

Guatemala declared mine free, milestone marks MARMINCA success in Central America

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After more than three decades of fighting, Guatemala, a country which lost 100,000 people to civil war, was eager to return to some normalcy. Finally, in December 1996, a United Nations-led peace accord was struck between opposing factions and the road to recovery began; though not with ease.

Standing in the way of the rugged Central American nation lay many obstacles. An economy dependent on agriculture was severely affected in 1998 after Hurricane Mitch did extensive damage to the country's banana and coffee crops. Additionally, many of the estimated 8,000 Guatemalan land mines which had been buried during the civil conflict had now been dislodged by the storm.

Ironically, a people trying to distance themselves from violence were still being held hostage by silent time bombs that lay in waiting underneath untilled soil. That's when the Organization of American States was asked by Guatemala's government to intervene, and agreed to send to Guatemala the Mission for the Assistance of Mine Removal, Central America (MARMINCA), a program managed by the OAS through the Inter-American Defense Board.

Recently, MARMINCA celebrated a new milestone when they, along with Guatemala's Congressional Peace Commission and the Guatemalan Army's Corp of Engineers, declared Guatemala mine-free during a special ceremony in Guatemala City December 15.

“The demining effort in my country was necessary because the mines have been assassins to workers dependent on farming the land,” said Guatemalan architect and IADC Class 45 student Guillermo Pacheco. “The people have supported the MARMINCA efforts, including ex-guerrillas who helped plant the mines. Now the people can get back to working the land without worrying about their safety.”

The declaration is only one of many milestones MARMINCA has achieved since its 1993 inception. In 2003 MARMINCA declared Costa Rica mine-free after it cleared more than 130,000 square meters of infected soil. Recently, Honduras joined Costa Rica as a mine-free country. In all of Central America, 53,000 anti-personnel mines over an area of more than 2,700,000 square meters have been removed.

“Besides training, MARMINCA has assisted with mine risk education awareness campaigns, which will alert local populations to dangers in how to avoid the mines,” said COL Carlos Calderon, USA, of the IADB Demining Division,. “MARMINCA has also gathered verified data for the OAS program data base.”

Meanwhile, MARMINCA continues to aggressively pursue the demining project in Nicaragua, which it hopes to declare mine-free by the end of 2006. Most of the mines in Nicaragua were placed there during the Sandinista-Contra conflict that dominated the countryside in the 1980s. In addition to the Central American campaign, in 2003 the OAS and IADB began the Mission for the Assistance of Mine Removal, South America, to remove the mines that in the mid-1990s were buried in 320 square kilometers of disputed territory between Peru and Ecuador.

In January, during a change of command ceremony in Managua, Nicaragua, CNEJ Jorge Gamez Abreu of the Venezuelan National Guard, an expert in conventional

and non-conventional demolitions, replaced Chile's CNEL Rafael Guerra Ibarra as MARMINCA's chief.

The change of command was placed in perspective by the words of IADB Chairman MG Keith M. Huber. "We are very proud that we have reached these achievements," Huber said. "It demonstrates that anything is possible when different countries unite. We are here as a family, and we place great importance in protecting the towns and their people who work the land."