



V CONFERENCIA DE MINISTROS DE DEFENSA DE LAS AMERICAS

SANTIAGO DE CHILE 18 AL 22 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2002

THEMATIC LINE 3: DEFENSE AND SOCIETY; THE POSSIBILITY OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

SUB-THEME 3A: EXPERIENCES IN DEMINING OPERATIONS

SPEAKER : NICARÁGUA

**"Experience of an Integral Action Against Anti-Personnel Landmines:
An approach from the Ministry of Defense of Nicaragua."**

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Anti-Personnel Landmines are a terrible calamity that threatens the life and peace of many people. In spite of the hard experiences learned after the use of these inhuman weapons, still more than 200 millions of these artifacts are stored in different countries. Other millions of them, place in danger the life of many citizens in more than fifty nations throughout the world. While we are gathered in this important Ministerial Meeting, an anti-personnel landmine somewhere in the World –the Western Hemisphere, Nicaragua-threatens to snatch the happiness of many human beings, among them, innocent civilians who are often children.

The terrifying possibility that an instrument designed for conventional war, continues to cause deaths and mutilations to innocent civilian citizens, still after the conflict has concluded, should oblige us to commit all our efforts and resources within our reach, to the removal and destruction of anti-personnel landmines in this Continent, mainly, in countries that have lived the terror and desolation of war during passed decades.

For these reasons, Nicaragua makes use of this opportunity – the Fifth Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas- to present the most relevant aspects of its experience in the fight to eradicate the plague of these devices of death. Nicaragua will also present a document that summarizes the evolution, reaches and limitations of the different national demining programs in Central America, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. This document is the result of the Hemispheric Conference on the Advances of Removal and Destruction of Anti-personnel Landmines in the Americas, which took place in Nicaragua last August.

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Hidden Assassins.

From their invention, anti-personnel landmines have demonstrated to be inclement and hidden assassins that shorten the steps of many nations. Such is the case of Nicaragua, that has finally gained peace at a very high price but still struggles to advance toward a destiny of democracy and prosperity.

Some of the supporters of anti-personnel landmines, allege that these weapons have a great tactical utility and that, under strict parameters of control and signaling, once a armed conflict is over, there are of virtually no risks for the civilian population. Nevertheless, the Nicaraguan experience demonstrates just the opposite. As other countries that have also experienced civil or conventional wars, year after year, Nicaragua continues to experience landmine accidents. To October of 2002, Nicaragua has registered 512 landmine victims: 472 civilians (34 fatalities) and 40 military (5 fatalities).

In the cases where the victim survives, the tragedy of loosing a limb is also accompanied by social exclusion, despair and a awakening to a new reality where his/her life has changed forever after stepping a landmine. Due to the fact that most victims are peasants or inhabitants of rural areas in a country with high levels of poverty, for many of them, physical labor is its main means of subsistence; therefore, to lose a part of the body is a human tragedy that usually condemns them to permanent unemployment and even begging. This is a situation that Nicaraguan authorities are trying to change through different Government programs.

The consequences of stepping a landmine are even more serious to children. As UNICEF has pointed out, children are more vulnerable because of their natural curiosity, disinformation or mere misfortune.

Intelligent Landmines?

In spite of the damages caused by these weapons, we have recently heard of some groups that insist in the production of the so-called "intelligent mines". The logic behind these supposedly "*intelligent landmines*" is that they have certain self-destruction devices –either mechanical, chemical or electric- that prevents them from triggering after a given period of time. However, objective experience determines that landmines, once installed, do not distinguish between factions involved in a conflict and innocent civilians. Therefore, there can not be such things as intelligent landmines. The main objective of these lethal weapons is to cause casualties, to inspire terror, to demoralize, to hurt and kill. Nothing is less intelligent than that.



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Nicaragua's position is that nothing justifies that some countries are still using Anti-Personnel Landmines as conventional weapons. For this reason, Minister of Defense, Doctor José Adán Guerra, has stated that Nicaragua is determined to a global action to ban mines that should be conceived as "a state commitment that must involve government, civil society, along with the international community, since the landmine problem is a very complex matter that can not be solved in an isolated way or only through national institutions"².

National Commission for Humanitarian Demining.

