

COLOMBIA

Sensitizing high-risk populations to the dangers of landmines: Jhon Ferney's testimony

On 25 May 2004, members of the National Liberation Army (ELN) came to Jhon Ferney Giraldo's family farm. They told his father that they had to leave the village within the next three days and that they should leave everything behind.

The family woke up early the next day and moved off with six mules and all of their possessions to the municipal capital – an approximate eight-hour walk. As they crossed the river, Jhon jumped into the water to cool himself down. He was with his brother and a cousin.

As the rest of the group was now far ahead, the boys decided to have a race, placing bets on who could catch up with the group first. Jhon Ferney took a shortcut in an effort to win the race. He had been running for a while and had stopped to take a breath when he stepped on the mine that flung him into the air. He fell into the hole opened by the explosion. As he tried to stand up, he saw that his foot had been torn off. He began to scream. He was 14 years old.

His father put him onto one of the mules. They walked for two days to reach the provincial capital, using the old pathway because the guerilla was blocking the main road. "We met the ELN," says Jhon. "They had a medic. She washed my wounds, applied dressing, gave me an injection to ease the pain and hooked me up to intravenous fluids. She advised my family that I needed to get treatment at the hospital as soon as possible or else I would die. Eventually we arrived at the hospital, where I remained unconscious for three days. I underwent several surgeries and was there for a total of 15 days. I was given a pair of crutches. It was only later that I would receive my prosthesis."

It takes Jhon about 30 minutes to walk up the hill from his home to the school. This means that his prostheses wear out quickly. He is now studying at a school in San Cristóbal and his favourite hobby is participating in sports activities. The things he used to do at the farm, such as riding horses and travelling to the main town each week to sell their produce, fill his days with happy memories. They were self-sufficient and food was never in short supply. Having food on the table is no longer so easy. The accident has affected the whole family. "It is not the same when you have a part of your body missing," says Jhon Ferney.

At school he is learning about respect and the importance of a good education. He dreams of becoming a teacher when he is older. In June 2007, he was

elected as spokesperson for his school, with 185 votes, whereas the second candidate gained just 52 votes. His peers see in Jhon Ferney a bright boy, full of life and hope for the future. In July, he completed his first mine-risk education training course, a UNICEF project implemented by a national non-governmental partner, Peace and Democracy, where he learned key aspects of mine awareness and mine-risk education. He is enthusiastic to teach others about the dangers of landmines and is looking forward to his next training session.

UNICEF's assistance has included a training programme for local authorities and landmine survivors on the rights of victims of armed conflict. In 52 municipalities, together with its counterparts, UNICEF conducts mine-awareness workshops among populations living in high-risk areas and trains civil servants, facilitators, key actors as well as mine survivors, like Jhon Ferney, on how to prevent accidents caused by mines or unexploded ordnance.

These activities are crucial. The presence of landmines in 31 of Colombia's 32 provinces (660 municipalities are affected from a total of 1,098) is a serious concern. Thirty per cent of the civilian victims of mine-related accidents are children – of these 90 per cent live in rural areas.