



Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines: A Regional Initiative to Address Landmine Issues by Carl E. Case [Organization of American States]

For more than 18 years, the Organization of American States has had a leading role in the struggle to deal with humanitarian-demining issues in South and Central America. Since the inception of the Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal programs, the OAS has been involved in many aspects of mine action, bringing new hope to the region.

The task of removing hundreds of thousands of anti-personnel mines and restoring the livelihoods of thousands of victims from conflict-ravaged regions of Central America and South America seemed impossible in 1991. Since then, the program known as Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal of the Organization of American States has evolved within an eminently humanitarian vision of reestablishing safe, secure and productive living conditions for mine-affected communities, with concomitant consideration for development, human rights and gender issues.

AICMA is the focal point within the OAS for mine action, integrating the components of humanitarian mine action with its mine-clearance work. These components include mine-risk education for affected communities, assistance for landmine victims and their families with physical and physiological rehabilitation services, as well as socioeconomic reintegration; stockpile destruction support for the Ottawa Convention¹; and removal of explosive remnants of war.

The OAS and Humanitarian Demining

The OAS was founded in 1948 to bring the countries of the Western Hemisphere together to strengthen cooperation and advance common interests. It is the region's premiere forum for multilateral dialogue and concerted action. Through the ongoing Summits of the Americas process, the region's leaders have entrusted the OAS with a growing number of responsibilities to help advance the countries' shared vision.

At the core of the OAS mission is an unequivocal commitment to democracy, as expressed in the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Building on this foundation, the OAS works to promote good governance, strengthen human rights, foster peace and security, expand trade and address the complex problems caused by poverty, drugs and corruption. Through decisions made by its political bodies and programs carried out by its General Secretariat, the OAS promotes greater inter-American cooperation and understanding.

The OAS seeks to prevent conflicts and to bring political stability, social inclusion and prosperity to the region through dialogue and collective action. A problem-solving example of OAS collective action is its AICMA program.

AICMA

The AICMA program implements OAS General Assembly resolutions, passed by the 34 member states, to assist requesting member states with their national humanitarian mine-action programs. The consensus expressed strengthens AICMA's ability to assist in the removal of hundreds of thousands of anti-personnel mines, and to reestablish safe, secure and productive living conditions for thousands of mine-affected communities in different parts of Central and South America.

Humanitarian demining. Originally conceived as an assistance program for mine clearance in Central America, AICMA assisted humanitarian-demining programs in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Suriname, enabling their governments to declare their countries mine-safe.² Likewise, AICMA currently supports mine-clearance efforts in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru.

Mine-risk education. AICMA designs its MRE campaigns to supplement humanitarian-demining operations, and to enable affected communities to get involved in mine-awareness initiatives, facilitating the exchange of information about the location of mined areas and explosive devices in the vicinity. During 2008, 118 education campaigns covering 125 mine-affected communities were carried out in Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru. In August 2008, Colombia saw AICMA launch its first series of mine-risk education campaigns to supplement clearance activities in response to humanitarian emergencies caused by landmines. Three prevention campaigns focusing on three communities at risk reached more than 3,800 people.

Victim assistance. The AICMA has assisted over 1,200 landmine survivors with medical, psychological and rehabilitative interventions in various beneficiary countries since its establishment in 1997. By December 2008, 97 percent of all victims in Nicaragua had received medical assistance and psychological rehabilitation. During this past year, the AICMA program assisted in the rehabilitation of 394 survivors in Nicaragua, 40 in Honduras, 77 in Colombia, three in Ecuador and 11 in Peru.

Support for AP mine ban. AICMA promotes the interest expressed in OAS General Assembly Resolutions to make the Americas a landmine-free zone, and actively supports member states that are signatories to the Ottawa Convention in meeting their obligations. AICMA actively cooperated with the government of Nicaragua and the European Union in hosting the Managua Workshop on Progress and Challenges in Achieving a Mine-Free Americas held this past February 2009.

Stockpile destruction. AICMA has supported landmine-stockpile destruction in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Peru and Nicaragua, providing both technical and financial support for these efforts. Since 2000, more than one million stockpiled AP mines have been destroyed in the Americas, due in part to financial contributions from Canada and Australia.



Obsolete munitions in Nicaragua getting ready for destruction.
Photo courtesy of PADCA-OAS in Nicaragua

Munitions destruction and explosive remnants of war. During 2007, in coordination with the OAS Mission for Assistance to the Peace Process in Colombia and the financial support of the governments of Canada and Italy, AICMA assisted in a project to destroy 18,000 small arms and light weapons surrendered to the Colombian government by paramilitary groups as part of that country's peace process. With Canadian and U.S. contributions, an initiative was launched in Nicaragua in 2007 and renewed in 2008 to destroy some 1,047 tons (about half) of the excess and obsolete ammunition in Nicaraguan Army stockpiles. In conjunction with a project sponsored by the United Nations Regional Center for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, AICMA provided a technical advisor to assist in monitoring the destruction of 42,536 weapons and more than 10 tons of weapons parts and accessories carried out by the government of Peru in 2008.

Coordination with international entities. The AICMA program relies on collaborative efforts with other international and nongovernmental organizations. Cooperation with international entities over the life of the program has improved the efficiency and effectiveness of mine-action initiatives throughout the hemisphere by marshalling available resources from these organizations, particularly in the fields of MRE, victim assistance and munitions destruction. A close partnership with the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation has resulted in the safe and successful destruction of weapons and excess munitions in Colombia and Nicaragua.