The National Commission for Humanitarian Demining was created on November 27, 1998, through Presidential Decree number 84-98, and is presided over by the Ministry of Defense. It works to guarantee the implementation of policy required to comply with the commitments assumed from the Ottawa Convention. Under the initiative of the Commission, in 1999 the first Central American Demining Meeting, was successfully carried out.

On January 12th 2000, Nicaragua published in "La Gaceta", the government's official journal, a law Prohibiting the Production, Purchase, Sale, Import, Export, Traffic, Use and Possession of Antipersonnel Landmines, which was previously approved by the Presidency on December 7th, 1999.

On December 2000, Dr. José Adán Guerra was appointed as Minister of Defense and thus, President of the National Humanitarian Demining Commission. On January 2001, this Commission was reorganized into three Sub Commissions, which are:

- **Clearance and Destruction of anti-personnel landmine:** Formed by institutions that work directly in the Clearance and Destruction of land mines.
- **Medical Attention and Rehabilitation:** Formed by institutions directly linked to the primary treatment of the victims of anti-personnel landmine, as well as their later assistance.
- **Education, Prevention, Signaling and Socio-Economic Integration:** Composed by institutions that worked in the above mentioned fields.

Each one of these three Sub-commissions is integrated by government, non-governmental and international organizations, which all interact with the same general purpose.

² Guerra, José Adán. Opening Statement at the Conference on the Advances of Removal and Destruction of Anti-personnel Landmines in the Americas. August 28th. 2002.



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On March 29th 2001, during the Sixth Act of Destruction of Stockpiles³, Minister Guerra announced that the Commission would reorient its efforts toward a more integral and humanitarian focus, in order to eradicate all landmines in Nicaragua –both stored and installed- by the year 2005. It was also announced that the Commission would give greater importance to victim assistance programs. Under the leadership of the Commission, Nicaragua intends “to play a more active international role, aware that this serious problem requires of the joint action of the group nations committed to the cause of Peace.”⁴

National Plan for Humanitarian Landmine Action.

Over the last two years, the Commission has been able to develop a strategy that includes five main components, as well as specific projects derived from them; all these, with the purpose of complementing an integral and humanitarian National Landmine Plan. The components are **Clearance and destruction of Stockpile, Prevention and Education, Signaling, Social Integration and Rehabilitation**. The first component –Clearance and Destruction- is executed by the Corp of Engineers of the Nicaraguan Army.

As for the actions of prevention and education on the danger of landmines, Nicaragua has published several practical documents for popular use, such as the “Prevention Guide” and “The Popular Version of the Ottawa Convention”. Other similar texts are currently in reproduction to be used in next school year, at regions of high risk of landmine accidents.

On the other hand, the Nicaraguan Red Cross, as a member of the National Humanitarian Demining Commission -and with the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross – is participating in the “Signaling of Mined Fields Plan”, and in the activities of prevention through the program “Child to Child”, which is carried out by training local promoters that work at the level of rural schools.

As a complement to the above-mentioned, by next year, efforts will continue to be taken in order to train broader segments of the population within school age, so they can work in their own homes and communities, in the education on the danger caused by nearby landmine fields.

The National Humanitarian Demining Commission, by means of the Sub Commission of Medical Attention and Rehabilitation; on one hand, and the Sub Commission of Education, Prevention, Signaling and Social Integration, on the other, has carried out activities through technical work groups that develop situation analysis, identify which national capabilities must be reinforced and creates a portfolio of victim assistance programs, such as the one presented at the Third Conference of Member States of the Ottawa Convention.

³ Nicaragua destroyed its landmine arsenal in eleven public events, organized by the Ministry of Defense.

⁴ Ibid-



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In the area of Socio-Economic Integration, a pilot project is being executed, which aims at the training of 42 landmine victims from the central departments of Nueva Segovia and Chontales. This project has the economic support of the Program for the Assistance of Demining in Central America, PADCA-OAS, and the academic and technical support of the National Technological Institute (INATEC), a governmental institution which is member of the National Demining Commission.

The experience and initial positive results of this pilot project, has allowed the implementation of a second technical and vocational training course –sponsored by the Tripartite Initiative integrated by México, Canada and the PHO-, which benefits 92 landmine victims, divided by two groups of 41 people each, over a period of 6 months per group.

