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Clearing Landmines and Building Peace in Colombia

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In the SPOTLIGHT: Clearing Landmines and Building Peace in Colombia

by Vanessa Finson [Norwegian People's Aid] and Giovanni Diffidenti [Photographer]

In 2015, the government of Colombia and *las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) invited Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), to develop a joint pilot project to survey and clear anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). The project was a first of its kind in terms of the composition of the teams: two warring parties working side-by-side, and a means to help build trust and de-escalate the conflict during the Colombian peace process. In 2016, NPA commissioned photojournalist Giovanni Diffidenti to visit Santa Helena and El Orejón to capture the historic demining project in action. Diffidenti's photos for NPA are featured in this article.

In 2016, the government of Colombia and FARC-EP reached a peace agreement after four years of negotiations. The agreement ended one of the longest armed conflicts in South American history, and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December 2016.

More than 50 years of civil war has left Colombia with widespread landmine and ERW contamination. Clearing the country of landmines is an important pre-condition for the fulfillment of the peace agreement and a successful transition into post-conflict Colombia. It is also an obligation under the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC), to which Colombia is a state party and is required to complete landmine clearance by its Article 5 treaty deadline of 1 March 2021.

Two BIDES members walk through an area cleared of landmines in Alto Capitan (2016).
Photo courtesy of Department of Antioquia.





DAICMA's Paulo Lasso conducts MRE in Santa Helena primary school, and shows children a video in which they can see landmines and hear stories of landmine survivors (2016).

Photo courtesy of Department of Meta.

Landmines are dispersed throughout an estimated 40 percent of the national territory. More than 11,000 victims of landmines have been recorded since 1990.¹ Due to the conflict, the Colombian population has suffered large-scale displacement, and the government has registered more than 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDP). Demining operations are essential for reducing the fear and risk of mine- and ERW-related incidents, and for making land available for safe and productive use (e.g., farming and other livelihoods), promoting development, and restoring access to infrastructure and public services.

NPA led, coordinated, and facilitated the demining pilot project from May 2015 to December 2016. The demining teams consisted of personnel from both the Government's Demining Engineers Battalion (BIDES) and FARC-EP, accompanied by the Colombian National Authority on Mine Action, *Dirección para la Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal* (DAICMA). Part of NPA's role in Colombia during the peace process was to build trust between the parties. NPA organized trust-building activities, such as football tournaments and barbecues. BIDES and FARC-EP lived under the same roof during the pilot project, which meant they got to know one another well and had conversations that were not limited to work-related issues.

The pilot project also encouraged both parties to work together to achieve a specific goal: clear landmines that endangered the population.

NPA's role in the successful implementation of the pilot project consisted of three elements: a reference group comprised of one peace negotiator from the government, one member from FARC-EP, and one NPA representative; a steering group with members from all three parties; and a management field team in charge of implementing the project.

The geographical areas chosen for clearance operations were two highly contaminated areas of Colombia that had not seen any humanitarian demining previously. Santa Helena in the Department of Meta is situated in a flat area with heavy rainforest vegetation. Parts of this area were difficult to access because the roads were heavily damaged. The other area, El Orejon, is situated in the Department of Antioquia. It is a mountainous area with rivers and high rainfall, and difficult weather conditions frequently stopped the operations. Both communities are in need of socio-economic development, including the construction of roads, and improvements to health services and education. The pilot project contributed by removing



Cattle handlers pass next to a minefield in the Gilotambor task area, Santa Helena (2016).
Photo courtesy of Department of Meta.



NPA dog handlers Measho Kidanemariam and Mohamed Beyele Shikuralahi with their mine detection dogs Rambo and Hamilton, deployed on long leash searching in a minefield in the Filotambor area, Santa Helena (2016).
Photo courtesy of Meta.



FARC-EP's Jefferson Martinez points out to BIDES an area where they might find more landmines in the CHIRI 4 minefield task (2016).
Photo courtesy of Department of Antioquia.

landmines, constructing a community house, and making improvements to a local road and bridge.

