LANDMINES

U.S. Navy SEALs stormed an encampment in northern Somalia in late January to rescue two aid workers taken hostage in October 2011. While the rescue itself is newsworthy, the operation also brings to light the workers’ mission in Somalia. They were there to disable landmines. Somalia, among other countries of the world, is littered with landmines that maim and kill innocent victims daily.

Antipersonnel landmines are explosive devices planted on or near the ground intended to injure or kill people. Containing explosives and often shrapnel, these landmines may be made of plastic, metal or other materials. Used during times of conflict or war, landmines are cheap and easy to deploy. These explosive devices, however, pose incredible threats for years or decades after a war is over.

According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a leader in the fight to stop landmines, a landmine can be detonated a number of ways. Direct pressure from above or pressure put on a wire or filament attached to a pull switch can activate landmines. More frightening, they can be detonated by a radio signal or even simply by a person walking within a predetermined distance. Landmines are not aimed; instead they kill or injure indiscriminately.

A recent article in *National Geographic* (January 2012), details Cambodia’s attempts to rid its countryside from the scourge of landmines. Ravaged by war from 1970 to 1998, Cambodia remains one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. Cambodia’s demining effort has been very successful and is a model for other countries of the world.

After Cambodia’s wars ended, much of the country’s best agricultural lands—vegetable gardens, pastures and rice fields—were full of landmines. With farmers comprising 60 percent of Cambodia’s workforce, much of the population was unable to make a living. Furthermore, innocent people were frequently maimed or killed by mines. In 1996, for example, landmines (both antipersonnel and antitank) injured or killed 4,320 Cambodians.

With more than a dozen demining programs, including risk education and survivor assistance, the number of people injured or killed by mines had dropped to 286 in 2010. All major minefields in Cambodia have been mapped and they are slowly being demined by hand.

The ICBL reports that until the 1990s, antipersonnel landmines had been used in one form or another by nearly all armed forces of the world. In 1997, however, international representatives signed the Mine Ban Treaty in Ottawa, Canada. This agreement bans the use, production and transfer of landmines. It also calls for the mandatory destruction of landmine stockpiles.

Today, nearly 80 countries, or one in three countries of the world, still have millions of landmines buried on their soil. While almost 12,000 people worldwide were killed or injured by landmines in 2002, that number recently dropped to fewer than 4,200. That decrease in casualties directly correlates with the Mine Ban Treaty’s implementation.

One hundred fifty-nine countries, including Afghanistan, Liberia, Nicaragua and Rwanda have signed the treaty. None of those countries produces landmines any longer. In fact, global trade of landmines has nearly stopped.

Unfortunately, some 36 countries have refused to join the Mine Ban Treaty, including notable countries like China, Russia, South Korea and the United States. Moreover, the ICBL reports that 12 states not party to the treaty continue to produce (or have not sworn the production of) landmines: China, Cuba, India, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, South Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam.

The United States, while refusing to sign the Mine Ban Treaty, has actually done more to support landmine removal and other remediation activities than any other country in the world. It has spent $1.9 billion over the past 18 years (about one-fourth of the total spent around the world) on landmine assistance.

*National Geographic* reports that the United States has not used landmines since 1991, not exported them since 1992 and not produced them since 1997. However, the United States continues to reject the ban based on maintaining national defense and security commitments to its allies.

Between 1999 and 2010, landmines and explosive remnants of war killed or injured more than 82,000 people in 117 countries, according to the ICBL. Afghanistan suffered the most casualties with 14,139. Following Afghanistan, were Colombia (7,882), Cambodia (7,830) and Iraq (5,344). Though these numbers seem high, they continue to decline yearly. That the Mine Ban Treaty has had such an effect in just over a decade is commendable. The treaty is the perfect example of an international accord that benefits the entire world. If all countries of the world signed it, landmines and the destruction they create might disappear forever.

And that is *Geography in the News™*. March 2, 2012. #1135.

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