In this same direction -and as a way to search for solutions at the problems that most landmine victims face- the National Demining Commission agreed with the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG-FOR), to incorporate landmine victims who are land-owners or farmers, to a program for development assistance known as “Libra por Libra”, by which a package of improved seeds was delivered to each family group.

Administration of Resources for the Action Against Landmines

Nicaragua requires a lot of help in order to complete the programs of the National Humanitarian Demining Commission, as well as to offer appropriate assistance to landmine victims. There are limited national resources to face the enormous challenge of clearing more than 54 thousand landmines that are still in the ground, out of 135,643 that were initially installed during the eighties.

According to data provided by the Program for the Assistance of Demining in Central America of the Organization of the American States (PADCA-OAS), the financial requirements to clear and destroy anti-personnel landmine in Central America, Ecuador and Peru for the period 2002 - 2003, come up to US \$7,091,434.98. PADCA-OAS has estimated that, for next year, Nicaragua needs at least three million dollars, i.e. 42% of the total amount required, due to the serious consequences of this problem in the country.

Then again, the Nicaraguan Minister of Defense has maintained that in Nicaragua, “the total financial cost of the National Plan for Humanitarian Demining, up to the year 2005, is equivalent to fifteen million dollars, in order to execute the components of victim assistance, prevention of accidents, social and economic integration of affected communities and individuals, without neglecting the tasks of removal of landmines.”⁵

⁵ Guerra, José Adán. Presentation to the donor community during the OAS meeting. October 18th, 2002.



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Minister Guerra explained that Nicaragua has a deficit of approximately US \$ 10.251.260.00, in the component of removal of landmines, to fulfill the goal of declaring Nicaragua “territory free of landmines” by the year 2005, and a deficit of US \$5.3 million dollars to cover the initial needs of other components, for a total deficit of US \$ 15.551.260.

During the last meeting of donor countries, which took place in Washington DC, on October 18, 2002, Minister of Defense explained that President Enrique Bolaños’ Government “has firmly promoted a National Humanitarian Demining Program as a key State policy”. In that sense, the Minister restated that the lack of resources seriously threatens the sustainability of the Program, reason why he has formulated a fervent call to the international community to continue supporting Nicaragua in its desire to get rid of these lethal weapons no later than 2005.

The current assistance capacity of the National Social Security System is far less than the true and actual level of the minimum needs of landmine victims, plus the great amount of war victims from the eighties. To understand the dimension of this problem, notice that in 1990 -according to sources of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior, Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security, CIAV/OEA, and the UNHCR- the population directly affected by war was estimated to be 541,704 people, including repatriated and displaced (444,594), retired members of the Army and of the Ministry of the Interior (35,750), demobilized from the National Resistance known as “Contras” (22,413) and civilian victims of war (38,947). Additionally, the military conflict in Nicaragua had produced, since 1975, approximately 120 thousand dead and 85 thousand orphans, 80 thousand handicapped, 10 thousand injured combatants and the extensive destruction of productive infrastructure, mainly in the rural areas in the north and center of the country.⁶ In the case of the landmine victims covered by social assistance programs, the government must care not turn this group of citizens into a privileged few over the rest of people that have also been disabled by war.

Participation of the Civil Society

Inter-institutional coordination in landmine action has been successful, mainly because of the effective participation of organized civil society groups along with different government instances that are members of the Commission.

The civil society members of the National Commission, participate in all the projects of assistance to landmine victims, as well as in the actions of education and prevention of accidents in close coordination with local organization both public and private. This program pretends to place the affected communities and its inhabitants at the central axis of the national humanitarian demining actions.

⁶ Data collected by the author.



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Landmine Action and International Humanitarian Rights.

For the Government of Nicaragua, the action against Anti-Personnel Mines is an expression of the will of the State in the respect, protection and promotion of international humanitarian rights. From this perspective, the use of landmines are contradictory to the basic principle that prohibits the use of weapons that indiscriminately affect combatants and innocent civilians. In this sense, Nicaragua sustains that countries that are respectful of human rights, should not only prohibit the use of these type of devices within its own borders, but should also be actively committed with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Advances of the National Humanitarian Demining Plan.

