

19th MSP Intersessional Meetings
Panel on Article 5 Completion and Sustainable National Capacities
Experiences in Supporting Sustainable National Capacities
The Case of Nicaragua
23 June 2021

Slide 1 – Introduction

- Thank you, Madame Chair, for this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on sustaining national capacities as States reach completion of their mine clearance obligations under Article 5 of the Convention. This is a topic that goes directly to the issue of how States can deal with residual contamination in their territories once they have achieved and reported completing their national programs.

Slide 2 – Landmines in the Americas

- To give you the context of the experiences of the OAS with supporting post-completion national capacities, let us look very briefly at the landmine situation in the Americas as a region.
- Ten countries have had to deal with contamination from landmines and other explosive remnants of war since the Convention entered into force; eight American States have received assistance from the OAS with five of these achieving completion of their national programs, including Costa Rica, Honduras, Suriname, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.
- Two other states, Venezuela and Chile have also met their mine clearance obligations, primarily with their own national resources.
- Finally, three more states continue to work toward Article 5 completion with Ecuador programmed to finish in 2022, Peru in 2024 and Colombia in 2025.

Slide 3 – Regional approach

- In general, the structure of the programs that have been actively supported by the OAS have been designed to emphasize multi-lateral cooperation between each supported State and a coalition of donors; states contributing in trainers, monitors and advisors; and technical partner organizations; all coordinated through the OAS Program of Comprehensive Action against Anti-Personnel Mines.
- The goal remains to support National Mine Action Authorities in the development of national capacities in all aspects of mine action.
- One unique component of this collaboration is the use of military units that are specially trained, equipped and dedicated to humanitarian demining tasks. Although civilian government authorities are pre-eminent in policy direction of national programs and in the execution of other mine action activities, every mine-affected State in the Americas has assigned responsibility for mine clearance operations and land release to a portion of their national military or security forces. Colombia is the sole country that has opened accreditation for these activities to civilian operators.

Slide 4 – Central America

- In Central America, the mine problem was almost entirely focused on Nicaragua, either within the country or along its borders with Honduras and Costa Rica. As indicated on this slide, contamination by mines and other explosive remnants in these neighboring States and in Guatemala was less than 2% of the level experienced by Nicaragua, and these three other countries were able to complete their requirements well before Nicaragua. Consequently, the significantly lower levels of mine and EO contamination outside of Nicaragua translated into a reduced need for major activities to eliminate remaining explosive hazards. On the other hand, when Nicaragua reported Article 5 completion in 2010, there was still significant concern about residual contamination, despite the elimination of all known mined areas in the country.

Slide 5 – Nicaragua

- Nicaragua had experienced an internal conflict throughout the 1980's on a far wider scale than its Central American neighbors, but its national military forces was responsible for placement of most mined areas in order to impede activities of armed non-state groups operating in the country and along its borders.
- While the majority of these areas were recorded, many additional minefields were not known or discovered until years after the national mine clearance effort began.
- Ultimately, mine clearance activities were supervised through a National Demining Commission chaired by the Ministry of Defense with clearance task assigned to the Nicaraguan Army Corps of Engineers.

Slide 6 – Hazardous Areas

- This map helps to demonstrate the geographical scope of mined areas as well as the location of two sites with a significant amount of abandoned munitions.
- In addition to clearance operations on a national scale by the Nicaraguan military's five demining units, the OAS undertook other mine action activities, including explosive ordnance risk education campaigns and landmine victim identification, registry and assistance, thanks to donor resources, that gave balance to the humanitarian demining work of the army.

