The dirt road between the villages of Micoahumado and La Caoba covers only about six miles through some steep hills in central Colombia that have long served as a home to leftist guerrillas. Jagged rocks, sandy gullies and numerous switchbacks make it a hard trip by any means.

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But it is the only road between the towns. So when the rebels laced it with land mines a couple of years ago to block incursions by their enemies, area residents complained to guerrilla leaders in the hope that it would set a precedent in the fight against a weapon that is quickly becoming one of Colombia's leading killers.

Instead, the efforts to clear the road of mines have brought more problems. While the negotiations with the rebels built trust between the villagers and the guerrillas, they aroused murderous suspicions among right-wing paramilitary forces and widened the divide between the locals and the army.

"There's no way to live in peace ... around here," said 12-year-old Yesid James, who was running up a hill when his friend stepped on a mine, and it blew up in the boys' faces. Both survived, but Yesid still has shrapnel in his knee and stomach.

The story of the Micoahumado road starts where most stories in Colombia do - in war. Colombia's has lasted for more than four decades, during which leftist guerrillas, the government and illegal rightist paramilitary groups seeded at least 50,000 mines throughout half of the country, most of them in the last five years.

Land mines are not unique to Colombia. Nicaragua still has about 30,000 mines to clear from its civil war in the 1980s, and 120,000 mines remain along Chile's border with Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. Part of the Ecuador-Peru border remains mined from a 1995 war. In most of those places, there is peace and the mines are being cleared.

But Colombia is one of the few places on the globe where mines play an active role in the fighting. And they are just beginning to take their toll - from 50 dead or wounded in 1999 to 832 last year, according to the government's anti-land-mine program, the Observatory for Anti-Personnel Mines.

"The majority of countries have problems with mines that are already planted," said Luz Piedad Herrera, the head of the Observatory. "We keep planting them. Every day, there are more."

In contrast to most other places, the vast majority of Colombian mines are homemade - fashioned from plastic gasoline canisters, cans, and metal tubes and laced with keys, pins, scrap metal, acid and even animal dung. The result is a blast that maims, infects and kills its targets with increasing effectiveness.

"It's a weapon that when it hits one, it affects three people - one who falls and the two who have to carry him - and this greatly affects the morale of the group," Herrera said.

And unlike many other conflicts, the majority of the mines here are seeded by guerrillas to protect their turf and claim mostly Colombian government soldiers as victims - 65 percent of them coming from the military.

Army Lt. Arley Perea, 22, is a typical victim. He stepped on a land mine while leading a squad in the northwestern province of Antioquia against guerrillas. The blast threw him 10 feet and broke his right leg in four places. He lost the leg.

"It completely demoralized the troops," Perea said from an army rehabilitation center in Bogota, Colombia's capital. "Imagine: The leader of the squad goes down. Who is left to command the troops?"

The army offers doctors, orthopedists and psychologists who spend months working with patients like Perea. He is learning to walk with a prosthetic limb, but the lieutenant remains bitter about his experience.

"You're never ready to lose a leg," he said. "The world just isn't fair."

Indeed, the surprising fact about Micoahumado, a village of a few hundred farmers whose name translates as Smoked Monkey, is how few casualties one finds. In the last 12 years, the government office here has registered just seven injuries and no deaths from mines - even though this is one of the most heavily mined regions in a country of 43 million people.

This area has long been home to the National Liberation Army, or ELN, Colombia's second largest leftist guerrilla group. Its commanding cadre was stationed near here for two decades, and the rebels placed mines to keep the army and paramilitary groups at bay for almost as long.

Most people here seem to accept the mines as a part of life near the guerrillas with whom they have lived side by side for so many years. That's the opinion of Alirio Vargas, a 55-year-old farmer who stepped on a mine in 1992 while accompanying his father-in-law to his farm. Vargas lost a leg and an eye.

"That's their strategy," Vargas said, referring to the guerrillas' use of mines. "That's what they have to do to stop them."

But an assistant to the government's human rights ombudsman said some of the residents also are afraid to complain about the rebels. For area families, said Javier Fonseca, the guerrillas are the law and the government is a foreign force.

"The people here don't collaborate with us," said an army officer who wished to remain anonymous because he did not have his superiors' authority to speak to the media. "They know where the mines are, and they don't tell us."

But the residents' lack of collaboration with government authorities is often mistaken for support for the guerrillas, which is what happened in Micoahumado beginning in the late 1990s, when the ELN laced the road with hundreds of additional mines to block a massive offensive by the paramilitary forces.

The mines worked. The paramilitary offensive ground to a halt. But then several smaller-scale paramilitary incursions into the area left a half-dozen suspected ELN collaborators dead and a slew of houses burned to the ground. Virtually the entire population of the village moved away during that period, residents said.

And the mines did hit some civilians. Five years ago, 52-year-old Benito Alarcon was taking neighbors' garbage to the village dump when he strayed off the road and hit a mine. Guerrillas carried him to the local clinic.

"It's us farmers who suffer the consequences of this war," said Alarcon, who still has shrapnel in his knee and scars on his chest.
Still, most of the residents dodged the mines with the help of the guerrillas. Signs were posted saying “DANGER MINES.” And when the ELN rebels took the signs down, residents kept up on which areas to avoid through word of mouth.

But at some points, the mines have become too much, even for the civilians who knew their locations.

While the paramilitary forces were in Micoahumado, the guerrillas destroyed the water pipe and then mined the area to hinder its repair. Village leaders protested, and talks eventually led the guerrillas to remove the mines and allow a repair team in.

And when the Colombian army launched an offensive in the area in 2003, the ELN mined the road between Micoahumado and La Caoba, which resulted in more talks.

“They put them where people had their crops, and they had to make a huge detour to bring their products to market,” said farmer Pablo Jesus Santiago. “If we hadn’t spoken to them, they would have mined all the way to our doorways.”

The talks led to a rare victory for civilians in a war full of civilian defeats. Last January, the ELN destroyed nearly 20 mines that had lined the road. Farmers with livestock, and even vehicles, now use the road.

“Even if it doesn’t end the war, it begins to resolve the crisis of the people who live in that area,” said Alvaro Jimenez, head of the Colombian Campaign Against Mines, which promotes similar de-mining arrangements throughout Colombia. “There’s a reality: The people have no other way to get along.”

But while de-mining the Micoahumado road opened up the area to commerce, it also allowed easier access by armed forces units that remain suspicious of the residents because of their prior relations with the ELN guerrillas.

“It’s very demoralizing,” said Capt. Juan Carlos Aristizabal, who commands the mobile army unit deployed to this area. “We can never walk around calmly.”


<<< zurück zu: News

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