



GENEVA CALL

APPEL DE GENÈVE

LLAMAMIENTO DE GINEBRA

REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP ADVANCING MINE ACTION IN SRI LANKA: MOBILISING THE EUROPEAN TAMIL DIASPORA

PARIS, 23 JULY 2005



ORGANISED BY GENEVA CALL
AND THE CENTRE FOR JUST PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

Introduction

The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been engaged in a civil war since 1983. A ceasefire was signed in February 2002 and peace talks began in September of the same year, only to be stalled in April 2003.

Both sides of the conflict have used antipersonnel (AP) mines, and the LTTE has used Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Most of the landmine contamination is in the northern and eastern provinces, particularly in the Jaffna peninsula, directly affecting the lives of the Tamils. This impediment includes preventing the internally displaced and refugees from returning to their homes, specifically in the High Security Zones occupied by the GoSL army.

One of the issues of great concern within the peace process has been the rehabilitation, reconstruction and normalisation of the north and east and the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs). A key factor in pursuing both of these aspects is mine action (mine clearance, victim assistance, mine risk education, stockpile destruction, and advocacy), which in turn is dependent on international aid. As most international aid in the area of mine clearance is dependent upon a commitment by the parties to the conflict to desist from using AP mines in the future, there is concern that long-term aid for mine clearance might decrease until the mine ban is in place.



**A deminer from the Humanitarian Demining Unit (HDU) at work.
Photo Credit: UNDP**

The workshop

“Advancing Mine Action in Sri Lanka: Mobilising the Tamil Diaspora” was organised as part of a larger effort to raise awareness among the Sri Lankan community, both inside and outside of the country, of the dangers of landmines in Sri Lanka and to look for ways to advance mine action (mine clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance, advocacy and stockpile destruction) in the current context. A special emphasis was placed on mobilising the Tamil Diaspora to support mine action efforts, having taken into consideration the strong familial and identity links with the Tamil communities living in Sri Lanka, who are among those most affected by the dangers posed by landmines in the country.

There was a total of 28 participants, drawn primarily from the Tamil Diaspora community in France, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom. There were also a few Sinhalese Diaspora representatives as well as a representative from the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research. The workshop was kept small in order to foster dialogue between participants and panellists.



Christoph Hebeisen from the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action makes a presentation on behalf of the UNDP for workshop participants. Photo Credit: Geneva Call

The workshop was organised into a morning session and an afternoon session, each followed by a discussion period of one hour in which participants could share their views and make recommendations on future action that should be taken. The morning session provided an overview of the landmine situation in Sri Lanka and efforts being made in mine clearance, victim assistance and mine risk education. Presentations were made by Reverend Perera of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation, Christoph Hebeisen of the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) on behalf of the United Nations Development Program-Sri Lanka, and Chandru Pararajasingham of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation-Sri Lanka. This was followed by an afternoon session dedicated to discussing the Mine Ban Treaty and Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment, international instruments available to States and armed non-State actors respectively. Anne Capelle of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and Katherine Kramer made the presentations.

Observations

Several participants were pleased to note the high level of cooperation between the GoSL and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation in the field of mine clearance, which they found encouraging. It suggested to them, that at least on this level, cooperation was possible and that it indicated on both sides a high degree of support and optimism for the peace process. Frustration was expressed on the attitudes of the donor community, specifically some government's conditionality of continued funding only when a mine ban commitment by both parties had been made.

Both Mr. Hebiesen and Mr. Pararajasingham in their presentations emphasised the need for an agreement by both parties not to use anti-personnel mines again. The concern was that if war broke out again, either new contamination would occur or areas that had been cleared might be reminded. This concern has also been expressed by the donor community as well.

One participant strongly felt that the anti-personnel mine ban could only be achieved after a peace agreement had been reached. However, most participants agreed that the mine ban should be pursued in parallel or hand-in-hand with the peace process, and some even suggested that it should be pursued independently as well, though clearly with the perspective of supporting the peace process. In this case, the mine ban could be used as a confidence building mechanism.

One participant expressed concern that the mine ban would weaken the LTTE and modify the balance of military strength between the conflicting parties. It was strongly addressed that in no way was the mine ban a disarmament measure - it was solely a way to prohibit use of one indiscriminate weapon by which the user had no control once placed, and which had a high humanitarian cost, specifically during the post-conflict, reconstruction period.



