

## The Landmine Web

By Col. Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | December 2004

With the double whammy of the four-day Thanksgiving weekend and the start of the Christmas shopping crush, little wonder that most people missed another very important November date: the five-year review conference on the treaty banning anti-personnel landmines that opened November 28 in Nairobi, Kenya.

But as the conference runs five days, it's not too late to "talk turkey."

Officially titled the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction" and informally known as the "Ottawa Convention," the treaty's main provisions include:

- ending all use, development, production (or other acquisition means), stockpiling, retaining, or transferring of anti-personnel mines;
- destroying those mines in national stockpiles within four years of the treaty entering into force (which occurred in 1999);
- clearing mines (if any) on national territory and/or providing assistance to other countries in removing anti-personnel landmines, with a goal to eliminate all such devices by 2009;
- educating affected populations about risks from landmines, providing rehabilitative care for mine survivors, and aiding their reintegration into community life; and
- enacting appropriate national legislation to implement the Convention.

As of the conference's opening, 144 countries had ratified the treaty (Ethiopia being the latest), eight more had signed but not ratified, and 42 had refused to sign. The latter two groups present interesting country "clusters" that revolve around three major powers: China, Russia, and the United States. And while these three are either at war or in strained relationships, the other 47 non-ratifiers are not all similarly encumbered. Yes, a few could be categorized as international pariahs, but many of the Pacific Island nations among these 47 are more in danger from rising ocean levels than from the threat of invasion that might tempt them to employ landmines.

It may seem a function of size and geography that most of those that have not signed border on and thereby fall within the sphere of influence of China and Russia. But in the broader

view recent history, there looms the unmistakable presence of an *eminence grise*—like the unseen quasar in a dual star system—that exerts great power: the United States.

What follows is a look at the 39 countries in four "clusters" that have not signed the Ottawa Convention and the eight countries in one "cluster" that have signed but not ratified it. Highlights of U.S. relationships with these countries are included to suggest the level of diffidence of these countries to U.S. policy—i.e., whether a country regards as "worth it" opposing U.S. pronouncements and practices.

### The China Cluster

China's orbit touches landlocked Mongolia; North and South Korea; the high Himalayan Mountain nations of Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Pakistan; and the adjacent triad of Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar (Burma).

a. Among these ten countries, just one—Mongolia—is free from actual or potential strife with its neighbors, China and Russia. Pleading "national security" due to its "vast territory, long borders, and scarce population," Mongolia declined to join the Ottawa Convention until it obtained "other means of protection." U.S. interest in Mongolia, while muted (diplomatic relations began in 1987), originally revolved in part around petroleum, which from Mongolia's perspective would have brought much-needed foreign investment and a U.S. presence—the "other means of protection." However, proposals discussed in 1998 to explore for oil and to build a trans-Mongolian pipeline linking Russia's oil fields with northern China never materialized. In 2004, a UK-based firm reported finding petroleum deposits of higher quality and quantity than previously discovered.

b. The two Koreas, separated by a still heavily landmined demilitarized zone, coexist uneasily under an armistice and with a continued U.S. military presence 51 years after fighting ended. For its part, China has been instrumental as a mediator in keeping alive the "six-party" dialogue on the North's nuclear weapons stance. But again, the U.S. clearly is driving the

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dialogue's course by both its formal position in the talks and uncompromising speeches and interviews—all of which fuel tensions in East Asia. This stand-off may become more heated in a second Bush administration.

c. Nepal, beset by a large-scale insurgency, has unresolved refugee issues with Bhutan, although these pale beside the potential for nuclear war between India and Pakistan should the current moves toward improving relations falter. The U.S. is aiding Nepal against the Maoist insurgents, but the main U.S. interests in the area are preventing a renewed India-Pakistan conflict that might turn nuclear and Pakistan's continued cooperation against Taliban and al-Qaida remnants along the Paksitan-Afghanistan border.

d. Myanmar (Burma), situated between rivals India and China, is perhaps the most enigmatic country that remains outside the Convention. At war with as many as 15 armed rebel groups, virtually all parties use landmines. Moreover, the government, which regards the Ottawa Convention as too sweeping, is accused of forcing civilians across suspected rebel minefields to "clear" the terrain. The U.S. opposition to the ruling junta, however, seems only marginally concerned with halting such inhumane actions. Rather, Washington has opted to highlight the junta's refusal to adhere to the 1990 election results, the continued detention of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi, and the growing drug trade emanating from the country. U.S. sanctions, first imposed in 1997 and strengthened in July 2004, have had little impact to date on the junta: as one scholar noted, there is no such thing as a hungry general.

