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Costa Rica:

The First Country in Latin America Free of Anti-Personnel Landmines

On December 10, 2002, Costa Rica declared itself the first country free from anti-personnel landmines in the Western Hemisphere. Placed in hills and brooks, bridges and roads, mines and UXO were buried for more than 15 years during the conflict in Central America.

by Jaime Perales and Carl Case

Introduction

With the support of the Organization of American States (OAS), Costa Rican deminers detected and destroyed more than 338 mines on the border with Nicaragua, and cleared more than 130,000 square meters of land. As a result, formerly contaminated areas were rehabilitated as potential agricultural zones. "There were 338 mine accidents, or 338 deaths, that we had the opportunity to prevent and this gives us satisfaction and pride," said Luis Alonso Rosales, international supervisor of the OAS.

OAS/Mine Action began its work in 1996 with the government of Costa Rica in the areas of mine clearance, mine risk education (MRE) and mine victim rehabilitation. With the conclusion of operations, the government fulfilled its commitment to the Ottawa Convention, which stipulates the destruction of anti-personnel landmines in approximately a ten-year period. Costa Rica signed the Convention in 1997 and ratified it in 1999.

Multilateral Cooperation Effort

OAS/Mine Action is a program created by the OAS at the request of its member countries. Apart from Costa Rica, OAS/Mine Action has programs in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Peru. In collaboration with the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB)—military counterpart of the

Inter-American System—the program has the following components: 1) humanitarian demining, 2) MRE, 3) mine victim rehabilitation, 4) stockpile destruction and 5) database and information systems.

The financial support of 19 donor countries¹ has permitted the OAS to clear more than 1,400,000 square feet of land in Central America and more than 22,000 anti-personnel landmines. The total effort of more than \$40 million (U.S.), channeled through the OAS for all Central America, has been key to finalizing mine clearance operations in Costa Rica.

The IADB has assisted in the training for demining operations since the creation of the program. To the present, this military entity has trained approximately 260 international supervisors from 11 member countries.² International supervision coordinates more than 900 deminers placed in five mine-affected countries.

Mine Clearance in Latin America

The programs supported by OAS/Mine Action have different challenges, depending on the country. In Honduras, some 2,269 mines have been cleared from the border with Nicaragua. In addition, in 2000, Honduras became the first country in Central America to destroy all its stockpiled mines. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused flooding and mudslides, which have delayed operations. Despite this setback, it is expected that demining will finalize at the end of this year.



■ Mine-free fields are now used for food.

Civil war in Guatemala lasted more than 30 years, leaving different types of UXO throughout the country. The UXO found in the affected zones includes homemade mines, booby traps and various types of grenades. There are an estimated 8,000 pieces of UXO in the country that are being located and destroyed systematically by three entities: volunteer firefighters, former members of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit and the National Army. It is expected that operations will be completed by the end of 2004.

In Nicaragua, mines are scattered throughout the country, especially in strategic areas such as bridges and electric towers. Nevertheless, Nicaragua has reliable equipment and personnel (as well as a reliable infrastructure) in these areas, which have permitted a constant clearance effort. According to official sources, more than 63 percent of mines have been cleared and all mine stockpiles have been destroyed. It is expected that Nicaragua will be a landmine-free country by the end of 2005.

As a result of the 1995 conflict between both countries, Ecuador and Peru have more than 130,000 mines sown on their border. With more landmines than the four Central American countries combined, Peru and Ecuador have emphasized the need for mine clearance operations. The OAS has collaborated in the areas of technical training, supervision and stockpile destruction. The large

number of mines in these countries makes it difficult to determine with precision when operations will conclude, although the OAS has estimated 2007 as a tentative date.

Preventive Education, Rehabilitation, Stockpile Destruction & Database

Mine Awareness Education is among the main components of the OAS/Mine Action program. In mine-affected countries, the program develops a campaign in the affected zones and coordinates efforts



■ An OAS Mine Awareness campaign.

with the National Army, schools, community leaders and local media. The steps to follow when finding a mine are disseminated to the population through these channels. The OAS has allowed landmine victims to share their experiences with the affected population.

The OAS rehabilitation program has provided more than 450 handicapped people with medical attention and prostheses. Since last year, OAS/Mine Action has included an additional component: job training for victims.

Stockpile destruction is another component of the program that has been developed in collaboration with the governments of the affected countries. Since 2001, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Peru have completely eliminated their anti-personnel landmine stockpiles by destroying a total of more than a half million mines.

The OAS, in collaboration with the United Nations, has implemented the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) in Nicaragua, with the

goal of maintaining a record of mined areas, supporting victims of anti-personnel landmines, recording mines that have been destroyed and targeting areas that have been supported by mine awareness campaigns. IMSMA in Nicaragua has records of more than 500 victims, and the system has expanded to Guatemala, Peru and Ecuador.

Costa Rica: First Country Completed

Fewer mines than expected were located in Costa Rica. Approximately 5,000 were thought to have been placed along the border with Nicaragua, but these estimates were further reduced once operations were in progress. The lack of minefield registries was a problem shared by other Central American countries. "There were no records of mined zones and, for us, this was as if we were looking for a needle in a haystack," said Freddy Santamaría, the chief of demining operations of the Ministry of Public Security of Costa Rica.

Apart from international supervision by the IADB, mine clearance operations require a helicopter for medical evacuation, a paramedic at the demining site and health insurance for mine clearance personnel. "The lack of at least one of these elements will not allow us to continue mine clearance operations in the area," stated William McDonough, the coordinator of the OAS/Mine Action Program.

Mine clearance operations and destruction of UXO were executed according to United Nations international standards. No accidents occurred during mine clearance operations in the country. Nevertheless, demining in Costa Rica was not completely a walk in the park. Operations suffered delays from exogenous variables such as Hurricane Mitch, which caused the erosion of mines and subsequent difficulties in locating them. With the support of the OAS/Mine Action Program, Costa Rican deminers cleared three mined sectors along the border with Nicaragua in the provinces of Guanacaste and Alajuela.

A mine awareness campaign was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Security to target local schools and communities close to the

mined zones. The campaign consisted primarily of distributing educational materials, including posters, photographs, pencils and uniforms for students. According to Leda Marín, local coordinator of the OAS Program in Costa Rica, children's enthusiasm about the campaign was generated not only by "the message carried on the T-shirt, the notebook or the pencil, but also by the receipt of the present itself."

Although Costa Rica does not have a large number of landmine victims, according to the Ministry of Public Security, at least 10 people suffered injuries from landmines. In the case of the few Costa Rican mine victims who had not previously received assistance, the OAS program provided them with prostheses and medical treatment in Nicaragua.

The completion of the OAS Mine Action Program in Costa Rica represents a small but significant step in the fulfillment of the mandate provided by OAS General Assembly Resolution 1745 to continuously support member countries that request assistance with mine action in order to make the idea of the Western Hemisphere being an anti-personnel landmine-free zone a reality. ■

**All photos courtesy of OAS.*

**Editor's Note: El Salvador declared itself "the first Central American country to be certified as free of anti-personnel mines" in 1994. Please refer to this year's Landmine Monitor for more information (http://www.icbl.org/lm/2002/el_salvador.html).*

References

1. Argentina, Germany, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Honduras, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States (information since the beginning of the program).
2. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (information since the beginning of the program).

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