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THE POLITICS OF LANDMINES: AN INTRODUCTION

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In the last few years, landmines have become a high-profile issue for governments and organisations around the world, and perhaps deservedly so. Landmine contamination affects more than 60 nations, with consequences on both the macro- and micro- level. Southern Africa is a perfect example of the toll landmines take on a country, as every step in post-conflict recovery and development is constrained in some way by mines. However, efforts to remove landmines in Southern Africa are having varying measures of success.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Millions of antipersonnel and antitank mines litter Southern Africa, with most estimates deeming the region the most-heavily mined in the world. Decades of colonial struggle and civil conflict left Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe in particular, with minefields around their borders and scattered throughout the country. During civil wars, factions would often mine infrastructure and economic assets, villages, military positions and encampments as a 'denial and defence' technique. However, in the chaotic atmosphere of domestic fighting, international laws about the strict military use and marking of landmines were not heeded. Instead, mines became a weapon of terror, easily deployed against non-combatants and emplaced in prime civilian areas such as river beds, schools, health centres and agricultural fields. Consequently vast stretches of road, land, bridges and rivers are contaminated today by mines that were neither marked properly nor removed when the fighting ceased.

Mines present an especially cruel weapon for civilians for several reasons, most notably their effectiveness. Landmine technology has advanced dramatically throughout the twentieth century, with landmines

becoming scientifically advanced, easily dispersed and inexpensive tools of destruction. The advent of microchips and durable plastic has meant that landmines can be undetectable and are capable of remaining armed in the ground for years or decades. Some so-called 'smart' mines are intended to turn themselves off and disarm after a certain time period. However, even 'smart' mines are not infallible. More importantly, no mine can tell the difference between a military target, and a civilian who is looking for firewood. The result is an indiscriminate and highly effective killer, which continues to inflict as many as 2000 casualties per month around the world.

WHICH BAN?

In response to the crisis that landmines present, the movement for a total ban on landmine production and use has grown by leaps and bounds. However, even within the community of nations supporting a ban, dissent exists about how, and how far, to proceed.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines has mobilised governments and NGOs around the globe to push for a comprehensive prohibition on mines in the near future, believing that the humanitarian and warfare laws governing use are no longer sufficient or relevant. In response to these efforts, Canada took up the lead position on banning landmines at an international conference in Ottawa at the end of 1996. Canada called upon the nations of the world to completely proscribe use, production and sale of mines by joining a new treaty that will be opened for signature in Ottawa in December 1997. This track of negotiations, referred to as the 'Ottawa Process', is working in tandem with unilateral bans by certain countries, including South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

However, not all countries are equally desirous of a ban in the near future, if at all. Primary landmine producers such as China and Russia, are opposed to any ban requiring an immediate cessation of production, both for national security reasons and in order to protect their manufacturing sector. These states would prefer a period of transition to phase out production and to convert factories to the manufacture of other items.

Previously a landmine producer, the United States also wants a global ban and has a unilateral one in place already. However, Washington is not part of the Ottawa Process because the major landmine producers have refused to take part. Without the participation of Russia and China, according to this opinion, any ban would be hollow. Hence, the US and others are pushing for the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament (CD) to create a ban with the full participation of members Russia and China. The CD process is not without its detractors either, however.

Critics feel the CD process is too lengthy and political - even voting on an agenda can be a hotly contested topic - and will not address landmines in the near future. In many ways, this argument has been borne out as country after country makes statements in the CD claiming that they want to move forward on a landmine ban and a special committee should be established. However, countries such as India and Pakistan assert that other items on the agenda, including global nuclear disarmament, predate the landmine issue and should receive first consideration. Most observers accept that any discussion of nuclear issues will take years and be rife with difficulty as the CD acts by consensus. Thus, even if landmines can jump to the front of the agenda queue, the need for consensus could still further stymie progress. Consequently, the CD has been hampered in its landmine work and the United States is working on agreements with Russia outside both of these fora.

