10-5-2007

Danger from Landmines Continues in Colombia

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Danger from Landmines Continues in Colombia

by Guest

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2007-10-05

[The following article by Susan Abad is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the Sept. 12, 2007, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

A late July report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) gives Colombia the shameful list-topping title of the country with the highest number of victims and accidental explosions of anti-personnel landmines in the world. Anti-personnel landmines put Colombian civilians at risk Luz Piedad Herrera of the Observatorio de Minas of Colombia's vice president's office says it's "alarming." "We have two or three victims a day," said Herrera.

The observatory group says that 22 people were victims from landmine explosions in 1990. In 2006, there were 1,122 and from Jan. 1 to Aug. 15 of this year, there have been 557. Jose Miguel Vivanco, director of HRW/Americas, said that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) plant the most landmines, adding that another rebel group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), and paramilitary groups are also responsible. "Even though it's the FARC who is planting mines right now, the majority of victims are from mines planted by the ELN," Herrera said, adding that the group started planting mines in Colombia 15 years ago.

The HRW report, titled Maiming the People: Guerrilla Use of Anti-personnel Landmines and Other Indiscriminate Weapons in Colombia, says guerrillas' frequent use of anti-personnel landmines, improvised out of cheap, readily available materials, "leaves hundreds of civilians maimed, blind, deaf, or dead every year."

The landmines can remain live in the ground for 50 years. When one suffers "a landmine injury, survivors' whole lives are seriously affected, not only because of the injury's physical effects, but also because of the incident's impact on their mental health, their ability to support themselves and their families, and their ability to remain in their homes," said the report.

Many of the survivors are among Colombia's poorest and most vulnerable citizens: peasants or others who live in impoverished rural regions, far from state authorities and hospitals, and who are often caught in the middle of the conflict involving guerrillas, Colombian security forces, and paramilitary groups. Often, landmine survivors are victims of other abuses, too, such as forced displacement," it added.

Benefits legally guaranteed

Colombian law gives the survivors of landmine explosions a variety of benefits, but survivors face many obstacles to receive them. There is only a small window, one year, for survivors to apply, and, worse still, they are rarely aware of what their own rights are. The state provides assistance of a single payment of up to US$8,680 to victims, but they can also apply for a disability allowance of just over US$1,300 within a six-month period.
The report says, "Of 139 cases of landmine survivors that the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines reviewed in 2005 and 2006, only 17 survivors had received humanitarian assistance. Seventy nine had lost their rights to payments because the deadline to claim the benefits had expired."

A 1996 decree that regulates a government care fund orders victims to provide a confusing set of paperwork claim forms, certificates from local authorities to prove they are victims, transportation and health care receipts. Herrera says that the government is now trying to rehabilitate victims and prevent new incidents. She adds that every survivor needs an average of US$100,000 for his or her rehabilitation. Also, planting a mine costs just US$1, while disarming it costs US$1,000.

An estimated 100,000 landmines are in Colombia that have been planted by guerillas and paramilitaries in strategic areas or near their cocaine laboratories. Guerrillas also use the mines to protect their camps, where they house their commanders and hostages, as a means to ward off the militaries, making it difficult for these armed groups to agree to clear their mined areas.

In February 2005, the ELN agreed to remove its mines, but the deal was deceptive, according to the government. Herrera said that, while the ELN picked up 54 mines it had placed on a 12-km stretch of the road in Bolivar state, "that same day they planted 50 more." The ELN is currently negotiating a demobilization plan with the Colombian government in Cuba (see NotiSur, 2007-05-04).

The Colombian government ratified the Ottawa Convention in 2000, an international agreement that prohibits the employment, production, or transferring of anti-personnel mines. In October 2004, the government destroyed more than 8,000 mines that were protecting its military bases, energy and telecommunications installations.

HRW warns that "the provisions prohibiting indiscriminate warfare are part of customary international law and are binding on all parties to both internal and international conflict" and that if "guerrilla members intentionally direct attacks against civilians using anti-personnel landmines, then they could be subject to prosecution for war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)."

-- End --