

Report Cites Rebels' Wide Use of Mines In Colombia

The Washington Post
July 26, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia, July 25 -- [Colombia's](#) largest rebel group, already accused of executing 11 civilian hostages last month, faced a new allegation Wednesday: A [report](#) by [Human Rights Watch](#) said the group has dramatically escalated its use of land mines, to the point that more people are killed or maimed by the devices here than in any other country in world.

The report, nearly a year in the making, said the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC, which has been fighting the state since 1964, has sown antipersonnel mines throughout the country to slow an increasingly offensive-minded army. The impact of FARC mines, as well as those laid by a smaller rebel group, the [National Liberation Army](#), or ELN, has been devastating: The devices killed or hurt 1,113 people last year, nearly a third of them civilians, according to government tallies based on reported incidents.

Human Rights Watch, which issued the report in Washington, said Colombia bucks a worldwide trend; governments and rebel groups elsewhere have shifted away from using mines.

"The only place these weapons are constant, where they use them and where they justify them as weapons of the people -- for being cheap and easy to make -- is Colombia," José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director of Human Rights Watch, said by phone from Washington. "Because of the guerrillas, these weapons are causing more and more deaths to civilians in Colombia. It's incredible that the FARC and ELN continue acting with such scorn for fundamental values."

The report is sure to further tarnish the FARC, which remains a potent force but has little public support. Last month, the rebels revealed that 11 regional politicians whom the group had kidnapped in 2002 were killed in a FARC camp. The government characterized the slayings as coldblooded murder; the rebels alleged the politicians were killed in a shootout when "an unidentified military group" attacked the camp. Either way, the killings led to worldwide condemnation of the FARC's practice of kidnapping civilians, both for ransom and for political leverage to win the release of jailed rebels.

In Colombia's long, tortuous conflict, the army had for years planted land mines. But in 1997, the government signed an international treaty banning mines, which now includes more than 150 other countries. International humanitarian law prohibits the use of antipersonnel mines because of their indiscriminate nature.

Officials say they have completed the process of removing the military's mines from fields and trails, though there are mines around 34 military bases, said Álvaro Jiménez, who directs the Colombian chapter of the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines.

The rebels have defended their use of the devices. Francisco Galán, a spokesman for the ELN, told Human Rights Watch that international humanitarian law did not apply to the group. Still, the ELN has told the government it is prepared to declare a six-month cease-fire leading to peace talks -- a proposal that, if accepted, could include a de-mining process. Human Rights Watch says the ELN needs to permanently cease using

mines; otherwise, an official said, the group is in essence using civilians as bargaining chips.

The FARC asserts it does not target civilians. Raúl Reyes, a spokesman for the group, recently told Colombia Journal, an online report, that "the minefields are used against the public forces, never against the civilian population, never." He acknowledged that civilians sometimes suffer but said that "the norm is that one must try and ensure that there are no civilian casualties."

The latest government statistics show that last year 320 civilians stepped on mines, 66 of them children. Fifty-seven civilians died. In 1996, 11 civilians were killed and 30 were injured. Some incidents likely have gone unreported, according to specialists.

Jiménez, of the anti-mining group, said mines have led whole farming communities to abandon towns laden with the devices.

"The mines move to the rhythm of the confrontation, and mines are used in an indiscriminate manner," said Jiménez, himself a former guerrilla from the M-19 rebel movement that demobilized in the early 1990s. "The armed actors argue that they use them as defensive weapons and directed at the enemy, which is the armed forces. But the reality is we've found that mines have a terrible effect on civilians in all the regions."

The use of mines has become particularly troubling to the military. Nearly 60 percent of the casualties the army suffers are due to the devices. In 1999, the army attributed 26 casualties to land mines; last year alone, there were 793 such casualties, with 169 fatalities.

"This is a terrible problem for us because we lose more soldiers to these land mines than to the bullets of the guerrillas," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said in an interview. "The types of mines are very primitive. They're not sophisticated mines. And that makes them more difficult to detect."