

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



Minefields can be used to create barriers to defend vulnerable populations.

use landmines, obscuring the fact that there also have been and continue to be constructive uses for landmines with respect to vulnerable populations. I argue that landmines have *de facto* served to protect vulnerable populations. Consequently, the wholesale stigmatization of the production and use of landmines exacerbates the vulnerability of some of the populations that the ICBL intends to protect.

Anti-landmine Rhetoric

Genuine, open dialogue and debate regarding the production and use of landmines has been rather restricted. There are at least three possible explanations for 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 the 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 experience and insight to revise or reject the arguments against landmines must “toe the line” if they want to keep their jobs, lucrative contracts, power and prestige that comes with managing the response to the landmine crisis.

As long as explanation Nos. 2 and 3 remain viable, we should be skeptical 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, “Meeting landmine survivors—most of them civilians 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 outright ban on this weapon is the only feasible way forward.”¹

The landmine survivors are not there merely to attract attention, although that is a necessary first step. Their plight is to be taken

as a moral argument that refutes any claims that landmines can be regulated or designed to prevent such incidents in the future.

Most of us will never meet a landmine survivor; instead, we are shown graphic photos and are presented with disturbing details of their suffering.² Without the photos, many people could not begin to comprehend what is at stake for a landmine victim; the images jar us from our complacency. One scholar describes this as “priming” the audience.³

Problems with the strategy emerge after the audience has been primed. The audience has not merely acquired new facts with which to make more informed judgments. Emotional reactions to the photos include shock, disgust and anger. Fortunately, these reactions urge us to help. Unfortunately, because the photos and stories are shown in the context of supporting the ICBL, the ICBL has commandeered allegiance to the victims by linking the images of the injured civilians to their agenda. The implication is that if one believes that landmines might serve useful purposes in present and future con-

texts, then one must not be taking seriously enough the trauma inflicted on children resulting from landmines left over from past conflicts.⁴ Believing this, many people are reticent to express skepticism.

The lack of discussion also allows unsubstantiated, if not outright indefensible, claims to go unchallenged. Cited figures exaggerate the number of mines deployed, the likely costs of demining and the expected number of civilian and deminer injuries. Other claims are technically correct but function as distortions because they are taken out of context. As Kenneth Rutherford, Co-founder of Landmine Survivors Network, explains, “Many of the

in landmine issues is “against” the vulnerable populations that are being victimized. Military personnel who use landmines in campaigns to protect civilian populations, as in the case of Sarajevo, are not against the victims, nor are the engineers who design “smart mines” with self-destruct or self-deactivating mechanisms. Proponents of the ICBL simply do not merit an exclusive claim to concern for the civilian victims of mines.

The unwillingness to question arguments put forth against present landmine use further obscures what is really going on. When someone in a position of authority claims that meeting a landmine survivor can “dispel forever the myth of responsible use,” we ought at

about the moral legitimacy of the use of landmines *per se*.

Why Use Landmines?

The purpose of landmines and the reasons for their effectiveness in war have been clearly articulated elsewhere. Two uses are relevant here. First, landmines reduce the mobility of opponents. Second, landmines are “force multipliers,” meaning they are a factor that increases the effectiveness of military force. What this means is that just about anyone can erect defensive barriers cheaply and effectively. Landmines achieve these ends because they inspire fear. The injuries sustained are particularly brutal in

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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 developments, 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 (ATR): numerical simulation as a tool for developing countermine 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 +1 800 882 8684.

statistics generated by NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], however, are inflated and, more significantly, regurgitated by the media and policymakers without proper fact-checking and research. Some of the over-inflated figures have become so widely used that original sources and methodological data-collection techniques are unknown.⁵

Consequently, “some landmine figures are repeated so often that they are now regarded as fact.”⁶ There are good reasons to question the accuracy of these “facts.” If we don't know how they were gathered, then we can't tell if they are unwarranted extrapolations. If we don't know who conducted the research, then we can't be sure that the research design and interpretation of the data are unbiased.⁷ Concern for landmine victims is laudable, but not if it ignores or abuses the truth in the quest to help.

Lastly, the lack of balance in the debate has allowed the blurring of distinct issues. The ICBL reports on “the problem” as if there were only one.⁸ If there is only one problem, then we need only one solution—theirs.⁹ The real picture has been distorted.

