

Antipersonnel Land Mine Eradication in Colombia

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Introduction

In November of 2016 in Havana, Cuba, after over a year of formal negotiations between the Colombian government and the guerrilla revolutionary group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace accord to end decades of violent conflict that resulted in more than 200,000 deaths and the removal of over 7 million citizens throughout the country. This peace accord, dubbed the “Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace,”¹ aimed to usher in a new era in Colombia without the constant threat of violence and kidnapping. However, the new peace, while putting an end to the active revolution, did not purge the country of all military threats, for the threat of antipersonnel land mines persisted throughout the nation.

FARC had historically been one of the most prolific revolutionary groups in the use of land mines, and the nearly 50 years of war with the Colombian government made Colombia one of the most mine-scarred countries in the world with some of the highest death rates due to antipersonnel land mines². Both FARC and the Colombian military are responsible for antipersonnel landmines, although the military claims to have cleared their explosives. In short, the peace with FARC did not eliminate the threat, and a concerted effort had to be made by the Colombian government to eradicate land mines throughout the countryside. As a signatory of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty³, Colombia had made a commitment to purge the country of all land mines by 2021, and now that the fighting with FARC had ceased progress could be made in reducing the presence of these deadly land mines. However, Colombia would not be able to accomplish this task without the help of outside organizations, and that is where the Organization of American States became involved.

Background: International Agreements and OAS Missions

The most important international treaty dealing with the elimination of land mines is known as the Mine Ban Treaty (1997), also dubbed the Ottawa Convention. The UN convention entered into force in March of 1999 and required signatory states to halt production of all antipersonnel land mines, eliminate all stockpiles of mines, and destroy all mines within the country’s borders. Additionally, the convention states that all member states have the right to request international assistance and suggests that all states with the necessary capacity assist others with important actions such as mine clearance, stockpile destruction, and the rehabilitation of affected persons. All states have access to UN research and technological advising pertaining to the destruction of land mines and correct practices, and in the more than two decades since the signing of the convention, the UN has amassed a sizeable amount of data related to the issue (UN research on land mines can be found [here](#)).

¹ <http://especiales.presidencia.gov.co/Documents/20170620-dejacion-armas/acuerdos/acuerdo-final-ingles.pdf>

² <https://news.trust.org/item/20130626060528-f3oey>

³ https://fas.org/asmp/campaigns/landmines/Ottawa_Convention.htm

Within the Organization of American States, the primary international organization that addresses antipersonnel land mines in the Americas, there are several organs that have directives to assist countries with mine eradication. The OAS follows the outlines of the Ottawa Convention but has also passed several resolutions related to mines, most importantly the 2004 resolution titled “The Americas as an Antipersonnel-Land-Mine-Free-Zone” [AG/RES. 2003 (XXXIV-O/04)]⁴ which reiterates many of the objectives in the Ottawa convention while urging member states to cooperate with and provide funding for the OAS Mine Action program. The OAS Mine Action program, known by the acronym AICMA due to its Spanish title, is coordinated by the Department of Multidimensional Security under the General Secretariat of the OAS with technical and monitoring assistance from the Inter American Defense Boards⁵. These organs solicit funding from the international community, organize missions to monitor the destruction of mines in affected countries, and provide preventative educational programs that aim to reduce the likelihood of civilian deaths due to land mines in the region.

The OAS began officially supporting the demining efforts in Colombia in 2003, providing resources to train government leaders and assist with risk education⁶. In 2004, following the signing of the aforementioned resolution, with the help of military experts to advise demolition deployed by the OAS, over 12,000 mines were destroyed clearing 1.5 million square meters of territory in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Peru⁷. In the ensuing years much of Latin America has been cleared of mines with the assistance of AICMA and the OAS, and as of 2016, Colombia was one of the few nations which still had a sustained presence.

Colombian Demining after the Peace Accord

Between 2008 and 2014, Colombia had the second most deaths due to antipersonnel land mines in the world with a death rate of 1,000 people per year at its peak, only surpassed by Afghanistan during this periods. With a peace treaty with FARC newly signed in 2016, the Colombian government could, at last, make significant progress towards total the eradication of landmines which they promised to achieve by 2021. The process of demining is technically challenging and painstakingly slow with modern mines, in which finding the mines usually requires metal detection. However, the process of finding and destroying mines becomes more challenging when mines are homemade with low metal content like the majority of the mines found in Colombia, making the eradication of mines increasingly difficult and creating a very costly problem. The majority of mines that remained in Colombia in 2016 were improvised explosive devices (IEDs) manufactured by FARC and scattered across rural areas of the country using materials that rendered metal detection and the use of bomb-sniffing dogs ineffective. Therefore, the process of detecting and destroying landmines in Colombia required innovation and modern techniques, which required additional resources and spending.