Slide 7 – Timeline

- Across the life of the program in Nicaragua, which began with the first clearance operations in 1993, the overall size of the demining component of the military grew, particularly after the devastation of the country by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and following Nicaragua's ratification of the Convention in 1999.
- As this national capacity expanded, eventually reaching a strength of some 650 deminers, additional mined areas were identified through both survey activities and from reports received through EORE campaigns from people living in affected areas. While the five major demining units were committed to clearance of recorded mined areas, the need for a team dedicated to responding to reports of mined areas or significant UXO contamination. This led to the creation of an additional army unit of 50 deminers that

would be dedicated to clearance of EOD call-out tasks and mined areas that were previously unknown and would have had to await off-schedule clearance by the major demining units.

- As the Nicaragua program approached completion in 2010, the reduction in donor contributions forced an overall reduction in national demining capacity. In spite of this, national authorities decided to preserve the call-out capacity, which turned out to be a good decision with respect to subsequent years after completion of clearance of known hazards.

Slide 8 – Residual threats

- The residual contamination that was found in Nicaragua after conclusion of demining operations in known hazardous areas included not only some previously unrecorded and unreported mined areas, as well as randomly emplaced mines and unexploded ordnance that should be anticipated following any conflict involving widespread use of these munitions.
- However, other information began to surface following completion with regard to areas with abandoned munitions and large stockpiles of explosive ammunition that was found to be either in poor condition or well beyond its best-use expiration. Attention was drawn to these last two hazards by several accidents that occurred in the final stages of the demining effort when a number of civilians, including children, were killed or severely injured while trying to harvest munitions for economic purposes.

Slide 9 – Residual capacities

- Initially following completion, the Nicaraguan Army retained about 25% of its demining personnel to respond to residual contamination tasks.
- When it became clear that these tasks went beyond EOD and demining spot tasks, additional training of some demining personnel was necessary to prepare them to deal with specific tasks such as finding and destroying abandoned munitions and undertaking larger scale EOD operations to eliminate bulk quantities of ammunition.
- While some equipment, such as machines for vegetation clearance were easily adapted to these tasks, other items, such as detection systems with deep search capabilities had to be introduced along with additional training of demining personnel in their use.

Slide 10 – Other residual capacities

- As residual hazards persisted, so did the need for continuation of risk education efforts in many parts of the country. As the nature of the threat was somewhat different from the period dominated by clearance of mined areas, so was there a need for EORE campaigns to emphasize UXO and AXO threats in addition to that of landmines. For the most part, these efforts were sustained through the OAS EORE staff, but also by developing a multiplier capacity through the training of selected residents of affected areas, especially local officials, teachers and other community leaders. This capacity would prove to be extremely important both in protecting lives and in the identification of residual contamination.

- Another key area that required sustainment beyond completion was the reporting system for receiving information from affected communities and the public. In addition to community liaison channels that were set up important capacity that was sustained was a telephone hotline number that connected any citizen who called directly to the demining unit of the army engineers.
- And to ensure that reported information was adequately captured and follow-up actions were taken, all reports through these channels were recorded into the national mine action database to serve as a reference for residual contamination clearance, including spot tasks.

Slide 11 – Residual contamination reporting

- As this graph indicates, a significant number of reports identifying dozens of mines and hundreds of items of UXO continued to be received throughout the year following Article 5 completion. In fact, some residual clearance activities were still ongoing some two years after Nicaragua completed Article 5 completion.

Slide 12 – Lessons learned

- To summarize:
- It was clearly very advantageous to define a sustainable capacity well before the anticipated completion date in order to handle what would turn out to be a significant level of residual contamination in many parts of the country.
- The capacities that were needed had to deal not only with residual mine and UXO contamination, but also with abandoned and deteriorating munitions.
- In that context, consideration should be given to the appropriate equipment and training needed to address a broader variety of residual contamination tasks and how humanitarian demining capacity can be adapted to meet these challenges.
- With the continuing risk to many communities even after mine clearance tasks were completed, risk education continued to play an important role in protecting lives from other kinds of explosive hazards and also played a role in collecting information about where these hazards were located.
- And, finally, the continuing flow of new information about hazards means that both reporting systems and mine action databases should be maintained well beyond projected completion dates.

Thank you