We can begin to clear away the hyperbole by recognizing that the strategy of using photos to promote an anti-landmine agenda is a red herring. No one involved

least to ask him for clarification. When someone like James P. Grant, former Executive Director of UNICEF, claims, “Given the destruction and damage anti-personnel landmines can cause to children and to their development and living environment, arguments in favour of such weapons cannot be **morally justified**”¹⁰ (emphasis added).

We should ask, “Cannot? In what sense?” Why, for instance, would it be worse to accept the risk that some villagers, including children, may be killed or maimed by landmines than to allow an entire village, including all of the children, to be raped, tortured and killed because they lacked the means to defend themselves? Poor inferences, absolutist language and conflations of distinct concerns distort landmine issues.

In order to properly evaluate the moral legitimacy of the use of landmines, one must do more than view vivid photos and selective statistics. Photos and sound bites may prime an audience, but they do not constitute an argument. Those who malign the production and use of landmines seem to have overlooked what the outcome would have been without mines in many troubled regions. While the humanitarian crises resulting from decades' worth of abandoned mines are real, they should not prevent us from conducting an honest, open inquiry

both the short and long term. Witnesses to the trauma are often traumatized themselves, creating a wider demoralizing effect. Hence, much of the strength of landmines lies in their obvious deterrent effect.

In the military, one does not always have the choice to avoid entering a minefield. Part of what we find so upsetting about the civilians who are injured is that they too had no real choice but to enter mined territory, whether compelled by hunger or the lack of understanding to avoid mines. But there are those people who do have a choice, namely aggressors and profiteers. In these cases people may be trying to protect their own territories from aggressors or bandits. For the mines to be effective, the would-be aggressor has to know where mines are in the area, therefore there is little to no risk of injuries sustained by landmines so long as people heed the warning. What follows are examples of contexts in which the impact of the presence of landmines is considerably more complicated than one might otherwise have thought. Although these examples are not sufficient to prove that production and use of landmines is morally justified, they do suggest that our response ought to be more nuanced than proclamations that propose nothing short of a complete ban is remotely justifiable.

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 far 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 additional economic productivity. To make matters worse, mined roads prevent the transport of goods once collected or grown, thereby preventing income and trade.

However, while landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group contained within a confined territory, so too can they be used to protect 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.



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Protecting vulnerable populations from armed forces. Whether or not one believes a line between combatants and non-combatants 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 children and farmers, *viz.*, 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 warrants is education, not vilification. But there are many cases where the choice to use mines was not mistaken; the choice to use mines saved lives. For instance, it was thick belts of landmines that protected thousands of residents in Sarajevo from meeting the same fate as Srebrenicans. 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 afflicted 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 parties who do not wish to be included in conflicts. But 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 cases 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 bandits. Kidnappings associated with the Khmer Rouge received attention 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 villagers who were laying mines to protect themselves from attack and theft by dispersed Khmer Rouge and other bandits.¹¹ 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. Deminers are currently assisted by maps showing where conflicting armies deployed mines. However, their mission is considerably more difficult because not all mines were deployed by military forces. According to Dino Bulsuladzic of the University of Western Australia, “There are zones that were 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 out of fear of being attacked. The minefields of Sarajevo, in reality, are many more than those marked on the maps.”¹² These were civilians using mines to protect themselves while United Nations peacekeepers watched as everything these citizens held dear was being destroyed.

Conclusion

To demonize landmines *per se* is to demonize not only the guerrillas and the oppressive regimes that are effectively judged by their aims and methods anyway. There are people who use mines for their own defense in the longstanding absence of adequate protection from police, the military and even the United Nations. To pretend that landmines do not serve these purposes is to obfuscate the conditions of the vulnerable populations who are compelled to use them to defend themselves when no one else will.

Although people who oppose all landmine use have not caused the acute problems faced by vulnerable communities, I would suggest that the stifling of debate and the willful overlooking of such cases implicates them in terms of skewing our response to these communities. If noncombatants turn to landmines for self-protection, they must be particularly vulnerable. When the self-appointed authorities on the matter fail to acknowledge such cases exist, it makes it sound like there are no such cases, rendering the extent of their vulnerability invisible. And when we pretend landmines never help, we worsen the situation of some communities. Because by denying them recourse to an effective tool, we make them more vulnerable. And by denying ourselves recourse to an effective tool, we make it easier to give ourselves permission to claim that there is nothing we can do either. ♦

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