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A Promise To Our Children

*Making
landmines
and their
consequences
a thing of
the past*

Young children are particularly vulnerable to landmine injuries, as they are naturally curious, physically and socially active, and adventurous.

*by Dr. Charles F. MacCormack
Save The Children*

On May 22, 1999, President Clinton announced a decision on anti-personnel landmines that commits the United States to sign the Ottawa Treaty by the year 2006. With this initiative, Clinton cleared the way for the United States to join the more than 120 nations that already have signed the treaty, which is an international agreement that bans the stockpiling, use, and import and export of anti-personnel landmines. This is welcome news for the children, families and communities whose daily lives are affected by the scourge of landmines.

We at Save the Children urge the administration to sign the Ottawa Treaty. We believe that alternatives to anti-personnel landmines already exist and it is no longer necessary to endanger the lives of millions of the world's children through the use of landmines.

Banning landmines, however, is only one step toward ridding the world of these insidious weapons. We also must focus on the urgent need to eradicate the nearly 100 million landmines that are currently in place, and to address the long-term psychological, social and economic needs of landmine survivors. Clinton recently announced his support of the Demining 2010 Initiative, which calls upon the United States to lead a global campaign to eradicate existing landmines by 2010.

In addition to mine-clearance efforts, the initiative also will address the rehabilitation and economic needs of victims whose lives have been shattered by landmine incidents. Ambassador Karl F. Inderfurth has been appointed to serve as the U.S. Special Representative to the President and the Secretary of State for Global Humanitarian Demining. The United States has expanded its own demining program with an increase in funding from \$68 million to \$77 million in the 1998 fiscal year.

The urgency of the Demining 2010 Initiative cannot be overstated. In the last two decades alone, landmines have killed more than 1 million people, mostly civilians, many of them children. Each year

an estimated 26,000 people are killed or maimed. Young children are particularly vulnerable to landmine injuries, as they are naturally curious, physically and socially active and adventurous. Compared with adult landmine victims, children have higher fatality rates and experience more serious physical damage and permanent disabilities as a result of their injuries.

Save the Children works with communities that are continuously exposed to the threat of anti-personnel landmines. In Afghanistan, one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, Save the Children assists child landmine victims and their families. The program uses participatory games and activities to help children recognize and avoid contact with mines. To date, this ongoing program has reached more than 100,000 children.

Save the Children also is beginning a Social Reintegration Program in Afghanistan that addresses the medical, psychological and social needs of child landmine victims and their families to assist with their recovery from trauma. Ahmed, a 13-year-old Afghan landmine victim, articulates the hopelessness so many

youngsters feel and the challenges they face: "What will happen to my family ... to my mother and father? Why couldn't I have died? It would have been better if the mine had just killed me. Now I am useless and a burden on everyone, including myself."

The plight of children in Afghanistan has recently been documented in a report commissioned by Save the Children and UNICEF. The report, *The Impact of Conflict on Children in Afghanistan*, is based on extensive interviews with 500 Afghan children aged six to 18. It documents the negative consequences of civil strife on children, whose educational, social and economic needs are disrupted by conflict.

We must allow children worldwide to live and play in areas free of landmines and provide them with a sense of hope for their future. As Clinton remarked, "The world's children deserve to walk the earth in safety." Let us follow through on that promise by signing the Ottawa Treaty before 2006 and continuing to strengthen our efforts for survivors of landmines, their families and their children. ■



*Little girl learning to walk with her prosthetic.
Kabul, Afghanistan.
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