

Suriname Demining Mission

After achieving independence in 1975, the Republic of Suriname experienced periods of intense political and economic instability. In 1986, a guerilla war broke out in the eastern region of the country. For the next six years the armed forces of Suriname were involved in a conflict with 5 insurgency groups, in which an estimated 1,000 antipersonnel mines were employed. Following the signing of a peace treaty in 1992, the Organization of American States (OAS) participated in demining operations supported by the governments of Holland, Guyana and Brazil in which all mines were destroyed, with the exception of one minefield sown by the army. On 7 February 2005, the Office for Humanitarian Mine Action (OHMA) of the OAS coordinated a unique multilateral mission to clear the remaining minefield and train a Surinamese army unit in humanitarian demining operations.

Located in Stolkertsijver, District of Commewijne, 50 kilometers east of the capital city of Paramaribo, the remaining minefield, an area of approximately 50m x 75m, was estimated to contain approximately 13 PRB M409 type landmines. With civilian homes located at a distance of less than 5 meters, the minefield posed a serious threat to inhabitants of the area.

The OAS Suriname mission was composed of 14 Honduran Soldiers, experts in matters of humanitarian demining, a Brazilian international supervisor, assigned to the Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America of the Inter-American Defense Board, and a Surinamese demining unit composed of 8 Surinamese soldiers. The mission was structured multilaterally with the Government of Canada providing the necessary financial support, the governments of the United States and Suriname providing in kind support, and the governments of Honduras and Brazil providing personnel. In turn, the OHMA/OAS provided overall coordination and humanitarian demining equipment. The project also received invaluable support from the Surinamese Red Cross, having donated an ambulance for the operations, and the Academic Hospital of Suriname which provided the required medical facilities.

Demining and training operations began on 7 February 2005 with the trained Surinamese soldiers being integrated into the live minefield with the Honduran soldiers on 26 February. On 18 March the Honduran soldiers were honored in a special onsite ceremony in which the Minister of Defense of Suriname, His Excellency Ronald Assen, participated and personally thanked the Honduran soldiers for their assistance. Assen also took the opportunity to congratulate the Surinamese deminers for their efforts. On 19 March the Honduran soldiers returned to Honduras after successfully turning over operations to the trained Surinamese contingency. The soldiers were received by their families as well as national authorities including the Minister of Defense (MOD), His Excellency Federico Brevé Travieso; the Joint Chief of Staff, Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, and the Commander of the Army, René Oliva Euceda. The MOD decorated the Soldiers with the “Expeditionary Medal” for their outstanding international service.

With the demining equipment donated by the OAS, the Surinamese demining contingency continued operations under the close supervision of the Brazilian International Supervisor who remained to ensure strict compliance with International Mine Action Standards of the United Nations. On 4 April demining operations concluded with the cleared land being officially turned over by the OAS to the Inter-Departmental Commission of Antipersonnel Mines of the Republic of Suriname.

The Suriname mission was a great example of transnational cooperation between the nations in our hemisphere. Honduran soldiers were able to share their expertise and knowledge with the Republic of Suriname in a gesture of true camaraderie in combating a problem that until last year affected Honduras and continues to affect many countries throughout the Americas. With the last identified minefield having been cleared, Suriname is now in a position to declaring themselves mine free and in complete compliance with the Ottawa Convention.