

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 3

August 2001

Organization of American States Mine Action Program

Jaime Perales
Organization of American States (OAS)

Carl Case
Organization of American States (OAS)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Perales, Jaime and Case, Carl (2001) "Organization of American States Mine Action Program," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Organization of American States Mine Action Program

Countries worldwide are supporting OAS' efforts to clear landmine-stricken areas in Central America by implementing a mine action program that will teach courses in demining techniques and supervise and monitor mine clearance operations.



by Jaime Perales and Carl Case,
OAS

The Problem

Central America was a theater for military conflicts for several decades leading up to the 1990s. During these conflicts, landmines were often used by both government and irregular forces. The majority of the mines used were manufactured outside the region, but some improvised explosive devices were also used by armed insurgent groups. In some cases, mine fields were recorded with varying degrees of accuracy and detail but in many instances, they were neither marked nor documented in any way. Mines were placed around military and economic facilities, including telecommunications installations, power lines and bridges, as well as along trails and roads.

Long after these conflicts have ended, their deadly legacy remains in the form of thousands of anti-personnel mines that continue to threaten large numbers of people living in Nicaragua. Published by JMU Scholarly Commons, 2001

ragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala. In many rural areas, the local population fears this threat, and the re-establishment of normal patterns of life remains elusive. Numerous tracts of needed agricultural land remain unusable, placing an added economic burden on these areas and leaving entire communities isolated and economically depressed. Even with the increased risk of living and working in or near mine fields, the pressures of the population and the economy have forced many people to remain in these zones. The danger to the physical well-being of the people of Central America, as well as the impediment that landmines pose to economic recovery and democratic governance, have made their elimination an urgent humanitarian task.

The Response

The Central American peace process, which took root in the past decade, helped resolve the internal conflicts in the region and created a favorable climate for strengthening economic development and democratic institutions. As these nations struggled to consolidate peace, their governments asked the Organization of American States (OAS) for assistance in addressing landmine issues. In 1991, the Secretary General of the OAS, with technical

advice from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), requested that the member states and the permanent observers of the OAS cooperate in this task. Under a series of mandates from the OAS General Assembly, the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy of the OAS General Secretariat assumed overall responsibility for the conduct of this pioneering and innovative initiative, which became known as the Assistance Program for Demining in Central America (PADCA).

Since the program's inception, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, the United States and Venezuela have provided military engineers and other specialists to teach courses in demining techniques and supervise and monitor mine clearance operations. Other countries, including Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United



■ Deminers at work in Ocotal, Nicaragua.

Latin America

States, have generously donated finances and equipment to this humanitarian task.

Program Goals

The OAS has continually expressed a firm commitment to support the Member States in eliminating the danger of landmines. In the years since PADCA was initiated, the program has developed beyond an assistance program focused primarily on mine clearance in Central America into a comprehensive, multi-faceted mine action effort throughout the Americas dedicated to the total elimination of landmines and the conversion of the Western Hemisphere into an AP-landmine-free zone. The OAS has also called on the component organizations of the Inter-American System to participate in the development of programs to support mine risk awareness and preventive education, physical and psychological rehabilitation of victims and socioeconomic reclamation of demined zones. As the overall goals of the program have evolved, the Organization has expanded PADCA into an effort to attack all aspects of the mine problem throughout the Hemisphere, called Comprehensive Action against Antipersonnel Mines (AICMA). The AICMA program incorporates the previously existing demining assistance effort into its structure and serves as the focal point for the OAS on all landmine issues.

■ The first of 5,000 antipersonnel mines exploded by the Nicaraguan government.



In accordance with the Ottawa Convention of 1997, which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of antipersonnel landmines among signatory countries, the OAS has asked Member States to ratify and comply with the Convention. The Organization has also established a landmine registry for the Western Hemisphere and has supported the development of new demining programs in the Americas for all affected countries requesting assistance. Moreover, the OAS, through the AICMA program, has emphasized assistance to Member States that are signatories of the Convention and request assistance with landmine stockpile destruction in order to meet their obligations.

