

Land mines: Another American blow to multilateralism

By Wolfgang Petritsch

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Let's be clear about the U.S. announcement Friday on land mines. Washington's new policy seems to have a lot more to do with the administration's controversial approach to multilateralism and internationally accepted norms than it does with a commitment to address a pressing humanitarian problem.

Monday was the fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the Ottawa Convention prohibiting antipersonnel mines. Far from being a rogue effort on the part of a small group of militarily insignificant states, it has taken hold as the international standard of action to address in a conclusive manner the human suffering caused by land mines.

With 141 States having accepted the convention, Washington's announcement that it will turn its back on the convention's high standards seems to reaffirm that while international rules are fine for the rest of the world, the United States will go its own way.

Experience has shown that when the United States takes a progressive lead it can have a positive impact. President Clinton was the first international leader to call for a total ban on antipersonnel mines. The current administration, however, by taking a narrow approach on land mines has failed to seize the opportunity to show global leadership.

An approach based solely on the purported tactical needs of U.S. forces threatens to undermine a higher standard accepted by most of the world. Undermining this standard will only reverse the incredible progress that has been made and result in additional civilian victims. In essence, the US policy runs counter to its stated humanitarian objective.

It is inconceivable that the world's most technologically and economically superior power cannot forgo what many have referred to as "the poor man's weapon." And it is naïve to think that antipersonnel mines will make America safe from terrorism. Virtually all of its military allies have accepted the Ottawa Convention and consequently have made adjustments necessary to fulfill national security and defence responsibilities without antipersonnel mines.

The United States has demonstrated no need for antipersonnel mines in recent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo. But it continues to disregard a multilateral solution that is working by staunchly refusing to join states with which it shares common values.

The Ottawa Convention was born out of a desire to make multilateralism work. The effort has been worth it. Since the convention took effect five years ago, the use and supply of antipersonnel mines have been markedly reduced and few new landmines are being produced. In addition, the convention's members have destroyed more than 31 million stockpiled mines. Vast tracts of mined land have been cleared and the number of new victims is decreasing.

Cynics may suggest that the timing of the U.S. – on the eve of an important anniversary for the Ottawa Convention – was designed to sap the will of the global movement to end the suffering caused by land mines. It is clear, however, there is no stopping the determination of

the 141 countries that have accepted a higher standard of international rules regarding antipersonnel mines and that these rules should apply to all states equally.

In November of this year, the *Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World* will take place. At the meeting, world leaders will review progress made and establish an action plan to ensure the elimination of antipersonnel mines. The biggest challenge facing the Nairobi meeting will be to secure the global commitment necessary to get the job done.

The United States has rightly stated that “communities victimized by deadly mines left behind after conflict deserve the full cooperation of all who support mine action” and that differing policy approaches “deserve to be discussed.” So I would expect that rather than turning its back on the international community, the US will participate actively at the Nairobi summit. It is worthwhile to be a part of this dynamic process and to see effective multilateralism at work.

Wolfgang Petritsch, Austrian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, was the President of the 29 November – 3 December Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World – the name given to the First Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention. From 1999-2002 he was High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1998-1999 he was EU Special Envoy in Kosovo and EU-Chief Negotiator in the Kosovo peace talks in Rambouillet and Paris.