The two points of contemporary positive engagement with the generals are a one million dollar allocation by Washington to fight HIV/AIDS in Burma and the continuing search for the remains of U.S. military personnel killed in Burma in World War II.

As in Myanmar, a major aspect of U.S.-Vietnam relations is recovery of war dead remains. Vietnam, which saw landmines widely used during World War II and the post-war conflicts with France and the U.S., cites "national defense" as its reason for not signing the Ottawa Convention. The U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations have supported demining activities in Vietnam as well as in Laos, the other non-signatory state in this cluster. Except for its role in the international drug trade, Laos largely has remained outside U.S. concern since the Vietnam War ended. Interestingly, Laos, unlike its neighbors, seems to be moving toward acceding to the treaty.

On a broader note, of the 15 countries still producing or able to resume landmine production rapidly, eight—more

than half—are in the China cluster: China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, South Korea, and Vietnam. And of the approximately 200,000,000 landmines still in stockpiles worldwide, China's holdings are estimated at 110,000,000.

## The Russia Cluster

China also has a long border—and a history of strife—with Russia, the second major non-signatory of the Convention. There are three Russia-dominated groups of countries not party to the Ottawa Convention.

a. None of the countries in the Central Asia group of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan is directly at war (although they do have "terrorist" movements). All are under authoritarian leaders, and all proved receptive (for a price) to U.S. requests for overflight rights and basing and logistics support in the 2001 U.S. overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

b. This Central Asian group is tied to the "Caucasus" group of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia by reason of petroleum deposits or export routes. Georgia is battling secession sentiments and fending off Russian incursions against Chechen insurgents, while Armenia and Azerbaijan remain at odds over Nagorno-Karabakh. Landmines have been and are being used in all areas, and will continue to be an unknown hazard to pipeline development until conflicts in the area move from battlefields to negotiating tables for resolution. The U.S. appetite for oil makes such resolution important.

c. The third grouping—Finland and Latvia—are countries that only recently escaped from the Soviet empire or effective domination by the giant to the east. What is noteworthy here is that as soon as Latvia and the two other Baltic states officially joined the U.S.-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), four NATO aircraft arrived to patrol the Baltic skies—against whom, one might wonder.

Interestingly, only Russia among these nine countries produces anti-personnel landmines.

## The U.S. "Islamic" Cluster

The last major concentration of states that have not signed the Ottawa Convention stretches from a restive North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Morocco) through a long-running, reciprocal "terror" conflict among a Middle East trio (Israel, Lebanon, Syria) to a full-scale, high casualty insurgency that touches the entire oil-rich Persian Gulf (Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab

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Emirates, Bahrain). In all, 13 countries are involved—14 with the U.S.—which must be included as it is Israel's patron and has 140,000 troops in Iraq fighting a bitter insurgency that features the wide use of ersatz landmines—the improvised explosive device or IED.

At least three of these countries—Egypt, Iran, and Iraq—produce landmines. In March 2004, the White House disavowed the pledge by President Clinton that the U.S. would cease using landmines by 2006 if a suitable substitute were developed. Instead, the current administration says it “unconditionally” will stop using non-self neutralizing anti-vehicular and anti-personnel landmines by December 31, 2010 and will destroy its stockpile of non-detectable (non-metallic) mines. In the interim, the U.S. is counted as a landmine producer by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL).

It is also noteworthy that, when the U.S. is counted, this group constitutes fully one third of the countries that have not signed the Ottawa Convention. The fact that the U.S. is deeply entrenched in the affairs of many of these countries, has fought two wars with Iraq in the past dozen years, and has more than 160,000 troops ashore and afloat in the region, keeps tensions at a boil.

### The “Island Cluster” Plus Two

Of the eight remaining holdouts, four—Micronesia, Tonga, Palau, and Tuvalu—are Pacific island countries heavily dependent on the United States. Cuba, the private U.S. nemesis, is another island, but one with memories of both a successful (1898) and unsuccessful (1961) U.S. invasion (plus enduring U.S. control of Guantanamo Bay). Understandably, Cuban authorities are reluctant to give up what they see as a defensive weapon, even though they reportedly have removed landmines from the Guantanamo perimeter. Cuba is also a landmine producer.

