

Combating Subterranean Terror

HM Queen Noor makes a plea to rid the world of landmines and the destruction they inflict on civilians and their communities.

by Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan

Over the past 25 years, driving past Jordan Valley mine fields fenced off by barbed wire, visiting with landmine victims, or tallying the grim statistics, I have grieved for the children and adults in the Middle East routinely maimed or killed by these weapons of mass destruction in slow motion. Our region has been called the landmine heartland of the world, with an estimated 50 million mines scarring the earth from Morocco to Afghanistan. Beyond the physical and psychological torture of those who have been injured, or lost loved ones, is the further punishment of land made desolate, lost to productive use, held hostage by the menace of landmines. About 10 percent of Jordan's population lives in areas unable to be worked or planted or traversed because of this subterranean terror.

Landmines impact a range of issues, including peace and conflict resolution, the environment, arms control, economic development, human rights and health. Those of us who campaign to ban landmines are waging a battle not to win a war but to win an enduring peace. War-torn societies can never be rebuilt if people

continue to fear for their lives with every step they take. I believe our cause is just and right, and that the tide of history and world opinion is on our side.

Landmines are increasingly seen as a moral issue for religious communities in the Middle East. In 1998, my late husband His Majesty King Hussein and I convened a conference in Amman to offer an opportunity for religious leaders, landmine survivors, doctors and rehabilitation specialists alike to consider how to stem the mass suffering inflicted by landmines. At this the First Middle East Conference on Landmine Injury and Rehabilitation, sponsored by the Landmine Survivors Network and governments of Norway and Canada, religious leaders raised their voices to condemn the manufacture and use of mines as being contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the Koran. Among others, Shiite leader Abdel Majid Al-Khoi said that "the use of landmines is a crime and an evil" and that the clauses of the Mine Ban Treaty should be viewed as "religious rights." Sunni leader Sheikh Eiz Aldin Al Khatib Al Timemi concurred, "Landmines are against Islam, and therefore must be prohibited, and their production ceased." From a Christian perspective, Monsignor Ra'uf

Najjar said, "Man has been attacking the lives of his brethren by planting landmines, thus committing evils against them."

Unfortunately, these higher ideals do not seem to reach those who wage war. Because they are cheap and easily obtained, landmines are frequently used by informal militias and guerillas in local conflicts. These groups are more likely to turn mines against civilians, and less likely to keep records of where they have been planted. Mines are often placed in rural areas explicitly to shatter the morale and integrity of family, clan, tribe and village. Land shifts, rain falls, winds blow the sand, and the mines shift and move and roll as well. There is no tracking them. Maybe cruelest of all, even in areas where people crave peace, these insidious leftovers make rebuilding communities and trust nearly impossible. They are reminders of the past conflict and a threat to future progress.

The skirmishes and battles may end, but the mines remain. How ironic, that with brand new, billion-dollar weapons on every arms dealer's wish list, there is still no high-tech solution for safely removing a \$3.00 mine from the ground. The most reliable technique remains a courageous deminer lying on his stomach, prodding the earth with a stick.

More and more military leaders are admitting that landmines are simply not militarily decisive. In 1995, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent commissioned a military study of the

effectiveness of landmines. Examining 26 conflicts since 1940, the study found that antipersonnel mines played no significant role in the outcome of any of them. More than 50 high-ranking military figures from 20 countries have endorsed the study's conclusion: that the appalling suffering and waste caused by landmines far outweighs their military utility. I too am convinced. My own two sons serve in the Jordanian Army. I would not speak out against landmines if I thought banning them would put them in greater danger. I want them, as well as all Jordanians, kept safe from this military litter.

142 countries, including Jordan, have joined the historic 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. This remarkable arms control agreement also provides a detailed humanitarian framework which pledges governments to ban the weapon, destroy stockpiles, demine infected land and provide relief to victims. Our goal is to raise awareness about the cruel and senseless devastation wrought by landmines in every corner of the globe. If more people become aware more governments will join the Treaty. Universal acceptance is my objective.

And so, our challenge remains: What to do? How do we address the subterranean cancer eating our land and picking off our citizens, one by one? How do we reach out to the 51 non-ban countries and convince them to destroy their stockpiles of antipersonnel mines?

First, we must build awareness and support for the Mine Ban Treaty. Jordan was one of the first Middle Eastern States to join the Treaty in 1998. King Hussein despised the landmine scourge on our country and in 1993 set a goal to demine the Jordan Valley by the year 2000. Sadly, he did not live to see this goal realized. The Valley is still not completely cleared, but heroic Jordanian deminers from the Royal Corps of Engineers are making fast progress. We will soon clear the Jordan Valley of some 220,000 antipersonnel and anti-tank mines. Our

most holy ground will no longer be desecrated by mines, and pilgrims who wish to walk in the paths of the prophets can do so in safety near the Baptism site of Jesus and other landscapes sacred to the world's major religions. It is my hope that one day we will have a holy land entirely free of landmines and conflict. We are proud to say that Jordan has led the way for the rest of our region, and currently, we are in full compliance with all the terms of, and the timetable set by, the Mine Ban Treaty.

Secondly, we must give aid to the victims; or rather, the survivors, of landmines. The Ban Treaty is the first international treaty with a provision urging states to provide meaningful assistance to the victims, including rehabilitation and opportunities for social and economic reintegration. This will help rebuild our wounded communities. In Jordan, we have established the first amputee support network in the Middle East—a model of survivors helping survivors reclaim their lives. In my travels to mined countries, I have witnessed the courage of survivors, whether African, American, Arab, European or Asian, who have refused to be bowed by this weapon. I have met disabled mothers who work incessantly to care for their families. I've seen amputees who have been trained in computers, agriculture, motor repair, chicken-raising or carpentry, who can continue to make a living and support their families. We owe it to them to do all we can to make their lives whole in a way their broken bodies can no longer be.

I cannot sit with every survivor and try to ease their suffering. But I can remember them, and I can refuse to look away from their reality. Together, civil society and governments can help improve the conditions to help survivors reclaim lives and land.

"We must create peace. We need a sense of security in our private and national lives. We need hope for our children; we need trust with our neighbors; we need

opportunities for our development and faith in the moral conscience of the world and in our own destiny." -King Hussein

And so we pursue those countries in our region and in the world that have not joined the global movement to ban landmines. We provide aid to the victims, and we vow to remember those who have died. No one deserves to suffer for conflicts long past. We strive for peace, for community, and for a firm commitment to ensure security and well-being among all our citizens. I can think of no greater gift to the future than to make a giant step toward peace by rendering safe the steps of everyone on the planet. Now is the time to end the curse of landmines, forever. ■

Biography

Her Majesty Queen Noor is Patron and Honorary Chair of Landmine Survivors Network, Advisor to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a member of the Advisory Boards of Adopt a Minefield and Marshall Legacy Institute, and a Patron of the Mineseeeker Foundation. To learn more about Her Majesty's landmine-related work and read past statements on the issue, please visit the Internet at: www.landminesurvivors.org/heritage/queennoor.php

**All photos courtesy of Her Majesty Queen Noor.*

(L-R) HM Queen Noor makes an historic visit to Bethany, the recently demined baptismal site of Jesus on the Jordan River.

HM Queen Noor consoles a landmine survivor at the First Middle East Conference on Landmine Injury and Rehabilitation, Amman, July 1998.



HM Queen Noor with deminers from the Jordanian Royal Corps of Engineers.

