

GUINEA BISSAU

**Statement of the Secretary of State for Veterans Affairs
to the
7th Meeting of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention
Geneva, Switzerland**

18-22 September, 2006

(Check Against Delivery)

Mr. President of the 7th Meeting of States Parties,

Representatives of the Government of Switzerland,

States Parties to the Ottawa Convention,

Representatives of the United Nations System and other international organizations,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by offering my congratulations to the newly-elected President of the 7th Meeting of States Parties and thank him for his important work in presiding over this meeting.

On behalf of Guinea-Bissau, I would like to highlight the fact that our delegation is proud to be here as the 116th State Party to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. The inhumane effects of anti-personnel mines are a serious concern for our Government and the entire population.

We are a country in need of significant development assistance; anti-personnel mines have provided a further barrier to much-needed development for populations on the margins of survival. In partnership with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), we are attempting to address the overall needs of the population through our national mine action programme. We are working in cooperation with the various relevant government ministries and other actors to ensure that the mine action response contributes to the development goals – notably the Millennium Development Goals – of Guinea-Bissau.

Excellency,

This year a new survey of victims was completed through a joint project between the Government of Guinea-Bissau and the World Health Organisation (WHO). This was the

most comprehensive survey of victims that we have completed to date. More than 1,000 victims were registered, including war victims, UXO and mine victims.

The project also was able to conduct a needs assessment of victims at the same time. individuals were provided with subsequent medical evaluations, 30 individuals were given subsequent medical, including surgical treatment, and thus far 20 individuals were provided with prosthetic and orthotic devices. Basic medicines were also contributed as well as training for 55 medical personnel and hospital equipment.

Through an impact survey, the first phase of which is now complete with support from the Government of Canada, Guinea-Bissau is attempting to complete a strategy for meeting its Convention obligations. A total of 31 of Guinea-Bissau's 39 sectors are affected by mines and UXO. These areas must be visited in the second phase of the study so we can develop a comprehensive national plan.

Mr. President,

This year, Guinea-Bissau has made significant progress in ridding our territory from anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). I am extremely proud to say that the capital of Guinea-Bissau was declared free of mines on August 16th of this year. Close to 1 million square metres of land has been cleared in Bissau since clearance began in the year 2000, including the clearance of 2,580 anti-personnel mines, 76 anti-tank mines and 70,755 items of unexploded ordnance.

For all those who suffered through the recent conflict of 1998-99 and especially those innocent individuals who fell victim to AP mines in the aftermath of this conflict, this is an extremely important moment. We can now say there will be no more victims of anti-personnel mines in the capital city, Bissau.

Sadly, our capital is still littered with significant amounts of UXO from this same conflict. This ordnance is in the middle of a highly populated area and threatens the lives of a significant number of innocent civilians. In response to this ERW threat an EOD and Battle Area Clearance (BAC) capacity is being created within Guinea-Bissau's national NGO demining organizations, with assistance from Norway and the United States. This will allow us to clear the capital, as well as the many other areas that contaminate the country.

However, now that the capital is free from mines, our task is to address the mine contamination that exists in the various regions of the country. In response to recent conflict on our northern border, we have begun demining in that area. This will allow persons displaced during to conflict to return and rebuild their villages, without fear of being injured by mines and UXO. This emergency response project was mounted with the assistance of the United Nations system to ensure that there was a rapid response to the problem.

The first phase of this emergency response is completed, however, significant work remains to be done so that humanitarian agencies can begin to do reconstruction work within the conflict zone. This northern region has been the source of the overwhelming majority of accidents over the last two years. It is therefore a high humanitarian priority for the Government of Guinea-Bissau.

Mr. President, fellow States Parties,

If we are going to meet our Convention goals as quickly as possible, we must increase our speed and efficiency. With the help of the United States and advice from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, we are testing new mechanical methodologies to assist in clearing areas more quickly. However, we will require continued financial and technical support to do so. -

We would like to thank those donor countries that have contributed to mine action in Guinea-Bissau this year, including the United Nations System, Canada, the European Commission, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

In addition, we would like to highlight our appreciation for the support of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. The Centre continues to assist Guinea-Bissau in all areas of mine action, and allows our participation in these very useful meetings through the sponsorship programme. In this regard, I would like to congratulate Ambassador Nellen on the important contribution of the Centre.

Finally, I would like to reiterate Guinea-Bissau's commitment to the humanitarian principles of the Convention and to meeting our obligations. For mine-affected states, the value of our common work is the difference we can make in lives of innocent people living each day with the threat of mines and UXO.

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