates physical rehabilitation and transportation to and from

survivors' homes. Additionally, AICMA coordinates with *Instituto Nacional Tecnológico* (INATEC) to support landmine survivors as they establish micro-enterprises. AICMA identifies survivors, coordinates their transportation and counsels on the appropriateness of each small enterprise.

AICMA has provided assistance to more than 1,100 landmine survivors since the program was established in 1997 with the support of the Swedish government (see Table 3). From its beginning, the program has sought to provide the basic services mentioned above to enable the victims to reach and stay at the centers so they can avail

themselves of these services. In collaboration with INATEC, the OAS-AICMA program initiated an innovative training and job placement program for survivors in Nicaragua (see Table 4). Landmine survivors have a wide choice of training according to their aptitude, ranging from

auto mechanics, carpentry, sewing, shoe repair and farming to cosmetology and word processing.

Destruction of obsolete munitions. One of the latest components of the AICMA program is destruction of excess, expired or obsolete munitions. In Nicaragua, as a result of the armed conflict during the 1980s, great quantities of obsolete munitions remain stored in military facilities. Some facilities are near civilian populations, posing a threat for the communities as well as for the military personnel in charge of keeping the munitions. To assist Nicaraguans in resolving this problem, the OAS-AICMA program implemented two phases of a munitions-destruction plan. Canada, Italy and the United States provided funding, and the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation delivered technical support. The results of the first two phases are listed in Table 5.

Conclusion

The OAS mine-action assistance program in Nicaragua made steady and significant advancements during 2008. The partnership with

the national authorities, including the Nicaraguan Army and its Corps of Engineers, has brought the overall effort to within sight of its conclusion in 2009. The accomplishments in Nicaragua in all mine-action areas are, undoubtedly, results of different factors—among these, the will of the national authorities, the commitment of the international donor community and the participation of the Organization of American States. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 111



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News Brief

Extra \$5M Brings U.S. Demining Contribution to \$25M for FY09

In response to the international decrease in funding for mine action in Afghanistan, the U.S. Department of State is providing an additional US\$5 million to mine-action groups in the country. These funds will be distributed to Afghan Technical Consultants, Demining Agency for Afghanistan, Mine Clearance Planning Agency, Mine Detection Center, Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghanistan Rehabilitation, and The HALO Trust. The additional funds will enable 34 more mine-action teams to be fielded to remove the threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war across the country.

Afghanistan has been heavily contaminated with mines, small arms/light weapons, unexploded ordnance and munitions since 1979, following the invasion of the Soviet Union. Estimates indicate that more than four million Afghans are affected by these weapons, which contaminate an estimated 2,229 communities in the country.

The funds will help the demining teams clear three square kilometers (two miles) affecting 19 communities in Afghanistan. These communities have been highly affected by landmines, where 1,162 families living in the area have experienced 78 mine-related accidents in the past few years. The land, once released, will help the communities return to grazing livestock and growing crops, and ensure their safety against landmine casualties.

The funds are provided in addition to the \$20 million already contributed for the 2009 fiscal year by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.