Land mines a hidden killer in Amazon jungle (PERU/ECUADOR)

Danger lurks on border between Peru and Ecuador. During the last decade there have been more than 100 victims.

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TENIENTE ORTIZ, Ecuador - His shirt soaked with sweat, Wilson Chicaiza swatted at the incessant bugs of the Amazon jungle as he described how his land-mine detector had emitted a loud whine the day before.

"It was the first time in four months working here that I had found a land mine," said Chicaiza, a 26-year-old corporal in the Ecuadorean army. "I was a bit afraid, but also excited."

Ten years after Ecuador and Peru fought a three-week border war, Ecuadorean minesweepers are still searching for and then destroying some of the 11,000 land mines that remain along the isolated border - mines like those that have killed or maimed 114 Ecuadoreans and Peruvians since the last shot of the war was fired.

The dangers of land mines are usually associated with remote and notoriously war-ravaged countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Iraq. But they also present deadly problems in Latin America, with more than 1,100 people injured or killed by the devices since 1990 in Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile.

Each country presents its own challenge. In Chile, it is the lack of oxygen at 15,300 feet of altitude as soldiers clear an Andean pass on the border with Bolivia that was mined back in the 1970s. In Nicaragua, where Sandinista troops mined the borders in the 1980s to fight CIA-backed contra guerrillas, it is the tropical rains and mudslides that shift mines into areas that were previously safe.

And here in Ecuador, it is the Amazon jungle -- the stifling heat and strength-sapping humidity, the swarms of mosquitoes, the mud that swallows boots, the hilly trails where footing is treacherous, the dense vegetation -- that slows the land-mine- clearing work to a crawl.

About 60 Ecuadorean soldiers are carrying out the work from Teniente Ortiz, a military outpost one mile from the Peruvian border and an arduous hourlong hike from the nearest town, Santiago.

The base sits on a ridge and is about the length and width of a football field. One of its barrack walls still shows the bullet marks from Peruvian helicopter gunships a decade ago. The soldiers venture out of the base only along trails known to be mine-free. And that's not easy.

Inexact maps of where Ecuadorean soldiers laid land mines in 1995 make a risky job even more dangerous. And minesweepers often cannot use even the most sophisticated satellite location technology to match today's jungle contours with the 1995 maps.

"If you try to use a GPS, you can't get a reading because of the jungle tree canopy," said Capt. Carlos Urrutia, a Chilean army minesweeping expert working on a de-mining program sponsored by the Organization of American States.

And even after a minefield is located, the hazardous work is just beginning.
delaying the start of the day's minesweeping. No work can be performed unless the weather allows flights by a medical helicopter based in Santiago.

But on this day, the clouds clear by 9 a.m. "Let's go to work," Maj. Pedro Burbano tells his troops.

A line of minesweepers snakes into the jungle for the 30-minute hike to a small clearing that serves as a forward camp. They also carry metal detectors, backpacks, a green stretcher and a water cooler full of water.

At the camp, one minesweeper lights a pile of semi-dried leaves, hoping the smoke will discourage the mosquitoes, while the group's explosives expert gets ready to blow up a mine located the day before.

Chicaiza's metal detector buzzes again. Cpl. Angel Miguez uses a metal rod to prod the ground and confirm that it is indeed a mine. He then carefully uses garden snippers to clear away vegetation. Then they wait for others to do their work.

A sudden blast shakes the jungle. Two anti-personnel mines containing 3 ounces of explosives apiece have been blown up by 101/2 ounces of explosives.

"Two fewer enemies for us," says Pvt. Harol Tenori as he returns to the forward camp after destroying the mines. "They were laid by our troops a decade ago, but now they are our enemies."

Two soldiers head back down the trail to look for more mines. The others wait their turn. One reads a five-day-old newspaper. Another uses a machete to cut branches for the anti-mosquito fire.

"They've found two more mines," crackles a voice over a walkie-talkie a half-hour later. Then comes word that the soldiers will have to finish early, as soon as they finish destroying the newly found mines.

The men were scheduled to begin an eight-day break later that day after three straight weeks of work. But now, demonstrators protesting high gasoline prices are threatening that evening to block the single dirt road from Santiago to the provincial capital.

Another boom shakes the jungle. "Two enemies less," says Tenori as he returns to the forward camp a few minutes later. He and his mates gather up their equipment and begin the trek back to Teniente Ortiz.

Von: 12 February 2006 (The Seattle Times) By Tyler Bridges, Knight Ridder Newspaper

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