Throughout the years, the success of the work done by the AICMA program has been possible to achieve due to the generous contributions of Australia, Brazil, Denmark, the European Union,

France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The following nations have contributed in the past, as well as for 2009: Belgium, Canada, Italy, Norway, Spain and the United States.

The governments of the current beneficiary countries of the AICMA program, including Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, also make significant material and personnel contributions to their national efforts. Likewise, the Inter-American Defense Board, an OAS entity, coordinates monitoring personnel selected by member countries in support of the program to ensure safety and adherence to national and international mine-action standards.

Fulfilling the Vision

Currently, the Nicaraguan National Demining Plan is nearing completion. The number of people at risk in communities within five kilometers (3.1 miles) of a mined field, once estimated at 550,000, has been reduced to 11,153 inhabitants in 50 MRE-educated communities. According to a Nicaraguan survey by the national census bureau, cleared areas have facilitated improvements in freedom of movement, access to transportation, reestablishment and expansion of medical care, and better access to education.



A deminer works on a overcast day under triple canopy on the Peru-Ecuador border.

Photo courtesy of AICMA-EC, OAS.

On the Peru-Ecuador border, along the Condor mountain range, joint humanitarian demining operations continue in seven different zones of the Ecuadorian province of Morona-Santiago and the vicinity of Chiqueiza in the Peruvian department5 of Amazonas. Progress on the border areas will facilitate implementation of the bi-national plan to integrate economic activities between the two countries and develop agriculture, livestock production and tourism. AICMA is also coordinating plans to develop an innovative mechanical solution for the clearance of anti-personnel mines in the southern border zone of the Chira River.

Launching the AICMA program to assist Colombia's humanitarian-demining effort in 2005 was the manifestation of a dynamic vision. This program was concerned with responding to

humanitarian emergencies caused by AP mines laid by armed non-state actors during the ongoing conflict between the government and NSAs. It aimed to reduce or eliminate human suffering in a country where mines pose a threat in 31 of its 32 departments.

In Colombia, a positive social impact can already be seen as the areas cleared in the Guaviare department have created safer living conditions for indigenous communities. Similarly, clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance from the municipalities of San Francisco and Bajo Grande in the Antioquia and Bolivar departments, respectively, has allowed displaced families to return to their abandoned homes and their lands. For 2009, Colombia increased its humanitarian demining capacity from four to six units. Three of these 40-member units are dedicated to the clearance of minefields under government jurisdiction. The other three respond to humanitarian emergencies caused by mines placed by illegal armed groups.

Accompanying articles in this issue on victim assistance in Nicaragua, methodologies for mine-risk education in Colombia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, and a method to measure program effects in Central America provide an in-depth view of the wide scope of AICMA activities.

Expanding the Vision

As a natural extension of mine-action activities, AICMA initiated support to member states in their efforts to destroy excess or obsolete munitions stockpiles as well as small arms/light weapons. The presence of stockpiles of obsolete munitions, explosives and other remnants of war present a hazard to surrounding communities. Current proposals for destruction of obsolete munitions stockpiled in Guatemala and explosive remnants of war scattered in parts of Nicaragua, seek to remove the risk from accidental explosions and to eliminate or diminish the dangerous practice of collecting UXO to sell as scrap metal.



OAS program promoter on his way to conduct MRE in Las Nubes, Nicaragua.

All Photos Courtesy of PADACA-OAS in Nicaragua

Vocational training and social reintegration are crowning components of the overall AICMA vision. This type of assistance is the sequential complement to rehabilitation projects to fully prepare affected men, women, boys and girls to return to productive lives.

In collaboration with the National Technological Institute of Nicaragua, AICMA has supported vocational training for 421 landmine survivors. By the middle of 2008, 11 victims had been assisted in Ecuador and Peru; simultaneously, AICMA launched a program to identify and locate landmine accident survivors in order to assist them with the necessary rehabilitation services. In Colombia, AICMA supports a rehabilitation project for landmine survivors in coordination with the Colombian Integral Rehabilitation Center. In March 2007, AICMA initiated a project to enable the social reintegration of survivors by means of vocational training provided by the National Learning Service. AICMA invites private enterprise to support its different victim-assistance projects.

Effectiveness of AICMA

The AICMA program has proven its effectiveness in carrying out the requests of the OAS member countries that have sought its benefits in clearance operations, stockpile destruction and munitions destruction. Likewise the integrated, multi-lateral nature of its work has successfully created capable organizations where none existed, completed seemingly insurmountable tasks and leveraged the experiences in completed national programs to assist other countries still facing difficult and complex mine problems.

In 2009, the program anticipates assisting the completion of mine clearance in Nicaragua and transitioning its victim-assistance structure into a local NGO run by landmine survivors to provide follow-up services to victims in the future. Sustaining mine-clearance efforts in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, as well as assistance to many landmine victims and affected communities that still struggle to recover from the effects of landmines, will pose a difficult challenge for several more years; however, with continued international support, these countries can also overcome formidable obstacles to joining the other nations of the Americas that have become mine safe.

Biography

Carl E. Case is Director of the Office of Humanitarian Mine Action for the Organization of American States. In addition to his 12 years of experience working on mine-action issues in the Americas with the OAS, he also served in Iraq in 2008 as the Senior Conventional Weapons Destruction Advisor with the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S. Department of State.

Endnotes

¹Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. The document

was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>.

²Editor's Note: Some countries and mine-action organizations are urging the use of the term "mine free," while others are espousing the term "mine safe" or "impact free." "Mine free" connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms "mine safe" and "impact free" refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.