Organizing the Effort

Based on nearly ten years of mine action experience, the OAS assistance program has developed a planning system using operational modules of six months in duration. Modules are based on an agreement between the affected country and the OAS. It includes an operating budget that estimates resource requirements for each specified time period. This approach has ensured both effective and transparent use of the funds provided by the international donor community and has maximized the efficiency of mine action activities in Central America.

The OAS program provides a significant amount of the equipment and logistical support needed by the affected countries. Technical equipment, including mine detectors, protective clothing and other specialized items, are provided to permit the safe detection and



■ A sapper demining in Nicaragua.

destruction of landmines and to give the national deminers the confidence necessary to carry out their tasks. Other support, such as supplementary rations, life insurance and medical coverage, is also part of the complete package that AICMA offers.

Each of the countries supported by the program provides its own personnel and units to conduct mine clearance. The number of deminers involved in operations has grown to nearly 900 in Central America, as the need for broader action has become apparent. Mine-affected countries also provide logistical support within their national capabilities, as well as medical care and emergency evacuation in the case of accidents involving program personnel.

Some 30 international supervisors have been provided by members of the IADB, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Venezuela. Other nations, including Canada and the United States, have periodically provided military personnel to give training or technical advice on demining and landmine stockpile destruction. The activities of international military supervisors, trainers and technical ex-

perts are coordinated by the Mission for Mine Clearance Assistance in Central America (MARMINCA), which is based in Managua, Nicaragua and operates under the control of the IADB.

Challenges and Accomplishments

To date, the greatest challenge to mine clearance has been found in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Government has reported that some 135,000 landmines were buried throughout the country during the 1980s. Mined areas include land around electrical towers, bridges, communications facilities and power plants, as well as along the country's borders with Honduras and Costa Rica. Although Nicaraguan Government officials have reported the elimination of more than 62,000 landmines since clearance efforts began, approximately 73,000 mines remain to be located and destroyed. Following Nicaragua's signing and ratification of the Ottawa Convention, the Nicaraguan Army has also destroyed 84,000 stockpiled antipersonnel mines. The OAS and members of the international donor community have provided assistance with stockpile destruction, including international experts, to monitor the process.

In Honduras, demining operations began in September 1995, and since that time, ten operational modules have been supported, resulting in the destruction of more than 2,200 mines. As a result of these operations, numerous tracts of land have been reclaimed and turned over to local authorities for development. In November 2000, Honduras became the first of the OAS Member States to eliminate entirely its stockpiled antipersonnel mines when the Honduran Army destroyed its reserves of nearly 8,000 mines.

Demining activities began in Costa Rica along the border of Nicaragua in October 1996. With support

from AICMA, the Ministry of Public Security has undertaken both mine clearance operations and a public awareness component to prevent accidents involving the civilian population. To date more than 300 of the estimated 1,000 existing mines and unexploded devices have been found and destroyed. Because Costa Rica possesses no stockpiled mines, completion of demining operations will convert it to a mine-free nation.

Following the signing of a peace agreement in Guatemala, the OAS provided assistance in developing a mine and unexploded ordnance clearance program, which was launched in 1998. The Guatemalan National Commission for Peace and Demining has overall responsibility for the national project. Also participating in the program are the Volunteer Firemen's Corps, the Guatemalan Army and demobilized members of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union. Operations in Guatemala are somewhat unique within the OAS program, as the primary threat comes from the approximately 8,000 unexploded devices, including mortar and artillery shells, aerial bombs and hand grenades, which are scattered throughout Guatemalan territory. The clearance process requires extensive cooperation among the three operational components, as well as a concerted effort to communicate with the population of affected zones in order to locate and destroy hazardous items.

Since 1999, Peru and Ecuador have carried out demining activities along their common border as a key component of their agreement to resolve longstanding territorial issues. The OAS reiterated its support for these and other related mine action efforts in Resolution 1745 issued during the June 2000 General Assembly meeting. An agreement to support a program in Ecuador was finalized in March 2001, with the initial phase of activities to focus on mine stockpile de-

OAS Mine Action Program

struction. A similar agreement between the OAS and the Peruvian Government was signed in May 2001. Ecuador and Peru have both expressed interest in carrying out accelerated stockpile destruction with international assistance. In each country, the international community has provided or promised more than \$1 million (U.S.) to operate the initial stages of these mine action programs.

