A legacy of Latin American wars, missteps bring death and dismemberment 'but in Nicaragua, an international effort is uprooting the hidden hazards

Army soldier Rodolfo Reyes was looking for land mines when one tore off his right leg. José García was a 9-year-old rounding up livestock when a mine ripped off his left leg and killed a cousin. José Rosales was tilling his land when a blast left him with a pair of hooks for hands.

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And just last month, 15-year-old Edwin Cornejo lost both arms and much of his sight after handling an apparent mine detonator -- joining the 330 Nicaraguans maimed by land mines left over from a war that ended more than a decade ago. Thirty-eight others have been killed.

"He doesn't know he's lost his arms," Edwin's mother, Luisa, told visitors at a Managua hospital as the boy writhed in agony in bed. 'He keeps asking what's wrong with his face...I tell him, 'Just a few bumps and scratches, my dear.'"

Land mines are often perceived as affecting only far-off places such as Angola, Cambodia and Afghanistan. But 45 million to 50 million of the deadly devices threaten lives in about 90 countries, including at least five nations in Latin America.

Colombian guerrillas have planted about 50,000 mines there. Part of the Ecuador-Peru border is still mined from a 1995 war. About 120,000 mines remain along Chile's borders with Peru, Argentina and Bolivia. Suriname recently moved to clear mines left from a little-known guerrilla war in the 1980s.

HIGHEST CASUALTIES

Yet Nicaragua is the country in the Western Hemisphere where the most land mines were deployed, and where the greatest numbers of mine victims have been reported after a conflict ended.

In the 1980s, soldiers under the leftist Sandinista government sowed more than 146,000 land mines along the borders with Honduras and Costa Rica to fight CIA-backed contra guerrillas, according to figures from the Organization of American States.

About 95 percent of the mines used in the eight-year conflict -- which was ended by a peace pact in 1990 after about 30,000 people had died -- were antipersonnel devices, smaller and harder to detect than anti-vehicle mines.

During the war, the mines killed 38 fighters and civilians and wounded about 410 others, according to OAS figures. Nicaraguan authorities say they believe that the actual casualty toll is much higher.

Since 1993, international donors have provided nearly $30 million for the OAS Mine Action Program here. About 650 Nicaraguan army de-miners have cleared more than 116,500 devices, but an estimated 29,600 remain, mostly along the northern border with Honduras.

Some of the money goes to awareness and medical-care programs and to a technical school that retrains disabled survivors. Technical assistance and supervision for those programs is provided by the OAS and donor nations, including the United States.

"The war here is over, but the consequences of it are still here," said José García, the now 23-year-old who lost his leg in 1990.

HAZARDOUS WORK

Clearing minefields is especially dangerous in the mostly jungled and mountainous regions along Nicaragua's remote borders with Honduras and Costa Rica, where the contras were largely based.

"Installing a mine is infinitely easier than removing it," said army Lt. Col. Jorge Castro, operations chief in the department of Nueva Segovia on the border with Honduras. "But there is enormous pressure to get this done because the residents need to cultivate their land."

Using old Sandinista army maps and information from residents, de-miners first identify and cordon off suspect fields, then patiently pinpoint the locations of the devices with metal detectors or prodding rods.

"One mistake virtually guarantees a serious injury," said Carlos Orozco, head of the OAS office in Nicaragua, during a recent tour of de-mining operations in Nueva Segovia.

Even after a field is marked, heavy rains and landslides can easily shift the mines and bring their danger to new areas. Within six months of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, 27 people were wounded and one was killed by mines that landslides moved to previously safe locations, the OAS reported.

Nicaragua is expected to be declared "mine safe" by next year, according to OAS projections. But the hardships that the mines have caused will remain firmly in place for decades.

Edwin Cornejo lost his arms on Jan. 13 as he handled an apparent mine detonator left behind by a former roomer in his home in San Juan de Río Coco, a five-hour drive north of Managua.

"I didn't know that dangerous thing was there," said his mother, who had rented the room for extra income. "Dear God Almighty, how will I manage to take care of him?"

That burden of disability becomes a double weight on the families of survivors in the hemisphere's second-poorest nation, after Haiti. They are almost always poor peasants barely scratching out a living on remote and steep terrain.

Corina Zeas, a 36-year-old woman with owl eyes and a soft smile, has moved around on a wheelchair since she lost a leg to a mine 20 years ago near her home village, Ocotal. She has since depended on her mother, now 60, who spends midnight to noon over a hot oven, making corn tortillas to sell for a few dollars a day.

'ANOTHER BURDEN'

"When I saw her, I grieved because I realized I would have to bear another burden," said her mother, Delfina Centeno, who lost a son in combat 14 days after he was drafted into the Sandinista army. "I often ask God, 'Why so much pain?...Still, better to be poor than have war.'"

Zeas, who recently completed an OAS training course, hopes to start a tailoring business in her adobe home in Ocotal to help support her three children, 8 to 16 years old. The OAS program also trained carpenter Francisco Peralta, who was an army soldier in the war when he lost his left leg and
arm to a mine. Now 39, he is married to a former contra he met at a government-organized reconciliation gathering.

Rodolfo Reyes, 38, got through the war unscathed as a Sandinista soldier and then reenlisted in the military to earn a relatively good salary. But he lost a leg and an eye in 1998 -- and gained a pension of about $30 a month -- as he helped to clear a minefield in northern Jinotega province.

And then there is Pedro Hernández, a former Sandinista soldier who lost his left leg to a mine while on patrol near Honduras in 1987. His sporadic farm work can barely provide for his three children, from a newborn to a 5-year-old.

"There are jobs out there, but no one will hire me because of my disability," he said. "Those with good bodies have no consideration for those of us missing a limb."

DESPERATION
The cycle of physical, emotional and psychological pain experienced by Nicaragua's mine victims is just beginning for Edwin Cornejo and his mother, Luisa.

Standing beside her son's hospital bed, the single mother of five wept as she tried to make sense of his accident with the mine detonator. "I just don't understand how that thing got in the house," she said. "It's ruined my baby. Why would someone leave something like that behind?"

"Well, I guess I'm going to have to work harder and dedicate my life to my son," she added with a resigned sigh. "He can no longer work. Not with his eyes, his mind or his arms."

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