Sri Lanka, another island, is still negotiating with the rebel Tamil Tigers in an effort to end that island's bloody insurgency (which India tried, unsuccessfully, to resolve). Until the government resolves internal squabbles so it can turn to renewing talks with the rebel Tigers (which has its own schisms), demining will probably will not go far. The U.S. interest, other than humanitarian, is unclear, although when the U.S. Senate ratified a tax treaty with Sri Lanka in March 2004, Treasury Secretary Jack Snow termed Sri Lanka “an important trading partner in the developing world.”

Like other Asian countries, Singapore, perched on the end of the Malay Peninsula, cites the right of national defense

as its rationale for not acceding to the Ottawa Convention. The fact that Singapore is one of the 15 landmine producers may also be a factor in its position. But it has supported all UN General Assembly resolutions on landmines. The U.S. interest in Singapore is naval: the city-state constructed a pier large enough to accommodate a U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carrier—and Washington is shopping for a potential forward base for a carrier battle group.

This leaves Somalia, a “failed state” long ignored by the U.S. and the rest of the world. It lacks any effective central government, although tentative steps are underway to try to restore control. But with two secessionist “countries”—Somaliland and Puntland—within its recognized international boundaries, the potential for continued violence, including landmines, is real. The overriding U.S. interest here is the potential for “terrorists” to slip into the ungoverned parts of Somalia to hide from U.S. troops, rest, and resume planning for future attacks.

Ironically, sub-Saharan Africa is both the area with the greatest land mine problem—40,000,000 mines still buried—and the area with the most active armed conflicts, yet it has only one among the 42 non-signatory countries.

### The “Signers Only” Cluster

Turning to the eight countries that have signed but not ratified the Convention, three—Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, and Vanuatu—are Pacific Island nations susceptible to U.S. pressure.

Poland and Ukraine recently escaped Soviet dominance, with Poland now part of NATO and the U.S. denouncing as “unfair” last week's election in Ukraine that independent observers say was rigged. The U.S. would like to keep Ukraine from slipping back into Russia's orbit, a tendency that would grow if the election “results” are not overturned.

Haiti has only an interim government whose task is to prepare for nationwide elections in 2005. The UN Security Council just extended its peacekeeping mission in Haiti for six months (to June 1, 2005). Besides humanitarian concerns, the U.S. interest in Haiti is the formation of a stable, relatively uncorrupt government able to restart the economy—and thereby reduce the incentives for Haitians to try to enter the U.S. illegally.

The last two countries in this category, Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia, share the island of Borneo (with Malaysia) in what must be an uneasy relationship between a low-populated, oil-rich sultanate and a sprawling, densely populated, low-income regional power. Both countries lie

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along important waterways—Brunei off the South China Sea and Indonesia on one side of the Strait of Malacca that, at the Phillips Channel, is only 1.5 nautical miles wide. Indonesia also boasts Asia's largest economy, making its continued stability doubly important to the U.S.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the U.S. public has some excuse for not knowing much about the Nairobi conference, but the Bush administration has none. The ostensible reason the U.S. refused to send a delegation to Nairobi was “costs”—pegged by UN assessment rates at 20% of expenses for the conference. (Although the dollar amount could not be specified until all the bills came in, conference organizers had put the projected U.S. share at “somewhat more” than \$100,000—an amount the administration said was low.)

Instead of being there, the U.S. sent a message urging attendees to:

- increase funding for humanitarian mine action, and harmonize their efforts with other key mine action programs worldwide;
- examine their policies on the continued use of persistent anti-vehicle landmines, which pose substantial dangers to innocent life, and are not yet part of the Ottawa Convention;
- agree to negotiate, at the Conference on Disarmament, a ban on the sale or export of all persistent mines, including anti-vehicle mines;

- eliminate all non-detectable landmines, which pose a particular hazard to deminers.

Had it attended, the U.S., which is a positive force for demining activities despite refusing to sign the Convention, could have led by example in solving a growing gap between resources and needs, as outlined in the ICBL's 2004 report.

- Overall donor contributions have declined, especially to countries like Vietnam and Cambodia where the problem is most severe.
- Although \$1.35 billion was contributed for mine clearance between 1999 and 2003, contributions to assist victims have decreased while the number of victims keeps growing.
- Estimates are that more than 8,000 individuals fell victim to landmines in 2003—2,000 of whom were children.

And there is the “Africa anomaly:” while Somalia is the only non-signatory sub-Saharan country, among the 32 countries worldwide that are struggling to eliminate landmines, fully one quarter—Angola, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Senegal, Sudan, and Uganda—are in this region.

One might well ask: what is the cost to these and the other 24 countries—and to those killed and maimed by landmines—of failed leadership?

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