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The Parable of the Two Sons

by Dennis Barlow [Mine Action Information Center]

The Biblical parable of the two sons¹ illustrates a great human dilemma often repeated in literature and life. It is a very simple story: One son responds to his father's request to work in the vineyard by declining, yet reconsiders his intention and in the end does his father's bidding. The other son, keen to appear obedient, accepts the responsibility, but decides against doing the work. The question of who has done the father's will answers itself.

This parable reminds me of the state of the Ottawa Convention.² Four years ago in this column, I commented about the undoubted successes and shortcomings of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.³ Those observations are, I believe, still true. The more timely issue, however, is implied by the very nature of the Convention itself. Is the Convention providing guidance that induces practitioners to do good, or does it provide a forum where officials simply make meaningless conversation and so become a clanging cymbal?⁴

Let us review how the "sons," who said that they were going to uphold the Convention, are doing. There is at least one signatory, Venezuela, still making active use of its emplaced anti-personnel landmines, even while making statements at meetings that it is fully committed to the Convention. To my knowledge, no State Party has questioned Venezuela's noncompliant behavior, leaving only the International Campaign to Ban Landmines to condemn the action, calling it "highly disturbing."⁵

Regarding mines retained for training (Article 3), the *Landmine Monitor* reports that "there is a clear history of little or no consumption [destruction] of retained mines by a significant number of States Parties."⁶ Eighteen countries have not reported destroying any landmines since ratifying the Convention, while 15 more of those with remaining stockpiles have not reported destroying APLs for two or more years.⁶

Clearance is the focal point of mine action; the Convention requires that 10 years after accession, mine clearance must be complete. At the meetings of the States Parties in Amman, Jordan, in November 2007, heavy emphasis was put on this requirement. Yet, it appears that at least 14 states will not meet their 2009 deadlines, with four failing to commence clearance operations at all.⁶ Indeed most of the discussion during the clearance portion of the meeting dealt with procedures for requesting extensions for clearance operations.

In spite of the overwhelming good being accomplished by the Ottawa Convention ban on anti-personnel landmines, there are indications that actual accomplishments and adherence to its tenets are sometimes ignored in favor of rhetoric. Worse is the tendency of other signatories to turn a blind eye to these shortfalls, not wishing to be accused of being negative toward fellow States Parties.

The "other sons" (in this case, non-signatories) have acted variously. Countries that decided not to ban APLs via the Ottawa Convention are not intrinsically evil. They felt that they had a larger responsibility in defending their allies (e.g., the United States), believed chronic border problems necessitated APL reliance (e.g., Finland), or they placed a greater emphasis and reliability on more traditional arms-control venues (e.g., India).

It may surprise some to learn that the United States has adhered to the spirit of the Ottawa Convention since it was signed by the first States Parties and whose last significant use of APLs took place in the 1991 Gulf War in order to defend Saudi Arabia, the same year of the entry into force of the Convention. The United States also has, beginning in 1988, developed an extensive program of humanitarian mine-action programs, exercised leadership of the Mine Action Support Group, managed a robust mine-detection and clearance research and development program, and has destroyed well over 3.3 million of its stockpiled landmines.⁷

Most of the 30 non-signatories have endorsed the concept of elimination of APLs and 19 attended the Eighth Meeting of States Parties in Jordan. Most have also endorsed nontransfer or moratorium actions. Many countries that are not parties to the Convention have been taking steps toward it, such as cessation of production and export. If one were to assess the use of APLs today, it is generally not states who are the culprits, but factions, insurgents, drug lords, criminals and terrorists.

A review of national mine action globally reveals some interesting, if predictable, conclusions. Since the early 1990s, virtually every government and country has come to understand the insidious nature of APLs. Some countries could quickly sign the Ottawa Convention because they had no landmines, were not disposed to use landmines, or were so impressed by the need to ban landmines that they decided to override whatever military necessity APLs rendered—or perhaps they

signed because the political climate provided them an altruistic persona.

The difference between these two sets of countries—signatories and non-signatories—has been overblown; Finland and Norway, the United States and Canada, and Turkey and India are more alike in this regard than they are different. All but the most roguish of states desire to see the end of indiscriminate APL use. The time has come for the global mine-action community to accept all who wish to see the humanitarian impact of landmines—as well as other explosive remnants of war—eliminated.⁸ The efforts that go into universalization and the finger-pointing it often engenders not only sap the energy and unity that could be focused on clearing landmines and ERW, but worse, that creates holier-than-thou attitude that leads to words rather than actions, recriminations rather than results, and isolation rather than inclusion. ♦

See *Endnotes*, page 110



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