

Landmines: the state of play

By Bill Frilay

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) – the NGO leader on this issue – estimates that around 4,000-5,000 people were maimed or killed by landmines last year alone, and that millions more suffer from the agricultural, economic, and psychological impacts of the weapons. They estimate that there are still tens of millions of landmines in the ground in 78 countries. And UNICEF estimates that 30-40 percent of victims are children under 15 years of age.

These are just some of the reasons for banning landmines. It's a 'no brainer'. On the good-news side, there is an international treaty, known as the Ottawa Convention, which bans production and use of landmines. This was set up in the late 1990s, with the Canadian Government playing a lead role along with the ICBL, whose founder, Jody Williams, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Some 160 countries have signed the Treaty, while 36 others – including the US, Russia, China, India, Israel, and the two Koreas – have not. However, many of the latter abide by the treaty in a de-facto sense. The US has not signed, because of the Korean DMZ, but there is an NGO push there to seek their joining.

While the treaty has been in force for some years now, the problem is that, according to the UN, ICBL landmines cost \$3 to make, and \$1000 to recover and destroy. And there are so many out there, especially in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Afghanistan, Angola, Ruanda and other trouble spots of the last 50 years. It will take years – if not forever – to clear the land of these. And, sadly, children – being curious – are very vulnerable.

Landmines are about as insidious a weapon as can be, for most of the victims are innocent civilians, and they are a weapon that keeps on keeping on long after the conflict has stopped. A recent Bernama Malaysian report claimed that in the first 7 months of this year in Cambodia, 25 were killed and another 89 injured. The cost is economic as well as human – land is lost, and only last month, a report from Bosnia-Herzegovina stated that landmines were complicating firefighters' efforts to combat forest fires in southern Bosnia.

What is the Australian Government doing? Well, we are on of 160 signatories to the Convention, and support efforts to universalise the Convention. And through Ausaid we are contributing \$100 million from 2010 to 2014 to help countries clear the mines, to assist with medical treatment for victims, and to reduce the economic impact.

There are still some negatives. The Free Syrian Army has reportedly spoken of plans to use recovered landmines against the Assad regime. They are being urged not to do so. And I think landmines are still being manufactured by some countries.

The only action we might consider at some stage is writing to the Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade seeking increased lobbying efforts to universalise the treaty. But, at this stage, I think this is a matter on which to maintain a watching brief, and draw upon information from the ICBL.

Here are some websites:

<http://www.icbl.org/index.php/icbl/content/view/full/2>
<http://australia.icbl.org/index.htm>
<http://www.dfat.gov.au/security/landmines.html>
<http://www.ausaid.gov.au/Publications/Pages/mine-action-strategy-aust-aid-prog.aspx>
<http://www.unicef.org/graca/mines.htm>



Landmine by Duke Human Rights Center Robin Kirk, flickr cc