

# Rebels in Colombia Lay More Mines, Rights Group Says

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CARACAS, Venezuela, July 25 — Casualties from land mines used by guerrilla organizations in Colombia have climbed sharply in recent years with civilians suffering increasingly from these inexpensive weapons, a leading human rights group said in a report released Wednesday.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the country's largest rebel group, which describes land mines as the "weapon of the poor" and invokes their low cost as a rationale for deploying them, is largely responsible for their increased use, according to Human Rights Watch, the New York-based nongovernmental organization.

Reported casualties from land mines in Colombia did not surpass 148 a year in the 1990s, but at the start of this decade, casualties began surging, from 287 in 2001 to 1,107 in 2006, the report said, citing figures from the government's Antipersonnel Land Mine Observatory.

The report, which also documents land mine use by the National Liberation Army, or ELN, another rebel group, sheds light on one of the most brutal features of Colombia's four-decade struggle with guerrilla insurgencies. Colombia has the world's highest number of land mine casualties, according to available statistics, though some countries, including Afghanistan, are believed to lag in their reporting methods.

"The escalation of land mine use in Colombia is taking place, while the rest of the world has seen a decline," Maria McFarland, the report's author, said in a telephone interview. She said armed groups as varied as Nepal's Maoist insurgency and the PKK, the Kurdish separatists operating in Turkey, had moved to limit use of land mines while Colombia's guerrilla groups had not.

The report said that government support and financial assistance for civilian survivors of land mine incidents were often inadequate, despite large amounts of international aid for Colombia's government to deal with these problems. Human Rights Watch had not received a response on this issue from President Álvaro Uribe's administration, Ms. McFarland said.

Colombia's government has banned antipersonnel land mines, but has had to contend with different philosophies of warfare among the FARC and ELN. Francisco Galán, a spokesman for the ELN, said in an interview with Human Rights Watch that a "creole" version of international laws of war should apply to Colombia.

While Colombian cities like Bogotá and Medellín have largely been shielded from guerrilla activity in recent years, the war, financed in large part by cocaine smuggling and extortion payments for kidnapping victims, still claims victims in the countryside and in cities like Buenaventura, on the Pacific coast. The conflict's legacies include some three million displaced people throughout Colombia and neighboring countries.

About 20 percent of the country's land mine victims in 2006 died as a result of their injuries, Ms. McFarland said. Survivors suffer severed limbs, loss of hearing, blindness and emotional trauma, which inhibit their re-entry into society.

Most casualties are soldiers, but civilians are also suffering from land mines, with 314 civilian casualties last year, of which 66 were children. Still, Human Rights Watch said Colombia most likely had a great deal of underreporting of civilian casualties because of a fear of retribution by survivors or a lack of knowledge of survivor benefits.