Landmines kill 4 soldiers, wound 5 others in Colombia

Four soldiers died and five others were wounded when they entered a guerrilla minefield in a rural area in Colombia’s northwestern province of Antioquia, officials said Sunday.

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Gen. Hector Jaime Fandiño, commander of the army’s 17th Brigade, said the incident occurred Saturday night near Dadeiba, in the banana-growing region of Uraba, some 700 kilometers (about 435 miles) northwest of Bogota.

The soldiers were patrolling an area where Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas operate when they entered the minefield.

Soldiers Pedro Ricardo Berrio, Pedro Monsalve, Jairo Jose Villadiego and John Freddy Manco Castañeda were killed when they set off landmines, the general said.

The wounded, a sergeant and four enlisted men, were taken to hospitals in Apartado and Medellin, the capital of Antioquia.

Colombia’s armed forces have suffered heavy casualties this month in fighting with the FARC, the country’s oldest and largest leftist guerrilla group.

On Feb. 9, 18 soldiers and 11 rebels died in fighting in Uraba. Last Monday, three children were killed by landmines planted by the FARC in Vistahermosa, in the central province of Meta.

The FARC is on both the U.S. and EU lists of terrorist groups. The rebel group sometimes uses car bombs and other terrorist tactics that have killed hundreds of civilians in recent years.

The organization is also heavily involved in cocaine production and trafficking.

Drug smuggling, extortion and kidnapping-for-ransom are the rebels’ main means of financing their operations.

More than 50 troops have been killed this month in attacks by the FARC, raising questions about the government’s counterinsurgency strategy.

The attacks have been the most significant ones since President Alvaro Uribe launched an unprecedented campaign to wipe out the guerrillas, a move that has received broad popular support, according to the polls.

Uribe’s “Patriot Plan” offensive is a year-old push in broad swathes of eastern and southern Colombia employing tanks, helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers against the rebels who have been waging a four-decade-old war against a succession of governments.

Much of the bill for the offensive is being footed by the United States, which has provided more than $3 billion - mostly military assistance - to Bogota in the past four years, making Colombia by far the biggest Latin American recipient of U.S. aid.

The FARC, which has an estimated 17,000 fighters, has rejected the conditions set by Uribe for sitting down at the negotiating table.

An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 landmines have been planted in Colombia, the only country in Latin America where these weapons are still in use.

In the past 13 years, at least 2,450 people have been the victims of landmines in the Andean nation, with about one-quarter of them being killed by these weapons.

Colombia approved the Ottawa Convention to ban landmines in 2000.

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