Removing land mines high in Chile's Andes mountains is a hard, cold job that can take the breath away. Last Saturday a corporal's toe was blown off by an anti-personnel mine.

(04.10.2005)

At 15,321 feet above sea level, the Chilean soldiers face a hellish task removing land mines sown around these Andean peaks a generation ago by a paranoid dictator.

Snow storms blanket the minefields. The wind howls. A 40-foot cascade of ice dangles from a leaky water tower. Although it is spring in the Southern Hemisphere, the thermometer reads 20 degrees Fahrenheit. And the air is so bereft of oxygen that walking up a flight of stairs can leave visitors breathless and with a splitting headache.

But it is here at Tambo Quemado -- a bleak spot 300 yards from the border with Bolivia -- that 29 Chilean soldiers are spending six days a week trying to deactivate or destroy 4,410 deadly mines.

They are part of a stunning 120,000 land mines laid by Gen. Augusto Pinochet's military regime in a little-known effort begun in 1973 to protect Chile's borders in the years after the bloody coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende.

By definition, removing land mines is dangerous work. Deactivating 2,000 mines leads to one injury or death on average internationally, according to Col. Gunther Siebert.

An anti-personnel mine exploded Saturday morning, blowing off part of a corporal's toe. He is in the hospital recovering.

"A man, the soldiers in the mine-sweeping detail say they cross the barbed wire into the minefields without fear but with respect for the hazards. Each one remembers the minesweeper's mantra: "Your first error is your last one."

It's not just the danger that makes their work difficult.

"As you can see outside the window, we can't work today," the base commander, Capt. Emilio Larenas, tells two dozen soldiers lined up for morning formation in the barracks dining room. Outside, a storm is dumping snow on the ground, making whatever was underneath even more invisible.

"Spend your time making beds, cleaning your rooms, and of course you can watch videos," Larenas tells the soldiers, all wearing blue jumpsuits with their last names stitched in white over their right breasts.

But the boredom also can lead to deadly mistakes, so when Cmdr. Erwin Siebert addressed the men the night before, he had them shout out their three principal enemies: "The daily routine! Overconfidence! The weather!"

Chile has begun to remove its land mines under the 1997 Ottawa Convention, now signed by 154 nations. After Chile signed the treaty, its army destroyed 300,039 land mines in stock, and now soldiers have begun to demolish the remaining 118,377 land mines laid near the country's borders.

Chile's motivation for the removal is more political than humanitarian. The minefields pose little danger to the public. They remain clearly marked in fenced-off areas, with warnings in Spanish, German, English and the Indian language of Aymara.

After years of ostracism during the dictatorship, Chile's democratic government believes that removing the mines will win international favor and build good relations with Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. Chile nearly went to war with Argentina in 1978, hasn't had formal diplomatic relations with Bolivia since 1978 due to antagonism over a 19th century war and often finds itself in public spats with Peru.

"We want to build trust," says Gabriel Gaspar, the deputy minister of defense, who was exiled to Mexico during the Pinochet years.

The army began its work last year by destroying five minefields just half a mile from the border with Peru, adjoining the airport in the northern port of Arica.

Now they have turned to two minefields high in the mountains near Bolivia.

The work is laborious. First, metal detectors and titanium rods are used to identify the exact locations of the land mines, which may have moved a few deadly inches or feet over the past 20 years. Unlike most countries that laid mines indiscriminately, Chile kept maps detailing where the land mines were sown. Once the mines are identified, the soldiers place 65 grams of explosives atop each mine, connect them all via detonator cables and blow them up.

Relations with Bolivia have warmed in conjunction with the effort to remove the two minefields in northeast Chile at Tambo Quemado.

The area has a desolate beauty, with snow-capped glaciers and volcanoes high above the tree line and disappearing into the clouds. Llamas and the related vicuñas prance amid the scrub, more in evidence than humans.

Cargo trucks and vans full of people occasionally rumble by on the highway, which connects Arica with La Paz, Bolivia's administrative capital at 12,000 feet above sea level.

But during the visit of two Herald staffers, heavy snow has halted highway traffic. The army base is cut off.

When lunch ends, Capt. Larenas and three of his men begin to play an Argentine card game. At an adjoining table, Adams Lagos, a 24-year-old corporal with a crew cut, expresses confidence that he has the skill to prevent an accident.

But he notes that he says a prayer every morning before heading to the minefields and that his wife worries constantly. "She tells me to remember that someone is waiting for me at home," Lagos says quietly.

It was Lagos who was injured when he accidentally detonated the land mine on Saturday.

At dinner that night, Rodrigo Oyarce, a bright-eyed 25-year-old corporal, talks about how he joined the army to escape poverty in Chile's rural south.

"I wanted to see what I was capable of," Oyarce explains. "If someone tells me I can't do something, I tell myself that I can. You have to take risks to achieve your goals." He pauses and adds, "My family doesn't know I'm doing this."

John Roa is a 27-year-old corporal with a black belt in karate. He says that working in the face of danger has bred a high esprit de corps. In fact, he says that he and his mates would rather work than sit around on a day like this waiting for the storm to pass.
"The days are long when we don't work," Roa says.

The snow continues the next morning, however.

Four soldiers build a snowman, topped by a mine detection helmet, wearing heavy gloves and carrying a metal detector.

Inside one of the barracks, Sgt. Pedro Miranda gingerly takes wallet-size photos of his wife and two young sons out of a plastic bag. He lines them up on his bed, caresses them in his hand and finally gives each a gentle kiss.

Inside a common room across the way, seven other men are watching Lord of the Rings dubbed in Spanish.

In the equipment shed, Cpls. Claudio Chavez and Cristian Tapia are winning game after game of Foosball, or what the Chileans call Taca Taca.

In his office next door, Capt. Larenas hears that the two men have run up a 17-game winning streak. Larenas, a fresh-faced 34-year-old, fancies himself as the unit's best Foosball player.

"This is unacceptable," he says, before recruiting a partner and beating the corporals 20-19.

Larenas soon turns serious. He wants to take a squad of men to a minefield to see whether the snow and wind has disrupted the mines that they had already marked for destruction.

Just before they reach the Bolivian border, they turn off the highway and park along the edge of minefield No. 1. They don 50 pounds of Kevlar protective gear — first the heavy shoes, then the padded pants, next the upper body armor, followed by the helmet and finally the gloves. They grab their metal detectors.

A U.S.-donated ambulance is parked alongside, just in case.

Larenas, three minesweepers and a paramedic enter the minefield. They trudge through the snow along a path previously confirmed as mine-free. For the next 45 minutes, straining to hear the metal detectors' tell-tale beep over the hissing wind, they carefully check each of the 74 clusters of land mines that they have marked. The paramedic keeps 50 meters behind them.

"No problems," Larenas says upon emerging from the field.

Afterward, Larenas tells his men that it's time for their regularly scheduled week of vacation after having worked the past two weeks.

The next morning, they pile into the back of a troop transport truck and begin shouting "Vamos! Vamos!" as a last-minute hitch delays their departure.

A stretch of snow-covered road and a herd of llamas slow their descent to Arica.

At 3:45 p.m., as the truck pulls into the dirt parking lot at the army base in Arica, a Nissan SUV is waiting.

As Sgt. Miranda climbs out of the truck, his wife and two small boys run up and hug him.

"I know he risks his life," his wife, Rosana, says a few moments later. "I feel relieved now. I feel relieved to see him."