⁴ http://www.oas.org/xxxivga/english/docs/approved_documents/americas_antipersonnel_landmine_zone.htm

⁵ <https://www.oas.org/csh/english/mineintrod.asp>

⁶ https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-290/13

⁷ <https://www.oas.org/csh/english/mineAICMA.asp>

⁸ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/demining-colombia/>

The Colombian government would not be tackling the issue alone; following the peace accord with FARC, the military group agreed to assist in the national mission by providing locations of the mines as well as providing ex-revolutionaries to assist in the demining process. Even so, Colombia required assistance from the international community in order to achieve the 2021 deadline, and one of the primary institutions to aid in these efforts would be AICMA, who had been an active source of technical assistance, community education, and rehabilitation for over a decade. Due to the violence caused by FARC during this period, however, relatively little progress was made as mines continued to be distributed and deaths continued to increase.

Now, with a peace accord freshly in place, the Colombian government was poised to make progress in eradicating antipersonnel land mines. The issue would be handling costs and resources as they embarked on the costly and time-consuming process, and for this, they needed to communicate with the OAS.

Classroom Exercise

Imagine you are a Colombian government official in 2016 tasked with drafting a letter to petition for more funding for the mine eradication project from OAS member states. In order to effectively convey the situation, consider the following questions:

- What progress has Colombia made in destroying land mines in recent years?
- Why does Colombia need more funding now? What has changed?
- Why is it worthwhile for these countries to support this movement?
- Where would their funding be distributed? To which projects (think AICMA)?

Use the information presented in the case study overview and the additional links provided below to present your argument to OAS member states.

Additional Useful Links

- Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor's report on Colombia circa 2015
<http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2015/colombia/casualties-and-victim-assistance.aspx>
- OAS Action against antipersonnel mines
<https://www.oas.org/csh/english/mineintrod.asp>
- Colombian government page on AICMA (in Spanish)
<http://www.accioncontraminas.gov.co/AICMA>

Appendix: Background of the FARC⁹

Over the past 50 years, civil conflict in Colombia has resulted in 220,000 deaths, 25,000 missing people and 5.7 million displacements.¹⁰ Partaking in this armed conflict against the government and each other are two different types of insurgents: the right-wing paramilitary groups and the leftist guerrillas. The guerrillas first emerged during the political period called "La Violencia" (1948-1958). When the Conservatives won the 1946 elections, they implemented policies in retaliation against the Liberals, who had been in power and carrying out attacks on the Conservatives since 1930. This initiated a period of violent conflict between the two political parties, including a dictatorship, coup d'état, and economic turmoil.

The latter plagued the presidency of Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966), during which the devaluation of the Colombian peso, intensive inflation, and unemployment as a consequence of anti-inflationary policies led to the appearance of the National Liberation Army (ELN) in 1964 and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1966. The ELN was created by a group that had studied in Cuba; together with radical Catholics and leftist intellectuals, they followed the ideology of Che Guevara. The FARC had links to Soviet communism and defined itself as the military branch of the Colombian Communist Party. On top of redistributing wealth, especially on behalf of the rural poor, and preventing the privatization of natural resources, it fought for the elimination of the involvement of multinational corporations and the U.S. government in Colombia.

With around 20,000 soldiers and thousands of supporters at its peak,¹¹ the FARC is perhaps the most infamous and powerful of the guerrillas. Its strategies consist of bombings, assassinations, kidnappings (including of foreigners for ransom) and armed attacks. Some notable examples of its activities are the assassination of a former minister of culture in 2001, the hijacking of a commercial airliner in 2002, and the kidnapping of presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt in the same year. In addition, the FARC was involved in drug trafficking by imposing taxes on drug sales. In 2015 it was estimated that its funds from this trade were between \$150 million and \$500 million per year,¹² though the defense minister claimed it could be as much as \$3.5 billion. The FARC is widely known for its use of landmines. According to the government, its mines have injured or killed more than 10,000 people, including almost 4,000 civilians.¹³

Throughout its existence, there have been several attempts by the government and the FARC to reach a peace agreement. In the 1990s and early 2000s, several Colombian governments attempted to cede land to the guerrillas, institute demilitarized territories, or engage in intensive military operations against the group, with the aim of eliminating it or at least reducing civilian casualties. One case of this was President Belisario Betancur's 1982 achievement of a brief ceasefire between the FARC and the M-19 guerrilla group after granting amnesty to all insurgents. Another instance was President Andrés Pastrana's granting control of land in the southern state of Caquetá to the FARC and another guerrilla, the ELN. Finally, after

⁹ Translated excerpt from Claire Reardon, "Pobreza y conflicto armado en Colombia: Su relación a través de shocks de precio de productos básicos" (senior thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2020), 4-6.

