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

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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.

After a helicopter-borne crew matched one mapped minefield to a section of jungle terrain, it could not land to mark it because of the canopy and instead dropped a 4-foot wooden stake topped by bright red and yellow plastic streamers. It took the minesweepers a week to clear the 450-yard path from their nearest cleared spot to the stake.

"This tells us more or less where the land mines are," said Sgt. Pablo Cando, standing by the stake. But the soldiers first found nothing as they cleared a 100-yard path in one direction, then found the field in another direction.

Like all other cleared footpaths, both are now marked by yellow crime tape strung from tree to tree. "Peligro Campo Minado" -- "Danger Minefield" -- warns the tape, with a skull and bones for emphasis.

Peru and Ecuador went to war in 1941 over the exact location of their 1,058-mile border, which extends from the Pacific to the wilderness of the Amazon River basin. They skirmished for several years, then engaged in all-out war again for three weeks in 1995 over this 50-mile jungle area, known as the Cordillera del Condor. In 1998, they settled the boundary dispute.

But thousands of mines remain, hidden killers from that brief time of war.

It is early morning one November day at Teniente Ortiz, and low clouds are
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.

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