

Campaign deplures inaction by Cuba and United States on banning landmines

At the opening of a regional conference on landmines, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), 1997 Nobel Peace Laureate, commended governments for their progress in eradicating antipersonnel mines and expressed its deep disappointment at the recent policy reversal by the United States rejecting the notion of a total ban on the weapon.

“We are very pleased with the significant steps taken by every government in this region to eradicate antipersonnel mines with two major exceptions,” said Gustavo Oliveira Vieira, Coordinator of the Brazilian Campaign Against Landmines. “Cuba’s disinterest in eliminating this weapon and the recent rejection by the United States of the mine ban are disturbing developments that we deplore as they undercut the tremendous strides taken by others in the region,” he said.

Cuba and the United States remain the only countries in the region that have not yet joined the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, a historic agreement prohibiting the use, production, transfer, and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines. On 27 February 2004, the Bush Administration announced its policy on landmines, which rejects the country’s long-held goal of becoming part of the global ban of antipersonnel mines.

“We are thrilled that 1.2 million antipersonnel mines have rapidly and safely been eliminated from the arsenals of countries in the region,” said Charlie Avendaño of Mines Action Canada and the ICBL’s Research Coordinator for the Americas. “We urge Guyana to follow the commitments made by Colombia and Uruguay to complete destruction of their stockpiled mines ahead of the treaty’s First Review Conference at the end of this year,” he added. “We’re discouraged that Brazil has chosen to retain so many mines for training.”

Eleven States Parties have completed destruction of their stockpiled antipersonnel mines (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Perú, and Venezuela). Brazil is retaining 16,545 antipersonnel mines for training and research purposes as permitted under Article 3 of the Mine Ban Treaty, the highest of any State Party in the world.

“We are deeply disturbed by the worsening mine problem in Colombia, where there is no demining underway and where mine survivors face huge challenges in accessing appropriate care and support,” said Jeannette Perry de Saravia of Colombia’s Center for Integrated Rehabilitation. “Elsewhere in the region, medical care, rehabilitation, and job training for civilian landmine survivors is also inadequate and those services that exist are far away from mine-affected areas and hardly accessible for many survivors,” she added.

Colombia remains the only country in the region where antipersonnel mines are being newly laid by the FARC and ELN guerrilla groups, as well as paramilitary groups.

Humanitarian mine clearance operations were initiated in Chile earlier this month and are on-going in Ecuador, Perú, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. Costa Rica declared itself mine-free in December 2002 and Honduras is believed to be very close to attaining this status.

ICBL members from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, and the United States are participating in a two-day regional conference on mine action in Quito, hosted by the government of Ecuador in cooperation with the Organization of American States and the Canadian government. The conference is reviewing regional progress in implementation of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, as well as discussing goals and objectives in the lead up to the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World, the Mine Ban Treaty’s First Review Conference, which is scheduled to open in Nairobi, Kenya on 29 November 2004.