

Afghanistan offers hope in mine-ravaged region

(Friday 26 March 2004 Kabul, Afghanistan) Today the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) congratulated Afghanistan for its commitment to the ban on antipersonnel landmines and pushed for increased efforts to promote the landmine prohibition amongst the country's Asian neighbours. The 1997 Nobel Peace Prize-winning campaign is in Kabul for its regional meeting, opened today by Afghan Vice-President Mr Amin Arsalah.

"Despite steady progress made on the ground, Afghanistan remains one of the world's most mine-contaminated countries, but it is also a leader of the global effort to eradicate this weapon," said Ms. Mary Wareham, Global Research Coordinator for the ICBL's Landmine Monitor initiative. "This leadership is especially important in Asia, where antipersonnel mines are still laid, used and produced with impunity." Afghanistan joined the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, or Ottawa Convention, on 11 September 2002 and is now working vigorously to implement the agreement. Just under half of the Asia-Pacific region, and very few Central Asian countries, have joined the Mine Ban Treaty. Only two of Afghanistan's neighbours are party to the Mine Ban Treaty: Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Photos by John Rodsted

"In Afghanistan, we need sustained, multi-year funding to help us maintain our high rate of clearance and to address the needs of landmine survivors," said Mr. Shohab Hakimi, chairperson of the Afghan Campaign to Ban Landmines. "We hope that next week's donor conference in Berlin recognizes the need for continued support for mine action in our country's reconstruction plans."

Donations for mine action in the country have quadrupled in recent years, and as a result the goal of a mine-free Afghanistan is within reach in years, not decades. Landmines contaminate all but two of Afghanistan's provinces and are scattered over an area of more than 780 square kilometres, including towns and villages, grazing land and roads. To date some 260 square kilometres have been cleared.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) still kill and injure some 100 people each month. According to the Landmine Monitor Report 2003, many mine casualties in Afghanistan die before they reach medical facilities. Of last year's recorded casualties, around half were children and 89% civilians. Landmines also continue to take their toll on peacekeepers and soldiers. "We believe that sporadic instances of antipersonnel mine use continue in Afghanistan," said Wareham. "This underlines the urgent need for domestic legislation to punish such activities, as well as the importance of outreach to all the regions in Afghanistan to encourage adherence to the landmine ban."

Locating and destroying stockpiled antipersonnel mines, in line with Kabul's obligations under the Mine Ban Treaty, is another challenge. The ICBL urges support from regional leaders, private individuals and others who may hold stocks of antipersonnel mines. Stock destruction is an important preventative measure, since demolishing the weapon eliminates possible use and casualties. Ceremonial landmine destructions have taken place in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Kandahar, and on 25 March, the Ministry of Defence melted down casings of POMZ landmines for conversion into manhole covers.

Regionally, several significant governments have not joined the agreement, including recent mine users Burma (Myanmar), India, Pakistan, and Nepal and mine producers such as China, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. China keeps the world's largest stock of some 110 million antipersonnel mines and India and Pakistan, with the fifth and sixth largest stockpiles, hold an estimated 6 million and 4-5 million respectively.

Worldwide a total of 150 countries have joined the convention which prohibits all use, production, trade and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines. The U.S.A., one of the 44 countries that remain outside of the treaty, recently sparked criticism when it announced it was abandoning plans to eradicate antipersonnel mines and join the Mine Ban Treaty.

The Kabul conference is one of many events taking place in the lead-up to the 2004 Nairobi Summit for a Mine Free World, the Mine Ban Treaty's first review conference in November this year.