The Future

The AICMA program continues to grow as additional OAS Member States seek assistance in dealing with their own landmine issues. In keeping with renewed mandates from the OAS General Assembly, the program has responded to requests for support from the governments of Peru and Ecuador in addressing their shared problem of a common border contaminated by some 130,000 landmines. OAS aid is programmed to include technical, financial and logistical assistance in destroying their anti-personnel mine stockpiles.



■ Marion Orozco, 10 years old, was a victim of an APM and lost his leg below the knee, his arm below the elbow, and his left eye.

Latin America

About the Organization

The Organization of American States (OAS) is the oldest regional organization in the world, whose principle idea of creating an association of states in the Western Hemisphere dates to the 19th century. The Charter of the Organization, adopted in Bogotá, Colombia in 1948, declares that the promotion and consolidation of representative democracy is one of its central principles. The actions that the OAS has undertaken to promote democracy in the Hemisphere have varied since its foundation, but the basis for these actions has remained affixed to democratic ideals. Through the years, the Organization has become more actively involved in its support for democratic governance in the Americas.

In 1990, the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy was established within the OAS General Secretariat to provide guidance and support to member states to strengthen their democratic institutions and procedures. The Unit's main objective is to provide effective and immediate response to OAS member states requesting advice or assistance in modernizing or strengthening their political institutions and democratic processes. One of the priority program areas of the Unit is Comprehensive Action against Anti-personnel Mines. Since 1995, the Unit has been responsible for the general coordination and supervision of OAS mine action efforts, with the technical support of the Inter-American Defense Board.

AICMA is constantly searching for new technologies to increase the speed, efficiency and safety of clearance operations. With the financial support of the United States, a mine detection dog component has been used within the program since 1999 to enhance area reduction and quality control sys-

tem. AICMA has been operating in Nicaragua since 1997 to assist with the physical and psychological rehabilitation of mine victims. More than 300 people who have no social security or other insurance benefits have been provided with transportation from their communities to the program's rehabilitation center,

as well as lodging, nourishment, prostheses, therapy and medications.

As the scope of mine action activities expands, partnerships with other international and non-governmental organizations are taking on greater importance. Significant cooperation with the United



■ Marlene Talbott, OAS Principle Specialist and rehabilitation headquarters coordinator, visits the OAS prosthesis rehabilitation center.

tems. In the near future, mechanical clearance equipment will be introduced into Nicaragua with both U.S. and Japanese assistance.

In collaboration with the Swedish Government, a pilot program has

been operating in Nicaragua since 1997 to assist with the physical and psychological rehabilitation of mine victims. More than 300 people who have no social security or other insurance benefits have been provided with transportation from their communities to the program's rehabilitation center, as well as lodging, nourishment, prostheses, therapy and medications. As the scope of mine action activities expands, partnerships with other international and non-governmental organizations are taking on greater importance. Significant cooperation with the United Nations is maintained on several projects, including the establishment of a mine action database, which was funded by a grant from the U.N. Mine Action Service. AICMA is also developing a joint mine risk education and

landmine accident prevention project with UNICEF that will target children in Nicaragua. Important efforts are also being made to coordinate AICMA's victim assistance component with other international programs in conjunction with the Pan American Health Organization, the Center for International Rehabilitation, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration and the Inter-American Council for Integral Development. Other significant collaboration continues with important mine action non-governmental organizations, including the Canadian Landmine Foundation, International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Landmine Monitor, Landmine Survivors' Network, Mine Action Group, Survey Action Center and Las Damas de las Americas.

The countries that benefit from this program have made a significant commitment to sustain their national efforts to eliminate the mine problem, but their efforts require continued international support to succeed. With sustained and enthusiastic assistance from the donor community, the goal of making the Western Hemisphere a mine-free zone as soon as possible is both tangible and achievable. Demining in Central America should be completed by the end of 2001 in Honduras, 2002 in Costa Rica, 2004 in Nicaragua and 2005 in Guatemala.

**All photos courtesy of OAS.*

Contact Information

Carl Case
Mine Action Program Consultant
Organization of American States
1889 F Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
Tel: 202-458-3631
Fax: 202-458-3545
E-mail: ccase@oas.org