

Protecting displaced population from landmines – a call for joint action

by Sayed Aqa, Katrin Kinzelbach, Oren Schlein and Pontus Ohrstedt

In Colombia, as in many conflict and post-conflict states, the presence, or suspected presence, of landmines and UXO is one of the main obstacles to ensuring a safe and secure environment for returnees. A vigilant approach and greater coordination are needed.

Mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) do not recognise cease-fires and peace agreements and pose serious obstacles to the safe return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs. Agencies providing assistance to refugees and IDPs have not always demonstrated the necessary awareness and expertise to protect displaced

populations from the landmine threat, putting people at great risk or resettling them in heavily mined areas where livelihood opportunities are scarce. An even more complex situation arises in protracted conflict situations. Colombia is a country that presents these very particular challenges.

Colombia, which has one of the world's largest IDP populations, is the only country in the Americas where landmines are still being laid on a regular basis. Since the 1990s some 2.5 million Colombians, predominantly in rural areas, have been displaced by armed conflict.¹ Since peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces guerrilla group (FARC) broke down in February 2001, non-state actors have increased their use of antipersonnel landmines to delay the advance of



Pontus Ohlstedt

IDP camp in Bocas de Opogadó, Chocó

the Colombian army. This practice has become an integral part of the guerrillas' current military strategy, despite the impact on the civilian population. Data on the extent of the UXO problem is unavailable but intensification of the conflict, including the aerial bombardment of guerrilla-controlled territories by the Colombian armed forces, has contributed to UXO contamination of large areas of the country.

At least 579 of 1,097 municipalities in 31 out of 32 departments are now mine-affected. According to the Observatorio de Minas Antipersonales (the national mine action authority established by the office of Colombia's vice-president), there was a 390% increase in landmine accidents between 2000 and 2003. During the first seven months of 2004 there were a total of 391 victims of antipersonnel mines, involving 124 civilians and 267 military personnel. The proliferation of mines is causing new displacement, denying farmers access to their land and blocking hopes for return and reintegration. Mines are found with growing frequency along rural access roads and even in school compounds.² Because there are hardly any markings of landmine-contaminated areas in the country, people such as IDPs who move through unfamiliar territories are at high risk. Moreover, a recent UNDP field mission confirmed the use of landmines to encircle an

IDP community that had recently returned to their place of origin in Oriente Antioqueño. Although the use of landmines by the guerrillas was intended to hinder the movement of paramilitary groups and the army and to hinder access to coca plantations, they also blocked local farmers' access to their land.

The government's policy of promoting IDP returns despite the reality of ongoing conflict has been questioned by the UN, particularly UNHCR, as incompatible with the principles of voluntary return in dignity and safety which are enshrined in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.³ Of the 75 municipalities where IDPs returned between August 2002 and April 2004, 53 municipalities reported landmine incidents, out of which 35 reported landmine casualties. In total, 330 demining activities have taken place in these municipalities since 2002 and 28 suspected minefields were reported. Although each case must be studied in detail, these figures clearly suggest that landmines pose a significant threat to the security of the returning IDPs in Colombia.

The issue of landmines has only recently been recognised in Colombia as a major humanitarian and development problem. Awareness among the general public and state officials is limited, and coordination between actors has been poor. There is only limited information

sharing between the Observatorio and the Social Solidarity Network (SSN)⁴, the government agency in charge of registering displaced persons, assisting poor and vulnerable Colombians and planning reconstruction projects. Protocols for returnees require the provision of security clearances from the army but no information is systematically requested by the SSN of possible landmine contamination in returnee areas, either from the armed forces or the Observatorio. Military demining is undertaken but this does not necessarily meet international mine action standards for humanitarian demining, and the Observatorio is not involved at any stage of the clearance process.

It is essential that:

- the Observatorio and the army provide the SSN with updated information on actual and suspected mine-contaminated areas, especially in returnee areas
- protocols used by the SSN to govern the return of IDPs directly address the landmine issue and include detailed criteria for addressing landmine contamination in the returnee areas
- the armed forces do not provide security clearance for IDP return if the landmine issue is not addressed
- military deminers deployed to prepare for IDP return work with the Observatorio and adhere to international mine action standards
- emergency humanitarian mine action capacity be established in support of IDP return.

Humanitarian agreements with non-state armed actors to refrain from the use of anti-personnel mines present one of the best chances of reducing the threat to returning IDPs posed by mines. In the current political climate in Colombia this is a complex and difficult task. However, progress has been made through the work of Geneva Call⁵ and the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines⁶. In June 2004 they organised the first forum to bring together the Colombian government and non-state actors to discuss

humanitarian matters. A jailed leader of the National Liberation Army (ELN), the smallest of Colombia's three main guerrilla armies, was temporarily released from detention to come to the Colombian Senate to attend the forum. He renounced the use of landmines and called for an end to the country's violence.

