Ending the Era of Anti-personnel Mines

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In December 1997, mine-affected communities around the world were promised a better future when governments gathered in Ottawa to sign the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines. This marked the first time that states agreed to ban a weapon that was already in widespread use due to its appalling human cost. The Convention brought mine-affected communities the hope that they would one day live free from the fear of death and mutilation by these hidden killers. Canadians should feel proud that such an event took place on our soil and that the process was largely initiated and supported by Canadians.

At the end of this month, world leaders will gather at the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World to review the progress made so far and to determine the action required to fulfil the Convention's promises in the years to come. The Nairobi Summit is the most important event in the struggle to end the suffering caused by anti-personnel mines since the signing of the Convention.

Ten years ago, the medical staff of the Red Cross characterized the massive numbers of deaths and injuries by anti-personnel mines witnessed each year as a global "epidemic" of landmine injuries. The entire International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent called for a comprehensive ban on anti-personnel mines. Major public advocacy campaigns undertaken by the ICRC, the Canadian Red Cross and other national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the United Nations led to the adoption in record time of a new international treaty outlawing this weapon.

This landmark Convention totally prohibits the use, development, production and stockpiling of anti-personnel mines and requires states to destroy all existing mines whether in stocks or in the ground. However, the treaty does more than prohibit a weapon. It is also a humanitarian program of action designed to respond to the ongoing human suffering caused by anti-personnel mines by removing the threat of mines already in the ground, assisting mine victims and raising awareness in the civilian population about the dangers of anti-personnel mines.

The Convention's prescription to end the global epidemic of mine injuries has proved to be effective. Three-quarters of the world's states have joined the Convention. These include some of the most mine-infested states in the world, such as Angola, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Mozambique and Nicaragua. Together, states party to the Convention have destroyed more than 37 million anti-personnel mines. These appalling weapons have been stigmatized and the norm against their use is becoming universal. Worldwide production and use of anti-personnel mines have sharply decreased. The global trade in anti-personnel mines has virtually ceased. Close cooperation between mine-affected countries and donor States is ensuring significant mine clearance activities in all regions of the world. Most importantly, where the Convention is being fully implemented, the annual number of new mine victims has fallen dramatically, in some cases by two thirds or more.

Although the Convention has an impressive “track record”, great challenges remain before it fulfills its promises to mine victims. The real test will come in the next five years leading to 2009, when the first 10-year deadlines for states to completely clear mined areas will be reached. Twenty-three mine-affected states will have to complete mine-clearance by then. Two of the most heavily mine-affected countries in the world—Angola and Afghanistan—face deadlines in 2012. This is a daunting task for both mine-affected and donor countries. A large number of
affected countries are both poor and struggling to recover from war. While laying mines is easy, removing them is time-consuming, dangerous and expensive. In addition, mine clearance is only one of the many urgent and competing needs of post-conflict societies.

Thousands of men, women and children are still injured and killed by anti-personnel mines every year. Every day new mine victims are added to the hundreds of thousands of victims from the 1980s and 1990s. Those fortunate enough to survive an anti-personnel mine blast will typically need amputation, multiple operations and prolonged physical rehabilitation. Disabled for life, most mine survivors will require long-term care that is often inadequate or nonexistent in mine-affected countries. There are also limited opportunities for mine victims to gain employment. Although improved assistance to mine victims and other disabled has been evident in some communities, overall progress is not significant either on a national or global basis. The Nairobi Summit must ensure progress in this area in the coming years.

Whenever any state reserves itself the right to use anti-personnel mines by remaining outside of the Convention, it encourages other states and armed groups to do the same. It is essential to persuade governments that are not yet party to the Convention, some of which possess large stockpiles of anti-personnel mines, to join. A 1996 Red Cross study endorsed by military officers from 19 countries, concluded that "the limited military utility of anti-personnel mines is far outweighed by the appalling humanitarian consequences of their use in actual conflicts" (Anti-personnel Landmines: Friend or Foe? A study of the military use and effectiveness of anti-personnel mines, ICRC, Geneva 1996.). Although narrow military justifications for retaining anti-personnel mines can always be imagined, the verdict of history is clear: their use has caused unspeakable suffering and their global elimination is a humanitarian necessity.

The adoption of the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines marked not the last, but the first step to ending the suffering caused by these weapons. We now know that the Convention’s prescriptions work. But its full promise will only be realized through persistent efforts. The Canadian Red Cross is pleased that Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada along with The Honourable Pierre Pettigrew, Minister of Foreign Affairs are leading a Canadian delegation travelling to the Nairobi Summit. They will join world leaders from other countries to celebrate the Convention’s success, adopt an ambitious plan of action and commit increased resources to achieving its objectives. We witness the success of this global effort in the struggle of mine survivors learning to walk again and in the courage of mine clearers entering the minefields every day. At the Nairobi Summit, political leaders must do their part of the job by ensuring that the global effort to achieve a world free of anti-personnel mines is sustained in the next years.