Finally, some states, such as Australia, and military personnel around the world, feel mines are still a valid defence mechanism for the protection of large territories. For once an outcast in the arms control world, Australia has grave concerns about protecting its territory - nearly the size of the United States - with a military force of less than 25,000 personnel and no landmines. Apart from these conventional military concerns, questions exist about whether a paper treaty could limit landmine use during a civil war. For example, if a new civil war were to break out in Mozambique, would a rebel movement really adhere to the sitting government's pledge to forswear landmines? In this type of conflict, landmines represent an inexpensive force multiplier. Signatures

on a treaty may be less relevant when an armed struggle is underway.

MINE CLEARANCE AND HUMANITARIAN POLITICS

Aside from a ban preventing future landmine usage, the primary method by which Southern Africa - and the rest of the world - can recover from landmine contamination is by removing the mines already in place. Regardless of the debates over military utility and the rule of law concerning landmines, consensus exists that the mines already laid must be removed. Until mine clearance has begun to make the soil safe for bulldozers and ploughs, the business of development cannot flourish. On the other hand, due to concerns about the timing and universality of a potential ban, there is a perception in some quarters that mine clearance should be the uppermost priority: de-mining addresses the tangible problem, while a ban may never be totally effective, even one signed within the next few months.

In large part, mine clearance is a laborious process using Second World War vintage equipment, which has not evolved to meet the challenge of today's landmines. The most thorough methods of de-mining still rely on manual techniques using a metal detector and a prodding implement, or using the more rudimentary hoe to slowly excavate the ground. Metal detectors present problems in that they find every piece of metal in the ground, harmless or not, and consume a large amount of time, labour, and attention. In addition, metal detectors cannot function where the ground itself is too metallic, as is the case in parts of Mozambique. When the soil is contaminated this way, de-miners on their knees use hoes to dig up the earth in front of them, centimetres at a time.

In addition to the technological challenges of de-mining, mine clearance has recently taken on political overtones, further complicating the picture. Unfortunately, money and resources may lie at the heart of this 'humanitarian' concern

Throughout Mozambique and Angola, de-mining is conducted by both commercial companies and NGOs, usually acting in support of larger development projects. NGOs are widely seen to be disinterested in the business of mine clearance, which is in fact a very lucrative arena. NGOs such as Norwegian People's Aid, the Halo Trust and the Mines Advisory Group are among the primary actors in Southern Africa and mostly utilise manual mine clearance methods. These NGOs, while maintaining expatriates at the highest levels of leadership, hire indigenous people as de-miners, supervisors and for some

management positions. Hence, while their de-mining projects are contributing to the greater development picture, their employment of locals also builds the workforce and economy. Due to these benefits and perceived impartiality, donor nations that fund mine clearance feel comfortable supporting NGOs in this field.

Commercial companies in Southern Africa, on the other hand, represent entirely different issues and questions, regardless of their de-mining skills. Mine clearance firms such as South Africa's Mechem and Zimbabwe's Special Clearance Services are often hired due to their efficiency in certain types of de-mining. However, these firms bring their own personnel to the site and operate as commercially driven businesses, which causes donors to be wary. Moreover, Mechem - a part of Denel - is held by many in the NGO community to be unworthy of de-mining contracts because the South African Government and Armscor once manufactured the landmines that now litter the region. This so-called 'double-dipping' means that Mechem made money once from the sale of landmines, and is now profiting again from their removal. Unfortunately, some donor nations refuse to hire Mechem for this reason. As a result, commercial de-miners are more frequently employed by other commercial firms working on road and rail projects, for example.

Finally, the United Nations conducts mine clearance work in both Angola and Mozambique. For these programmes, the politics involved in de-mining often have little to do with the capabilities or goals of the programme. In Mozambique, for example, one of the initial challenges the de-mining programme encountered was fighting off the bad reputation the UN as a whole has acquired with several member states, in order to gain credibility and funding. Because the UN de-mining programme relies on donor contributions and not the UN budget, powerful political opposition - such as from the US - to all UN activities, held up progress. On the other hand, UN de-mining has also been hindered as a result of its own bureaucracies and in-fighting, which further weaken donor confidence.

Separate from these political concerns on the part of donors, host governments too have political concerns about the firms conducting de-mining in their country, both as a function of their involvement and due to the money involved.

