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An Alternative Perspective on Landmines and Vulnerable Populations

By offering a different view on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines’ dominant message concerning mine action, this article presents an argument for possible alternatives. The author brings up such points as a lack of discussion and an acceptance of facts without proper checking of research. In addition, suggestions of constructive use of landmines in the defense of vulnerable populations are made to refute the idea of a necessary worldwide ban.

by Shelby Weitzel [College of the Holy Cross]

People living in areas infested with landmines are quite aware of the impact these mines have on their well-being. For those of us living in "the developed world," public awareness of the impact of landmines is due largely to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. From this campaign we have learned of the physical, psychological, economic, and environmental damage caused by landmines left over from past conflicts. We have also learned of ways in which, contrary to the dictates of responsible use, landmines are used to terrorize civilian populations. That the most vulnerable populations in the world sustain much of this damage makes this senseless violence particularly heinous.

From what we have heard, we might easily infer that landmines are inherently problematic. However, focusing solely on these harms gives the false impression that only bad consequences result from landmine use. Furthermore, these arguments fail to consider that bad, perhaps worse, consequences can result from a failure to...
use landmines, obscuring the fact that there also have been and continue to be construc-
tive contributions of the defenders to vul-
nerable populations. I argue that landmines have more than served to provide security to vulner-
able populations. Consequently, the wholesale stigmatization of the production and use of these weapons undermines the vulnerability of some of the populations that the ICBL in-
tends to protect.

Anti-landmine Rhetoric

Genuine, open dialogue and debate regarding the production and use of land-
mines has been rather restricted. There are at least two observable implications of this, which need not be mutually exclusive:

1. The superiority of the arguments against landmines has more or less resolved any questions that would generate open dialogue and debate.
2. The ways in which arguments against landmines are presented, rather than the content of the arguments, tend to shut down open dialogue and debate.

3. The people with the kind of field ex-
perience and insight to revise or reject the arguments against landmines must "see the line" if they want to keep their jobs, kurative contracts, power and prestige that comes with managing the response to the land-
mine crisis.

As long as explanation Nos. 2 and 3 remain viable, we should be derisive of No. 1. I will focus on explanation No. 2.

The strategy of ban proponents is fairly clear. According to Canadian Deputy Permanent Representative Ambassador to the United Nations Gilbert Laurin, "Meas-
ing landmine survivors—most of them ci-
vilians and almost half of them children—is the best way to dispel forever the myth of ‘responsible use’ of landmines. It is the most powerful way of convincing all states that an outline on this weapon is the only fea-
sible way forward."

The landmine survivors are not there merely to attract attention, although that is a necessary first step. Their plight is too taken as a moral argument that refutes any claims that landmines can be regulated or designed to prevent such images of images, in particular the image of the injured civilian. As Kenneth Rutherford, Co-founder of Landmine Survivors Network, explains, "Many of the

News Brief

IDGA’s 3rd Annual Asymmetric Warfare Conference

The Institute for Defense and Government Advancement will host the third-annual Asymmetric Warfare Conference Oct. 16-18, 2006. It will be held at the Westin Arlington Gateway Hotel in Arlington, Va. IDGA’s Asymmetric Warfare conference, “Explosives Detection, Avoidance, and Removal Technologies in the Land Environment,” is a high-level, technology-focused event that will bring together government, military, academia and industry to discuss information on existing warfare detection capabilities, ongoing and future research and development, requirements for explosives detection, and avoidance and removal technologies.

Workshop topics will include:

• Countering the trends in improvised explosive device usage
• Helping to defeat the IED threat: advanced handheld detection (AHED)
• Protecting our troops in hostile regions
• Next generation jamming technologies: staying one step ahead of the enemy
• Developing improved explosive ordnance disposal tools and equipment
• Reliable detection of IEDs in operationally significant environments
• Information resources and delivery systems to enhance response capabilities
• Robotic systems for mine detection: removing the threat
• Developing and improving automatic mine recognition algorithms (ATM): numerical simulation as a tool for developing countermeasure technology
• Better identifying the presence of explosives through sensor technology
• Addressing and combating chemical and non-conventional threats

For more information or to register for the conference, visit www.idga.org or call +1 800 892 8684.

argue that landmines have de facto served

to protect vulnerable populations."
Weitzel: An Alternative Perspective on Landmines and Vulnerable Populations

Protecting vulnerable human populations. The ICBL has done a great service in raising awareness about the damage caused by landmines. Much of their case rests on the fact that mines do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. As we know, the damage extends beyond the physical injuries themselves. The social stigma and the added economic burden that a loss of a productive person creates for victims and their families are additional harms.