During the pilot project, NPA found 66 landmines and one item of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Another essential part of the project was to conduct MRE in coordination with DAICMA. NPA also trained four members from different villages who undertook MRE for their own communities.

In a war-torn country where support for the peace process has been low among the civilian population, the trust-building exercise between parties showcased positive results, and provided significant political and peacebuilding dividends. On 23 June 2016, the Colombian government and FARC-EP signed a historic bilateral ceasefire deal. The two parties formally signed a peace agreement on 26 September, but the deal was subsequently rejected by a narrow margin in a referendum on 2 October 2016. A revised peace accord was signed 24 November and ratified by Congress from 29 to 30 November 2016. On 27 June 2017, FARC-EP ceased to be an armed group, disarmed, and turned over more than 7,000 weapons to the United Nations at a ceremony in Mesetas.

Following the pilot project, NPA obtained full accreditation and registered as a clearance organization in Colombia. In April 2017, NPA started its own operations in Vista Hermosa, a municipality in the Department of Meta. NPA teams have conducted non-technical survey and clearance in Mesetas, also in the Department of Meta.

NPA is assisting DAICMA and FARC-EP in their mine action efforts. NPA has provided DAICMA with an



Above: Inside her tent, a light bulb illuminates FARC-EP's Lilana Castellano and FARC-EP Commander Alfonso Cano (2016). Castellano comes from META, part of the Bloque Oriental military group and joined FARC-EP at the age of 15. "I entered FARC because I did not have the opportunity to study or to work. We don't have any discrimination in our party (of women, men, black people or whatsoever)," says Castellano. She was a commander of a mobile campaign. "We always thought of peace since the beginning of war. There is lots to do, and I will follow the orders of my party." The party, for Castellano, is everything—family, friends—and gives her a sense of security. She traveled to Havana and saw the sea for the first time. "The sensation of the sand and the sea under my feet ... I ran for three [kilometers], a sensation of freedom."

Photo courtesy of Department of Meta.



Left: Alejandro Hernandez holds a photo of himself with his wife Yudi Garcia and their son Miguel Angel Hernandez in El Orejon (2016). Yudi died in a landmine accident not far from their home—she was 16 years old.

Photo courtesy of Department of Antioquia.



FARC-EP, BIDES-DAICMA, and members of the local community play football on the school grounds in El Orejon (2016).
Photo courtesy of Antioquia.

information-management adviser who will help enhance systems and undertake capacity building of the information-management team with the national authorities. NPA is also assisting FARC-EP in structuring its recently established organization for mine action,

Humanicemos. Moreover, NPA collaborates closely with the national military humanitarian demining brigade on various topics, particularly on the training and accreditation of mine detection dogs in Colombia. ©

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Vanessa Finson is Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) Country Director in Colombia. Finson was born in London and raised in Italy and Norway; she has attended university in Mexico, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Finson has worked in mine action since 2009 as a desk officer for Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia, in addition to working as the Head of Donor Relations for NPA's Humanitarian Disarmament department. Since 2014, she has worked with mine action in Colombia, having been part of the development, negotiation, and implementation of the historic pilot project on demining, which took place prior to the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP.

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Giovanni Diffidenti was born in Bergamo, Italy. His professional career as a photographer began in 1983 in London. His photographs have been published worldwide in many different magazines and newspapers, and he has been commissioned by various U.N. agencies and many international humanitarian organizations. The agencies he has collaborated with include Agence France Press, Associated Press, Contrasto, Frank Spooner Pictures, Grazia Neri, and Reuters. He has traveled and lived in Africa, Asia, the Balkans, and Latin America. Diffidenti is the co-founder of the cultural association Di+ that combines photojournalism and contemporary art (www.associazionediplus.org). He has exhibited his project on landmine survivors, "The Legacy of the Perfect Soldier," since 1992. For more information on this project and Diffidenti's publications, please see the photographer's website at www.giovanidiffidenti.com.

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1. "Colombia: Casualties and Victim Assistance." *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*. Last modified 9 November 2016. <http://bit.ly/2xOgnpn>.