Editorial: Why won't the US sign a land mine treaty?

by NCR Editorial Staff

Supporters of the first global arms treaty to emerge from civil society gathered last month in Maputo, Mozambique, to assess its progress. Their work should hearten peacemakers everywhere. It sends chills down the spines of military planners. Generals, it seems, don't like civilians telling them how to do their jobs.

Land mines are one of the most indiscriminate military devices. These inexpensive and mobile battle weapons came into their own in the industrialized 20th century. Soldiers buried tens of millions in fields across Cambodia, Laos, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Somalia and Angola, to name some countries. Wars end and soldiers return home, but mines stay, buried inches below the soil, awaiting victims.

Recklessness, arrogance and a void of human compassion characterize the strategies that have laid these mines and left them behind.

Beyond the immediate human toll -- some 25,000 fatalities annually in the early 1990s -- land mines have thwarted development, burdened health care providers, and rendered vast tracts of land uninhabitable.

Outraged peace advocates decided they had had enough, and came together in 1993 in Ottawa, Ontario, to do something about it. Representatives from 1,400 nonprofit organizations gathered under the umbrella of a group called the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, drawing up the Ottawa Treaty, also known as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention or the Mine Ban Treaty. The treaty called for the end to the development, stockpiling, transfer and use of land mines. It also required nations that signed on to clear land mines and assist victims.

The Ottawa Treaty would go into effect once it secured the ratification of 40 nation states. The movement
caught fire, especially among the poorer nations, usually the ones whose citizens were taking the heaviest toll. The treaty became international law on March 1, 1999.

Never before had a group of ordinary people, working within nonprofit organizations, forced a treaty upon the nations of the world.

American Jody Williams and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines were recognized for their efforts as co-recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

From the outset, the largest manufacturers of land mines, including China, Russia and the United States, refused to sign. They have resisted even as 161 nations have added their support, more than double the number of early signers, which stood at 71. (The Vatican, for its part, was an early treaty supporter.)

Treaty representatives met in Maputo for its third international review. The mood was upbeat. Reports cited historic gains. Consider that in just 15 years, the treaty has led to a virtual halt in the global production of these weapons and a drastic reduction in their deployment. When the treaty was first imagined, land mines spotted fields in almost every corner of the earth. Since the treaty, some 47 million mines have been destroyed and mine clearance programs have spread. Reported mine fatalities, meanwhile, have fallen to fewer than 4,000 per year, a fraction of pre-treaty levels.

Major challenges remain, as more than 10 million land mines are stockpiled, massive areas of land are still polluted with the devices, and tens of thousands of victims and their families have not yet received adequate support. Nevertheless, the historic treaty represents a major advance for the human family.

It's shameful and a bit bewildering that the United States refuses to sign. The U.S. was an early leading advocate. President Bill Clinton called the land mine problem "a global tragedy," saying, "In all probability, land mines kill more children than soldiers, and they keep killing after wars are over."

But he decided not to sign the treaty, reportedly under heavy pressure from the Pentagon, which did not want to give up that option. The Bush administration did nothing to advance the treaty.

In a sad and ironic twist, President Barack Obama announced the U.S. would not sign the land mine treaty just weeks after he joined the ranks of Nobel Peace Prize laureates in 2009. It apparently did not take long for Obama to buckle under the pressures of his military planners.

It also needs to be said, however, that while Washington has not signed, it has followed the treaty's key requirements, including its no-use, no-production and no-trade provisions. The last time the U.S. used land mines was in the first Gulf War in January 1991. The U.S. has also provided more funds than any other nation in efforts to clear land mine fields.

Speaking in Maputo in June, U.S. Ambassador to Mozambique Douglas Griffiths said the U.S. is pursuing solutions that would allow it to accede to the treaty, though it continues to reserve the right to use its current stockpile anywhere it feels it must until the mines expire. This was encouraging -- but far short of enough.

The question that needs to be asked is this: Are we, as a nation, incapable of renouncing weapons that kill mostly children and other innocent civilians?
The Pentagon cites the need to use land mines as a deterrent along the North and South Korea border. But does a nation that spends tens of billions annually on military procurements really have to depend on these weapons of war? Land-mine opponents say that the U.S. signing the treaty would substantially strengthen it. Why the resistance?

It seems plausible, as some treaty advocates have stated, that the treaty's unique evolution is viewed as a reason -- possibly the major reason -- that our military resists being part of it. The top brass fears that giving up land mines could encourage similar treaty efforts by human rights groups to seek bans on other controversial weapons. Land mines today, drones tomorrow?

Meanwhile, the treaty has already spawned at least one child. It's called the Convention on Cluster Munitions, an international treaty that prohibits the use, transfer and stockpiling of cluster bombs, another indiscriminate explosive weapon that scatters bomblets over a wide area. The convention was adopted in May 2008, opened for signatures in December 2008, and entered into force in August 2010. As of September 2013, 108 states have signed.

And, oh, yes, Washington has refused to sign.


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