Further harm results not from actual detonations, but from the belief that landmines are present in the area. The threat of mines blocks access to vital resources such as land, water, housing, public buildings, infrastructure and transport. Avoiding injury requires curtailing or refraining from securing subsistence or the means of productivity. To make matters worse, mined roads prevent the transport of goods once collected or grown, thereby impairing income and trade.

However, landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group within a circumscribed territory by keeping dangerous persons out. Landmines were originally intended for purposes of defense, the fact that some now use them on the offense does not mean that landmines cease to play this defensive role.

Protecting vulnerable populations from armed forces. Whether or not one believes a line between combatants and noncombatants can or should be maintained, the fact is many aggressive parties are willing to force noncombatants into their conflicts. Whether the noncombatants are “innocent” or are implicated by association and by providing indirect support to combatants, they require defense. To the extent landmines help to provide that defense, they protect not only children and farmers, but, those people who tend to be the focal point of the humanitarian campaign to ban landmines.

If we take the moral argument against all landmine use seriously, then we have to conclude that it is wrong to use mines to defend these populations. If we join supporters of the ICBL in stigmatizing landmine use, we must also stigmatize people who want to defend these populations. We would have to stigmatize people who are glad mines are used to defend them from rape and murder. We would have to stigmatize families of soldiers who are glad that their spouses and children have one more means of ensuring that they come home.

Suppose for the moment the choice to use mines is mistaken. Even so, what this war-ravaged, nation is not. In fact, it has been thickest belts of landmines that protected thousands of residents in Sarajevo from meeting the same fate as Serbians. Perhaps next to the photos of people who were injured by landmines, we should add the photos of women and girls who were not raped, and fathers and sons who were not removed in the night.

Self-defense of vulnerable populations. Although proponents of the ICBL often work in or come from countries affected by landmines, the framework that they have developed does not seem to take into account all that it should. There is something wrong with the strategy to the extent that it includes vilifying those who try to protect those who do not wish to be included in conflicts. Just perhaps an even more troubling problem pertains to cases of landmine use, which the general public tends not to hear about. The way one learns of these is by speaking to people in the field: deminers and the people who live there. Consider the following example:

Cambodians have endured a longstanding problem with landmine contamination associated with the Khmer Rouge received asylum but are now dismissed as a thing of the past. At least some of the deminers who were working in Cambodia in the 1990s know that at times it was the villages who were laying mines to protect themselves from attack and theft by dispersed Khmer Rouge and other bands. Travel Web sites assure us that it is now safe to travel to Cambodia. Perhaps for tourists, it is.

Let us return to the case of Sarajevo. Diners are currently assured by maps showing where fighting armies deployed mines. However, their mission is considerably more difficult because not all mines were deployed by military forces. Most of what the ICBL did for Dino Bulsudzic of the University of Western Australia, “There are mines that are not mined by the military but rather by civilians themselves. One example is that of houses and gardens, more or less isolated, [that] were mined by their owners for protection from fear of being attacked. The minefields of Sarajevo, in reality, are many more than those marked on the maps.” These are civilians using mines to protect themselves while United Nations peacekeeping forces watched as everything these citizens held dear was being destroyed.

Conclusion. To stigmatize landmines per se is to demonize not only the guerrillas and the oppressive regimes that are effectively judged by their aims and methods the war and as a result, landmines now pose a serious threat to civilians. For example, the United Nations reports that in 2004, landmines were responsible for more than 15 deaths and 30 injuries. The actual number of deaths and injuries has likely been higher but gone unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the south.