

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 7
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 36

October 2003

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Recommended Citation

Orozco, Carlos and Perales, Jaime (2003) "The OAS and Landmine Victims in Nicaragua," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 36.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol7/iss3/36>

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The OAS and Landmine Victims in Nicaragua

The Organization of American States (OAS) Mine Action Program has established a priority in providing prostheses and medical attention to landmine victims, as well as work training. In 2002, the program started a pilot project that provided job training and jobs to mine victims.

by **Carlos Orozco**, *National Coordinator, OAS Mine Action Program in Nicaragua* and **Jaime Perales**, *OAS Communications Specialist*

Background

On December 17, 1997, in Nicaragua, Juan Lopez was looking for work on Explosion Mountain. On this day, he stepped on a mine and lost his left leg. He was 39 years old. A year later, the same Mr. Lopez, while he was looking for a small piece of land to work, stepped on a second mine and lost his right leg. Agustin Ramos shared similar circumstances. "I walked into an area where I never imagined mines to be placed." Mayling Estrada is a survivor as well: "I was seven years old when I lost my two legs, while I was with my grandmother carrying firewood." Jose Larios: "I received shrapnel perforations all over my body." Santos Rayos is also a landmine survivor: "[A] friend and I were trying to get a banana from a tree. My friend died and I lost my left leg." Jose Blandon describing his injuries: "I received a mine blast close to my face. I lost part of my face, my right eye, part of my nose and my upper lip." Juan Lopez, Agustin Ramos, Jose Blandon and the others supported by the OAS rehabilitation program share similar fates: a loss of a limb or parts of their bodies due to anti-personnel landmines.

The OAS Mine Action Rehabilitation Program and work-training are vital components in the OAS efforts to combat the pernicious effects of landmines. Created in 1995, this program, apart from

rehabilitation, covers the following areas in six countries: demining, mine awareness education and stockpile destruction.¹ The humanitarian demining also has the technical support from the Inter-American Defense Board.

Rehabilitation of Mine Victims

In five years, the OAS rehabilitation program has supported 510 victims² with prostheses and psychological assistance. After destroying an estimated percent of mines sown and 100 percent of stockpiled mines, the program initiated its component in rehabilitation and work training. The majority of the victims involved in this part of the program come from Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, where nearly half of the country's known landmines were found.

Nearly 89 percent of the landmine victims in Nicaragua are civilians and only 11 percent are military personnel. Ninety-five percent are men between the ages of 32 and 47. The majority were looking for a job or working when they stepped on a mine. In Nicaragua, the children are the least affected population with only four percent involved in accidents³ which is different from other countries with landmines.

The OAS Mine Action Rehabilitation Program was created essentially in response to requests from OAS member countries. The effect of one anti-personnel landmine has devastating consequences not only for the victims, but also their families. Most victims were their family's main economic support before the accident.

The lack of knowledge about mines is one of the chief contributors to landmine accidents. For instance, Domingo Martinez

told the OAS, "I have 10 mines stockpiled at home to assure that none of them harm anybody." Says Carmelo Rivera, "I had a mine in my patio at home and it exploded without anybody touching it." Arnulfo Pozo knew of a similar story. She told the OAS that "there are some folks in the Pampas that take out mines and hide them in their homes." Daniel Montiel volunteered to show the OAS mines that are close to a tree. Manuel Perez kept "one mine PPMISRII and one used rocket LAU" in his home. There are plenty of stories without a name. For example, a "15-year-old youngster found three jumping mines. He kicked them, threw stones at them and moved them close to a road."

Twenty-nine percent of mine accidents happen when people walk through a mined area. Such was the case of Ramon Peralta, a 34-year-old farmer. His accident occurred on May 20, 1999. "I was picking corn. I did not know that the field was mined. I stepped on a mine; it exploded and threw me about 30 meters. I was carried to the hospital of Ocotal where they amputated both of my legs."

To reduce the risk of accident, the OAS Mine Action Program has embarked on an integral and extensive education program using radio and television, and in some cases training local leaders. OAS campaigns have identified mines placed in patios and schools, and those stockpiled by individuals in their homes. In a recent campaign in the Nueva Segovia area, the participation of the community helped locate more than 400 mines and UXO, which were subsequently destroyed.

With the financial support of Sweden, Norway, Canada and Spain, through the National Center of Prostheses and Orthoses, the OAS supports victims by providing them with prostheses and medical treatment. This was the case of Victor Bustamante: "[In the Sungano, Nueva Segovia] I stepped on a mine that smashed my right leg. I was carried to the Ocotal Hospital where my leg was amputated. The OAS gave me the prostheses that I needed." The OAS



At Instituto Nacional Tecnológico (INATEC), victims are trained in different jobs (computing, carpentry, shoemaking, etc.) in Nicaragua.

optimizes information through its database that includes a biographic profile of victims, as well as their names and the areas where the individuals suffered their accidents. The database also includes the areas where the OAS provided mine awareness education.

Work Training

The OAS Mine Action Program has established a priority in providing not only prostheses and medical attention, but also work training. Last year, the program started a pilot that provided job training and jobs to mine victims. The selection criteria are diverse. Prior medical and prosthesis attention is the first requirement. A second criterion includes the distribution of affected zones. The first generation of students came from the three different areas with the most accidents in Nicaragua: Chontales, Nueva Segovia and the North Atlantic Autonomous Region.

The training period lasts approximately one year and depends on the particular skills and experiences of each victim. The National Technological Institute, a governmental organization in Nicaragua, provides technical training. Students receive a scholarship, a monthly stipend, a per diem, transportation and daily meals. Job skills training includes car engineering and mechanics, soldering, and computing.

The first generation of students started its courses in April 2002 and concluded

eight months later. Of the 24 students who graduated, 11 were trained in woodworking, six in car engineering and mechanics, five in soldering and two in computing. In addition, seven students were provided extra help in literacy classes.

The OAS Mine Action Program, in collaboration with the National Commission of Demining, a national entity in charge of the follow-up of mine action operations in the country, provided a loan of financial support to each graduated student. This financial support helped them to establish their own businesses in their communities.

During the training, the OAS facilitator noticed that many of the victims had learning disabilities caused in part by depression. In response, the OAS provided psychological treatment to those students. The OAS project has attracted the attention of other NGOs in the United States: Global Care Unlimited, located in New Jersey, solicited funds from 800 students from 25 schools in New York and New Jersey.

Currently, the OAS is training 32 students, with the support of the governments of France and Spain, and started a third group in August. In the near future, this project will be replicated in other countries such as Ecuador, Peru and Colombia. In Colombia, the number of victims outnumber those in Nicaragua. People such as Juan Lopez, Braulio Guerrero and Agustin Ramos have more in common than just their accidents. They

know how to read and write, how to be woodworkers, how to have their own business and how to earn a stable income as a result of multiple efforts of the OAS Mine Action Rehabilitation Program, the international donor community and, most importantly, the individual efforts of Nicaraguan people to overcome an almost insurmountable obstacle in their lives.

**All photos courtesy of the authors.*

Endnotes

1. The six countries are Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia. To see the other components of the program, please refer to *Journal of Mine Action*, Issue 5.2., Summer 2001. Located at <http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/5.2/index.htm> or www.oas.org in the demining section.

2. Information up to May 2003.

3. OAS/Mine Action, Victims of anti-personnel landmines, Table of January 2001 (311 victims).

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