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By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor



A gambian giant pouch rat (*Cricetomys Gambianus*) receives the scent of a suspected anti-personnel mine in a minefield near the town of Vilancoulos, 450 kilometres north-east of the capital Maputo in southern Mozambique Reuters

Rats and Cats, Trained to Detect Landmines

Rats, better than dogs

Playing cat and mouse can have a different outcome from what we see in some cartoons. Tom and Jerry can be even very good friends when solving some very special tasks.

In the past years, a special Colombian police unit has been training rats and cats put in the same cages as part of a project to teach the rodents to sniff out the over 100,000 landmines planted especially by leftist rebels across Columbia.

The standard method of mine removal is a slow and very expensive process, which is not 100 % effective: even after the de-miners have finished their job, there may still be some mines in the soil.

"Bringing the rats face to face with an enemy allows them to stay more focused once they are released," veterinarian Luisa Mendez, who's been training the animals for two years, told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

"Here the cats play with the rats instead of attacking them. The cats wear shields on their nails so they can't cause any injuries and as a result the rats feel comfortable playing around them." said Mendez.

The rodents learn to freeze in front of mines, but it is hard to stay like that for fear of being attacked by predators.

"The rats' success rate in mine detection is 96 %. Unlike dogs, the rats weigh a lot less and therefore don't trigger explosions." said Col. Javier Cifuentes, who oversees the project.

Colombia is famous for the sad record of having the world's largest number of landmine victims. In 2006, the mines made 1,108 victims, or about one every eight hours. About 25 % of the victims died.

At the Faculty of Agriculture, Zagreb University in Croatia, honey bees are trained to detect landmines, as 1,000 sq km (380 sq miles) of this country are infested with mines, a "hard" inheritance of the Balkan wars in the '90s.

The bees are trained by feeding them on points where the soil immediately around has been impregnated with explosive chemicals (like TNT), based on the bees' keen sense of smell and their learning ability to connect the smell of explosives with food. In African countries, Gambian giant pouched rats are employed to find mines.