

Statement for

Ms. Nathalie Ochoa, UNMAS Programme in Colombia

**On occasion of
Security Council Thematic Debate on the Comprehensive Approach to
Mine Action and Explosive Hazards Mitigation
Tuesday, 13 June 2017 at 10:00am**

Excellencies,

I have been working in mine action in Colombia for the last seven years with civil society and for the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

In Colombia, UNMAS plays the critical role of technical advisor to the National Mine Action Authority, at a moment when the negotiation, design and implementation of a peace accord between the Government of Colombia and FARC-EP necessitates a functional, efficient, and effective Mine Action sector.

Since 2002 the national authority – the Directorate of Integrated Action against Mines (DAICMA) – has been leading the development of the mine action sector and the introduction of civilian humanitarian demining in Colombia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have seen first-hand the enormous impact and consequences that landmine and explosive remnants of war contamination has had on the lives of my fellow Colombians and on the development of my country. For this reason it has been incredibly gratifying for me to be working with UNMAS to support the process of removing the threat posed by landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Seven years ago, the mine action sector in Colombia was at an early stage of development and facing the daunting task of tackling an enormous problem. Here are a few facts from that time:

Colombia ranked second worldwide in landmine and ERW victims (9,296). In more recent years, Colombia has recorded less victims, but remains in the top five.

More than 50% of Colombia's 32 departments recorded contamination. In the most remote and underdeveloped rural areas, landmines denied access to services, restricted mobility and prevented the use of productive land, thereby entrenching/leaving little hope to recover from poverty.

Indigenous communities in the south reported being trapped and cut-off due to the presence of landmines, which meant they could not walk in or out of their territory, and that delivery of humanitarian aid was completely blocked.

My initial assignment brought me to work in one of the most affected districts. I trained the first 50 civilian deminers and supervised mixed teams comprising victims, ex-military and ex-combatants all working together with a common goal: to clear landmines, ERW and help communities – a true example of reconciliation.

Day by day, I learned that humanitarian mine action is, in so many areas of my country, the key to initiating the socio-economic reconstruction of communities.

This has never been more clear than in relation to the peace process.

After 3 years of negotiations, in 2014, the peace process was struggling and confidence levels between the Government and FARC-EP were at a low point. Everyone feared the process would unravel. In response to this pressure, the FARC-EP agreed finally to participate in a Gestures of Peace initiative.

Humanitarian demining was chosen as one of the Gestures of Peace (along with the release of child soldiers). This had a very important benefit of allowing the Government and the FARC-EP to demonstrate their commitment to peace and to pursuit of coexistence and reconciliation. As a result, the Colombian Army and the FARC-EP began to work in cooperation, which was a significant milestone in the path towards peace.

For more than a year, Humanitarian Demining activities under the Gestures of Peace initiative were the only concrete action jointly implemented by the two negotiating parties.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to support this initiative. I was able to observe that, despite starting from a point of mistrust, the Army and FARC delegates built a common language, defined shared goals and established coordination mechanisms for the decision-making process to overcome any challenges. My experience with UNMAS prepared me well to make a positive contribution to this critical process.

At the end, the Humanitarian Demining Gesture of Peace made mine action a key issue in the eventual peace agreement.

Now that, after 50 years, the peace process created a true humanitarian space, it was finally possible to start mine action operations in earnest to the benefit of affected communities

Now, if I may share a few personal reflections.

Landmines and explosive remnants of war remain an enduring legacy of conflict, no matter if there is a peace accord in place or not.

Their presence continues to cause socio-economic consequences for the affected populations and restrict the delivery of large-scale humanitarian assistance and development.

Tackling this problem not only requires removing the threat from the ground but also putting in place structures and processes that can help individuals and communities recover. UNMAS assists those involved in humanitarian demining to meet these needs effectively.

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In the case of Colombia, several provisions of the final peace accord defined specific roles for mine action along the following lines:

Firstly, humanitarian demining is recognized as a precondition for the implementation of other public policies including those related to the substitution of illicit crops and the collective return of internally displaced persons, and is also implicitly mentioned as a pre-requisite for the execution of national rural development plans.

Secondly, service of ex-combatants to the humanitarian demining process is explicitly accepted as a form of sanction within the transitional justice framework outlined in the accord.

Thirdly, participation of ex-combatants in mine action is viewed as an action that repairs damage caused by the conflict and contributes to reversing its effects.

Finally, mine action was identified as providing employment opportunities for ex-combatants and options for economic and social reincorporation.

There is a unique opportunity for the United Nations to partner with Colombians on mine action initiatives as they pursue sustainable peace.

It is anticipated that UNMAS can play an important role in supporting disarmament activities being carried out under the mandate of the United Nations Special Mission in Colombia.

UNMAS supported DAICMA, the National Mine Action Authority, in defining the National Demining Plan, and the process for prioritization of demining tasks.

We are working closely with DAICMA to increase and develop its capacity to lead the sector.

UNMAS co-leads with DAICMA the development of National Mine Action National Standards, to improve the quality of the demining process, but especially in order to improve the efficiency of the operations and facilitate a rapid response in the most affected areas.

Along with assisting DAICMA to define a National Demining Plan and to establish national mine action standards, UNMAS is providing training to ex-combatants on

humanitarian demining. This is expected to lead to the establishment of a national non-governmental organization which will be essential to meeting the target of reintegration of at least 20% of demobilized combatants, agreed to between the Government and the FARC-EP.

Excellencies,

Colombia has a monumental challenge ahead of it – to consolidate peace after the signing of the peace accords.

Humanitarian mine action will be a crucial activity to bring a definitive end to violence, and to form the basis of peacebuilding and development activities for all Colombians.

The Security Council plays a vital role in ensuring that mine action improves the lives of many more people in conflict-affected areas, as it has so clearly done in my country.

I am proud to be working for UNMAS, which has been an important agent for change in my country.

Having seen first-hand the progress resulting when mine action is integral to the pursuit of peace, I hope that you will continue to prioritize this issue in your deliberations and decisions.

I take this opportunity to thank the Security Council for its continued support to the peace process and to the promotion of mine action.

With your support, I look forward to meeting the challenges ahead. It has been a privilege and an honor for me to address you today.

I thank you.