As a result of the successful implementation of the National Humanitarian Demining Plan, on September 28 of this year, Nicaragua destroyed the last 18,435 landmines left in its arsenal, thus becoming part of a very selected group of States free of landmine stockpiles.

Concerning the clearance of installed landmines, the execution of the Program of Removal is carried out through five Operational Fronts, a Signaling Detachment and a Mechanical Minesweeper Detachment, all which have been able to carry out, up to September 30 of this year, the following activities:

- Of the 135,643 mines reported by the Nicaraguan Army, 81,348 installed mines have been certified as “destroyed”, being pending to remove 54,295, which represents an execution of over 59.97% of this component.
- In 2001 Nicaragua completed the clearance of 96 kilometers of areas in its southern border. The declaration of this territory as “free of mines”, has allowed the development of tourism and productive activities.
- During the month of June of this year, the important department of Chinandega, characterized by its agricultural potential on the northern border, was also declared territory free of mines.
- Demining and clearance of 171 kilometers of the 313 long northern border, for an advance of 54.47%.
- Of the 991 target areas programmed for landmine clearance, 748 have been concluded, for a global advance of 75.48%.
- The road between the cities of Juigalpa and El Rama –which included other targets such as bridges, electrical towers, radio and TV antennas- was also cleared.

Another aspect to point out, is that from the month of December 2001, a terminal of IMSMA⁷ is fully in place and working. This important database contains the information of the advances of landmine action in Nicaragua, as well as the registration of victims. This information is available to any user, member or not of the National Demining Commission.

⁷ Information Management System for Mine Action



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All these achievements have been possible due to the firm will of the Government of Nicaragua to comply with the letter of the Ottawa Convention, along with the commitment assumed with the donors community, for the correct use of the resources assigned to this humanitarian effort, either in bilateral or multilateral agreements.

Participation in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines

Consequent with the intrinsic function of the Commission as for the formulation and definition of landmine action policy, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also developed a wide diplomatic action toward incrementing awareness of this problem in the different forums and international conferences, with the purpose of promoting the adhesion and universal ratification of the Ottawa Convention. This awareness campaign has become a State policy that is supported and carried out by the National Demining Commission and openly promoted by President Enrique Bolaños Geyer.

On this sense, Nicaragua considers that the realization of the Third Meeting of Member States, signatories of the Ottawa Convention, which took place in Managua from the 18-21 of September 2001, was a signal of support to the will of the Nicaraguan Government and society, in its struggle against landmines, as well as a recognition to the work of the National Demining Commission.

Also, by organizing the Hemispheric Conference on the Advances of Demining in the Americas, carried out in Managua on August 27 and 28 this year, Nicaragua strengthened its leadership in humanitarian landmine action.

Product of this hemispheric meeting, the "Declaration of Managua" was adopted, in which the American countries affected by landmines reaffirmed their commitment to comply with the Ottawa Convention and made a call to the donor community, asking for their support to these efforts.

Pending challenges

The advances of the National Landmine Action Program are the result of the effort of many sectors of the national life and of the support and the economic collaboration of the international community. Nevertheless, as it has been pointed out by the Organization of American States and the International Committee of the Red Cross, one of the main problems of landmine action is the lack of funds to conclude the programs already in place.

The challenges that lay before are many, while the resources with which we counted on are getting progressively scarce. The National Humanitarian Demining Commission estimates that the funds of the international cooperation for the Americas, has experienced a reduction of approximately 40% in the last year. This is caused, among other things, by the reorientation of resources toward other regions of the world.



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Despite the many limitations, the tasks of landmine removal are still advancing. For instance, the lack of sufficient helicopters, imply one of the main difficulties for the tasks of the Corp of Engineers of the Nicaraguan Army, which has obliged the Ministry of Defense as head of the National Demining Commission, to explore innovative alternatives in order to assure the continuity of the programs.

Additionally, there are geographic and climatologic conditions –such as the floods provoked by Hurricane Mitch in 1998- that have radically altered the original location of installed landmines. These are new challenges to the demining tasks.

The Nicaraguan experience demonstrates that it is possible to free a country of the threat of landmines, if the strategy is able to combine the participation of the State, the Civil Society and the International Community.