

International Campaign to Ban Landmines  
Statement on Clearing Mined Areas  
Eighth Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty  
Dead Sea, Jordan  
Delivered by Nick Cummings-Bruce, Landmine Monitor  
20 November 2007

Mr. President,

It's a source of satisfaction that 10 years after the signing of the Mine Ban Treaty, the mine action community continues to report a significant acceleration in clearance. In 2006, countries reported clearing a total of 450 square kilometers of land, representing an increase of more than one-third over the previous year. Although clearance of mined areas remained at about the same level as the previous year, battle area clearance rose by over 60 per cent. And the amount of land released through area reduction and cancellation almost tripled to 860 square kilometers.

The increases testify in part to improvements in the productivity achieved by certain countries, acting on the experience of recent years to refine and improve clearance methodologies. In Afghanistan and Laos, we have the example of two countries where major reviews of management and implementation of operations are yielding big gains in productivity.

However, Mr. President, beneath these alluring headline numbers, we observe wide disparities in the results from different countries and mine action programmes that raise a number of major concerns.

First, the progress is extremely narrowly distributed. More than half of the mined area clearance in 2006 occurred in just two countries, Cambodia and Afghanistan. Similarly much of the advance in battle area clearance occurred in two countries, Afghanistan again and, perhaps surprisingly, in Iraq, where operators claimed to have cleared almost 100 square kilometers in this way, compared with less than 15 square kilometers the previous year. Nearly 90 per cent of the land released occurred in just three countries, Cambodia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Yemen.

Secondly, the corollary to this phenomenon is that too many other countries are making at best modest progress in landmine clearance. Too much effort goes into clearing land that is not actually contaminated. Many states still do not have strategic plans in place, and some that do are oriented towards achieving a "mine-safe" status. This does not meet treaty requirements. Some states are delaying mine clearance operations because of the strategic value of the mined areas, which contradicts the treaty's obligations not to use mined areas and to demine as quickly as possible. It's unacceptable that eight years after they signed the treaty, four countries, France, Niger, the UK and Venezuela, had yet to initiate formal clearance operations, though we welcome the fact that France has now begun clearance operations and aims to meet its deadline.

A third major concern is the disappointingly high proportion of countries which are now almost certain to miss the clearance deadlines to which they committed when they acceded to the Mine Ban Treaty. The treaty allows for extensions but intended these to be granted only for states with severe contamination. In Nairobi, states reiterated that "few if any" should need to ask for extensions. It is therefore disappointing that of 29 countries with clearance deadlines in 2009 or 2010, over half will not finish in time. Some of these states have valid reasons, but others have simply not demonstrated sufficient will to meet their obligations.

Mr. President, the mine ban treaty also requires states parties to make every effort to identify all mined areas. A decade into the life of the treaty, it is therefore regrettable that many states have yet to accurately define the extent of their mined areas and rely on inflated estimates of the extent of the contamination, resulting in poor task selection and poorly focused clearance, wastage of precious resources and delays in fulfilling their clearance obligations under the treaty.

Clearly, with the approach of Article 5 clearance deadlines, states parties will feel growing pressure to accelerate the clearance and release of land through area reduction and cancellation. It is therefore a good moment to emphasize the importance that it is done without jeopardizing safety. ICBL has drawn up guiding principles on area reduction and we are pleased the issue will be discussed in detail this afternoon. We hope that the debate will reinforce the urgent need for all mine action stakeholders -- operators, national authorities and international institutions-- to develop international guidelines for area reduction and cancellation of suspected areas.

With the approach of Article 5 deadlines, Mr. President, we would like to take a minute to consider the extension process that you elaborated earlier. We would like to express our support for the template tabled at this meeting as a way to encourage states parties to provide the comprehensive information required by the mine ban treaty.

We realize this requires considerable detailed information from countries requesting extensions but much of this information should have already been gathered by mine action authorities in the course of their existing planning and operations. And it is therefore the ICBL's view that the process should not distract states parties from the work of clearing.

Regarding the evaluation of extension requests by other states parties, we are also pleased to hear that the process is to be transparent and that documents will be made quickly available to the public, ensuring the widest possible scrutiny among stakeholders.

The extension process allows ample time for the evaluation of requests. But the ICBL strongly believes that the process will only be meaningful if the end result is more than a yes or no from the other states parties. It is our view that the decisions states parties render should include four elements. In addition to approval or rejection, they should include the number of years granted, which may be different from the number requested, performance benchmarks on the road to completion for those states that have made the least progress, and the rationale behind the decision. There would be little point to having a nine month evaluation including outside experts' advice if the outcome is reduced to a yes-or-no decision.

The ICBL has prepared criteria for judging extension requests that we hope will help states parties in the task of evaluating extension requests. We made them available to the intersessional in Geneva in April and they are available outside.

Finally Mr. President, we would also like to recommend adding the following bullet point under Article 41: "When requesting extensions to Article 5 deadlines, States Parties should observe the convention requirement that all antipersonnel mines in mined areas be destroyed as soon as possible. States Parties should therefore request extensions for the minimum practical time required, supported by the information provided in the voluntary template."

Thank you.