Landmines and displacement

In order to protect displaced populations from the threat of landmines, it is imperative that aid organisations, government and community officials and others involved in resettlement and return programmes be fully aware of the threat that landmines and UXO pose to IDPs. The risky nature of mine action operations requires a much higher level of careful planning and a longer lead-time than, for example, food delivery and the distribution of tents.

Planning of IDP resettlements has not always met this challenge, and IDP and refugee camps have been established in areas contaminated by landmines and UXO. In 1993, for instance, the Sarshahi IDP camp outside Jalalabad in Afghanistan was established in a heavily contaminated area. More recently, camps for potential Iraqi refugees were established in mined areas inside Iran. Fortunately, few if any refugees actually populated these camps. Mine accidents can and have discouraged IDP and refugee return. For instance, the tragic death of Médecins Sans Frontières staff due to a landmine accident in the spring of 2004 in Angola had a major impact on the return of refugees and IDPs in that country.

In order to ensure the safety of IDPs in camps and in home communities after return it is important to:

- encourage timely communication and coordination among national and regional mine action authorities, mine action NGOs, aid agencies and government officials responsible for IDP settlement and re-settlement
- gather information on the location of mines and UXO from all armed protagonists, communities and NGOs before establishing camps: information must be cross-checked from multiple sources
- clear several kilometres of land around camps as refugees/IDPs must often wander far in search of firewood, scrap metal, water or pasture
- provide alternative sources of energy – such as solar cookers/ water heaters – to reduce foraging for firewood
- permit only accredited mine action organisations to remove mines, giving them sufficient advanced notice of work required and then allowing them sufficient time to do so
- recognise that demining teams work according to a schedule of priority tasks and may not, therefore, be immediately available to respond to emergencies
- ensure that the considerable expenses of mine action programmes are included in the budget of IDP programmes as well as in appeals to donors
- ensure that repatriation is preceded by public information and sensitisation campaigns and by clearance of areas of return and roads to be used by returning populations
- include a survivor assistance component in all reintegration support packages to ensure that landmine victims receive medical, psychosocial and vocational support.

Mine risk education (MRE) plays an important role in ensuring the safety of populations living in mine-affected areas. MRE should, therefore, form an integral part of all IDP programmes in mine-affected areas. MRE should not only cover basic precautionary behavioural rules but also sensitise displaced and returning populations to the particular nature of the landmine threat in their community. There have been instances of aid agencies using pre-designed MRE messages, including kits prepared for other countries, which have put people at high risk because the messages have not been appropriate for the intended communities. All MRE messages should be designed by professionals with a view to taking into account the unique environment, level of education of IDPs, and other cultural considerations.

Any person on the move in mine-affected environments is exposed to the indiscriminate threat posed by landmines and UXO. Large-scale population movements increase this risk, since they tend to be characterised by confusion and distress. The dangers posed by landmines and UXO extend beyond the displacement phase and continue to be severe during temporary settlements, as well as during the return or re-settlement of displaced populations. Key components of any effort to mitigate the consequences of landmine contamination on displaced populations are communication and timely and joint planning among all key stakeholders.

Especially in the case of protracted conflicts, such as in Colombia, it is crucial to analyse the landmine problem within the context of the broader conflict, linking mine action to other components of an integrated strategy. The eventual return of IDPs to their home communities can only be successful and sustainable if both security and socio-economic conditions are favourable in those areas where IDPs intend to re-establish themselves. Maintaining a vigilant approach to the landmine issue can help reduce mine accidents among displaced populations and ensure the eventual safe and sustainable return and reintegration of IDP populations.

This article was co-authored by Sayed Aqa, Katrin Kinzelbach and Oren Schlein of UNDP's Mine Action Team in New York (see www.undp.org/bcpr/mineaction) and Pontus Ohrstedt of UNDP's Colombia Country Office. Emails: sayed.aqa@undp.org; katrin.kinzelbach@undp.org; oren.schlein@undp.org and pontus.ohrstedt@undp.org. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the UN or UNDP.

¹ See the Colombia country profile at the Global IDP Project, www.db.idpproject.org

² For more details, see www.mineaction.org/sp/countries/countries_overview.cfm?country_id=Colombia

³ See www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html

⁴ See www.red.gov.co/eng

⁵ See www.genevacall.org

⁶ See www.icbl.org