¹⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-civil-conflict>

¹¹ [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36605769#:~:text=The%20Revolutionary%20Armed%20Forces%20of%20Colombia%20\(Farc%2C%20after%20the%20initials, follow%20a%20Marxist%20Leninist%20ideology.](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36605769#:~:text=The%20Revolutionary%20Armed%20Forces%20of%20Colombia%20(Farc%2C%20after%20the%20initials, follow%20a%20Marxist%20Leninist%20ideology.)

¹² <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-civil-conflict>

¹³ Ibid.

taking office in 2002, President Alvaro Uribe adopted a firm strategy against the leftist insurgents, decreasing the murder rate by 40% and the number of kidnappings by 80% during his first term.¹⁴

However, the real process of reaching an agreement with the FARC began after the guerrilla group had shrunk to about 7,000 members¹⁵ and its founder and leader had died of a heart attack. In 2012, it announced it would no longer kidnap members of the army or police for extortion and released the captives (minus civilians) it already held. Then, in conjunction with the government, the FARC began negotiating for peace, focusing on five issues: disarming the insurgents, eradicating illegal crops, transactional justice and reparations, integrating the guerrillas into normal daily life, and FARC members' future political participation. These talks were temporarily suspended in 2014, when the FARC kidnapped a military officer. During that year and the next, the two parties entered into several ceasefires, which were to be broken and restarted by the guerrilla group.

In September 2015, FARC representatives and President Juan Manuel Santos promised they would reach a permanent agreement in the next six months; the following year, they wrote one that stipulated that within 180 days the guerrillas would turn over their weapons to United Nations officials, that the armed forces would remove land mines from the countryside, and that the Santos administration would invest billions of dollars in neglected rural areas in order to provide economic alternatives to the drug trade. In September 2016, guerrilla and government representatives signed the final peace agreement in front of the United Nations Secretary-General and the presidents of Venezuela, Cuba and Chile. However, the agreement was later submitted to a referendum by the Colombian citizens, who rejected it by a narrow margin, believing it to be too lenient with the guerrillas. For instance, a court of Colombian and international judges was established to hear testimony, search for evidence, and sentence only those guilty of serious crimes; all other former members of the FARC received amnesty for their crimes. Another example is that former FARC members could run as political candidates in regions that had not been conflict zones.

Nevertheless, in November, the Senate and House of Representatives ratified a new, similar agreement without a required referendum, and the FARC surrendered all its weapons between then and August 2017. It became a political party, the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force, which had ten unelected representatives in the legislature.

Useful Sources About the FARC

Fernán E. González: [The Colombian Conflict in Historical Perspective](#)

Council on Foreign Relations: [Colombia's Civil Conflict](#)

Encyclopedia Britannica: [FARC](#)

Encyclopedia Britannica: [The growth of drug trafficking and guerrilla warfare](#)

Human Rights Watch: [Colombia: Events of 2019](#)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

BBC News: [Who are the FARC?](#)

