

Colombia

FSD provides mine action and environmental experts to the national mine action centre and advises the government on the coordination of mine action.

Over five decades of armed conflict have left Colombia littered with hazardous Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) threatening populations and impairing economic recovery in vast areas of the country. Indeed, with 11'523 recorded mine victims, Colombia ranks among the most affected countries in the world. The good news is that 2017, with 50 mine victims, has been the year with less number of victims since statistics are systematically collected. 50 persons killed or maimed by mines, Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) or abandoned munition are still too many, but the reduction is encouraging when compared to the 1'232 recorded in 2006, the year with the largest number of mine victims in the history of Colombia.

The Peace Agreement signed between the Government and FARC on November 2016, provided the favourable political context for the development of the 2016-2021 Strategic Plan of the Mine Action Authority -Descontamina Colombia- with the overarching goal of declaring Colombia free of mines by the year 2021, according to the target set in the Ottawa treaty on the international ban on anti-personnel mines. While this goal is often assessed as over-ambitious, the progress so far achieved by the Humanitarian Demining Operators (HDOs) under the coordination and leadership of Descontamina Colombia is significant. By the end of February 2018 out of the 673 municipalities (60% of the Colombian territory) initially identified as ERW contaminated, 181 are now declared free of mines. Of these, 29 have been cleared, and 157 have been cancelled as no longer hazardous following exhaustive surveys and the collection of qualified information on the ground. Currently, mine clearance operations are taking place in the 252 municipalities with higher ERW contamination in the country.

FSD is providing Technical Assistance to Descontamina Colombia since early 2016 with a team of experts in the country in the fields of EOD, Mine-Detection Dogs, Mechanical Demining, Environment protection and, most recently, Information Management. 15 National Mine Action Standards have been issued to regulate all activities and technologies for humanitarian demining including Mine Risk Education, Accreditation, Task Assignment, Technical Survey, Non-Technical Survey, Marking and Organization of Work Site, Manual Clearance, Mechanical demining, Mine Detection Dogs (MDD), Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Victims Assistance.

Accreditation of demining agencies and monitoring of operations on the ground falls under the responsibility of an external body of experts from the Organization of American States, also



supported by the FSD experts. To date, there are almost 6,000 manual deminers, 8 machines for land-preparation and 24 MDD binomials (dog and handler) officially accredited in Colombia.

Also, FSD helped to issue the Environmental Decree (# 1195, 2017) aiming at reducing the environmental impact of humanitarian demining interventions throughout the national territory, particularly in Natural Parks and other areas of high ecologic value with special protection. Colombia's position as the second most biodiverse country in the world makes this decree a must, considering how environmentally invasive mine clearance can be. The decree sets the regulations and measures to prevent or minimise impact during land preparation and clearance and to facilitate the recovery of the soil when operations are finished. Only by reassuring environmental authorities that best environmental practices are followed, mine clearance operations are allowed in environmentally protected areas.

Humanitarian Demining Challenges

Several factors make Humanitarian Demining in Colombia very challenging. Typically, in Colombia, there are no minefields but hazardous areas with low-density ERW contamination of explosive devices of an improvised nature (as opposed to conventional mines), and located in remote places with difficult access, rough topography and thick vegetation. In this context, the use of MDDs is proving to be very efficient saving time and resources as dogs can detect quickly the sparsely located mines and Improvised Explosive Devices. However, the training process is rather long as dogs have to be trained, ad minimum, in the detection of the 5 explosives substances (including chemical) commonly found in Colombia."

Another main difficulty is that HDOs cannot use explosives for the destruction of ERW. Thus, options are either to wait for military/police services to do the ruins of the devices found, which can be very lengthy or to use a destruction alternative that does not require the use of explosives (mainly disruptor, Thermite and deflagrant). Therefore, to accelerate clearance, it is very important that HDOs increase the number of EOD accredited staff in such destruction technologies.

Despite the challenges, the objective of declaring Colombia free of mines by 2021 is achievable. And FSD will continue to contribute to this objective thanks to the generous support of the US Department of State Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (PM/WRA).