In Mozambique and Angola, mine clearance projects started during the post-conflict transition period, before either government was firmly established or had created a national oversight/coordination body for de-mining. Consequently, by the time government organisations began to take an interest in mine

removal, de-miners had already set up shop and in Mozambique, had become *de facto* mine action coordinators in their regions of operation. For example, the Halo Trust and NPA are now held up as the mine experts in their respective regions, and thus are viewed by many donors as the appropriate recipients of funds for any action in that region. However, this leaves national governments out of the picture in several significant ways.

First, national governments, having arrived late on the scene, have very little input into which regions are cleared by the de-miners. Only in cases where operators have good relations with local administrations, does government have a role. Some donors have their own interests or areas of historical concern, and they de-mine regardless of government ideas. Hence, any national strategy or priority system for de-mining is an empty effort.

Moreover, as these governments have not yet found their feet fully, they have to rely on the mine surveys and information provided by the de-miners. While each operator may have detailed experience in its region, this process does raise the issue of whether the same organisation that conducts the research should receive the funding for mine clearance. Estimates and budgets could be padded for an organisation's self-interest and longevity. In the case of Angola and Mozambique, projects were firmly underway before government could institute any review process or measure of transparency for contracts, and maintaining the status quo is often preferable for the actors involved.

In addition, governments have concerns about the techniques employed by the firms used. Because so much money is involved in de-mining projects, many new companies that are touting their de-mining skills have a limited track record. National governments would like to see some form of standardisation or certification developed in order to prevent serious breaches of safety or fraudulent ineffectiveness by mine removal firms. These concerns are valid not only for commercial companies. Some NGOs involved in de-mining do not allow external quality control/quality assurance checks, meaning government must simply take their word that a piece of land is safe. One de-mining NGO has been asked to cease operations and leave the country where it was working due to safety problems. Another NGO is being tried for illegal importation and transport of explosives.

Finally, the donor-government nexus is not free from strife or politics. As mentioned above, some donors fund de-mining ventures based on their own national economic and development concerns, or based on historical involvement in a region of the country.

While this is done nominally for better oversight into the selection and activities of the mine clearance operator, it has serious implications for the host country. For example, in Mozambique and Angola, the government structures involved in de-mining have been weak or underfunded for several years, limiting their capabilities to manage and co-ordinate a national strategy for de-mining. Conversely, donors were eager to begin clearance and started supporting de-mining right away, regardless of the government's absence. Now however, the government bodies are trying to get on their feet but find they have little authority; donors enjoyed their previous autonomy and are not eager to relinquish it.

Consequently, after years of exclusion from the process, government's management and decision-making skills admittedly are limited. So, while donors complain that they cannot work with government because it has no capabilities, donor avoidance did nothing to endow it with any skills or funding. In Mozambique, donor refusal to fund the National De-mining Commission (CND) directly has meant a lack of office equipment and salaries for almost the first two years of its existence. Rumours in the donor community about conflicts of interest within the CND, and real personality conflicts in Angola have not helped. Hence, operators and donors currently maintain local areas of autonomy regarding de-mining priorities and practices in these countries, which reinforces governments' wariness of the process.

SOME CONFUSION, BUT PROGRESS, IN MOZAMBIQUE AND ANGOLA

Despite all of these political machinations and concerns, whether based on personality or resources, de-mining in Southern Africa is moving forward. Mine clearance operations in Mozambique and Angola are moving steadily forward, either as a testament to the donors or determined developers. As a result, areas of land and infrastructure are being returned to communities and recovery is underway. Tackling mines need not be the centuries-long process pessimists warn of, and for the real beneficiaries of de-mining - the local people - this is more important than any political gamesmanship.

ADDENDUM

On 18 August, the United States changed course and became a participant in the Ottawa Process as well as the CD negotiations. The same day, landmine ban activists levelled charges that Washington would simply use its new position to force alterations to the proposed Ottawa treaty and would slow the process down. With the final negotiations taking place 1-19 September in Oslo, the character of US involvement and the final treaty draft will soon be known.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.