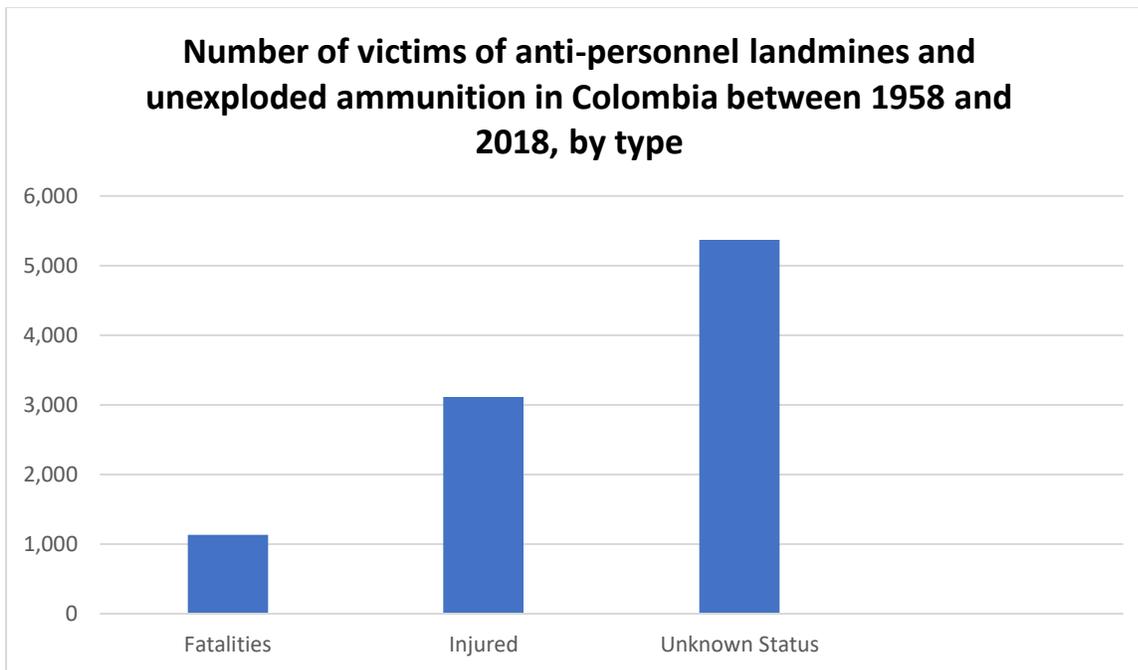
Exhibit 1 – Anti-Personnel Land Mines



Source: United Nations office for Disarmament Affairs, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/landmines/>

Anti-personnel land mines are defined under the [1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention](#) as: “a mine designed to be exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person and that will incapacitate, injure or kill one or more persons.”

Exhibit 2 – Casualty Statistics related to anti-personnel landmines in Colombia



Source: Statista¹⁶, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/989716/type-victims-anti-personnel-landmines-unexploded-ammunition-colombia/>

Exhibit 3 – Colombian Legislature after the 2014 elections

The Colombian legislature is decidedly not a two-party system, with several political parties holding a significant number of seats in both the House and the Senate. Elections are held every 4 years, and the makeup of the legislature in 2016 was determined by the 2014 elections.

Following the 2014 elections in which incumbent presidential candidate Juan Manuel Santos of the Social Party of National Unity (centrist political party formed in 2005 which united supporters of then-president Álvaro Uribe), the two political parties with the largest representation in the Colombian Senate and House of Representatives were the Social Party of National Unity (U) and the Liberal Party (PLC). The Social Party of National Unity (also known as the Party of the U), held 38 seats in the 166-member House and 21 seats in the 102-member Senate, with the Liberal party holding 39 seats in the House and 17 seats in the Senate. These two prominent parties were followed by the Conservative Party (PC) and the Democratic Center (CD) which also held a number of seats in both legislative chambers.

As far as FARC is concerned, the Liberal Party has historically favored peace talks while the Party of the U, formed around hardline president Álvaro Uribe, has taken a more aggressive approach to the revolutionaries. The Conservative Party supported the Uribe government from 2002 to 2010 but has represented the opposition to Santos' government, opposing making peace with FARC along with the Democratic Center.

Source: Colombia.com, <https://www.colombia.com/elecciones/2014/legislativas/resultados/electorales.aspx?C=CA>

Exhibit 4 – Additional information on AICMA

According to the Committee on Hemispheric Security under the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States,

“The Comprehensive Action against Antipersonnel Mines (AICMA) program supports a broad range of activities, including:

- Support to humanitarian demining activities, such as advisory assistance, surveying, marking, and clearance of mines;
- Preventive education for persons living in affected areas;
- Victim assistance, including physical and psychological rehabilitation, and socioeconomic reintegration of mine-cleared zones;
- Supervision of and assistance with the destruction of stockpiled mines;
- Development of a databank; and

¹⁶ A total of 9,623 people fell victim of anti-personnel mines in Colombia in the indicated 60-year period, leaving 1,133 fatalities and approximately 3,117 people injured

- Support in prohibiting the use, production, sale, and transfer of antipersonnel mines and in stockpile destruction.”

AICMA operates under several mandates from the General Assembly (found [here](#)), and is coordinated and supported in its efforts to eliminate land mine casualties by the Department of Multidimensional Security and the Inter-American Defense Board.

Along with OAS bodies and member states, AICMA works closely with several international organizations and NGO's including the United Nations, the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining, the Mine Action Information Center and James Madison University, the World Rehabilitation Fund, Physicians for Human Rights, and the South Florida Landmine Action Group.

Source: OAS Committee on Hemispheric Security,
<http://www.oas.org/csh/english/mineaicma.asp>