A White Pigeon mine risk education sign.
Photo Credit: TRO

Another participant questioned the use of the term non-State actor being referred to a *de facto* government. This was addressed by explaining that the term was chosen as the most neutral umbrella term to describe a whole range of actors who were not internationally recognised States and therefore could not sign the Mine Ban Treaty. In no way did the term non-State actor affect the legal or political status of the group, not did it change the situation on the ground. It was also mentioned that signing the Deed of Commitment did not prohibit a group from signing at a later date the Mine Ban Treaty once it became the government of an internationally recognised State. In fact, this has been encouraged in cases such as Iraq and Somalia, where signatory groups to the Deed of Commitment have become State actors.

Recommendations

- Lobby donor governments and the European Union to support unconditionally mine action being carried out by the Humanitarian Demining Unit (HDU), White Pigeon and others, rather than let fears of resumption of war or new mine use inhibit funding.
- Lobby European governments and the United States to support peace efforts and not actions leading to war.
- The churches in Sri Lanka should be cooperating in mine clearance and other forms of mine action.
- Both the Tamil and Sinhalese Diasporas should work together on the landmine issue, advocating for the mine ban, but should be careful not to let the issue be influenced by politics. One suggestion was to formulate a joint project to help all victims of anti-personnel mines.*
- Awareness should be built in Sri Lanka, specifically in the South, about the dangers of landmines and to gain support for mine action and the mine ban.
- A fall back track or plan B must developed to ensure mine action continues (mine clearance, MRE, victim assistance, mine ban advocacy) if war restarts.*
- The high security zones (HSZs) should be demined and the land returned to the people for cultivation.
- Information on the landmine situation in Sri Lanka, especially statistics, should be publicised through the media and on websites, both in Sri Lanka and abroad to help build the public's awareness and keep the momentum going calling on both sides to ban anti-personnel mines.
- Advocating the mine ban should go hand-in-hand with advocating for peace, and on its own.
- The work of HDU and White Pigeon should be recognised by the international community and smooth, direct funding should be made.
- Countries which are producing mines should be lobbied to stop and sign the mine ban.
- The European Tamil Diaspora should issue a statement on the landmine issue.
- The Diaspora could organise exhibitions, and document victims' stories. One participant said they would do this in Germany and Italy, however they would need material (films, photos, statistics, etc.).
- The European Diaspora should develop an action plan to work on the landmine issue.
- Demining efforts should continue, and mine use should stop.
- The European Diaspora should work with and support Geneva Call, and vice-versa.
- Both parties to the conflict (the GoSL and the LTTE) should discuss the mine ban together and come to an agreement. This could be a confidence building initiative.*
- White Pigeon (UK) will continue its awareness building activities, not only among the diaspora, but also the wider community.
- It was suggested to re-start the signature campaign, both among the Diaspora and in Sri Lanka. Other suggestions were to write letters to the leadership and gain the support of influential people.*
- The Diaspora should support efforts made by the Sri Lankan Campaign to Ban Landmines.*
- Public awareness material should be translated into Tamil.

* These suggestions were made by or contributed by non-Diaspora participants and/or the presenters.

Agenda

Advancing Mine Action in Sri Lanka: Mobilising the European Tamil Diaspora

CICP, 21 ter, Rue Voltaire, Paris, France, 23 July 2005

9:30 – 10:00 Welcome & participant introduction

10:00 – 11:00 Panel 1

- * Global overview of the landmine situation in Sri Lanka (Rev. Perera, Inter-Religious Peace Foundation)
- * Mine action in government controlled areas (Christoph Hebeisen, Swiss Foundation for Mine Action on behalf of UNDP)
- * Mine action in LTTE controlled areas (Chandru Pararajasingham, TRO-Sri Lanka)
- * Questions & Discussion

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 12:30 Diaspora initiatives & possible new activities

12:30 – 13:30 Lunch

13:30 – 15:00 Panel 2

- * TRO mine action video
- * UNICEF advocacy video
- * The mine ban movement, the convention and the Sri Lankan government (Anne Capelle, International Campaign to Ban Landmines)
- * Video on Geneva Call
- * The Geneva Call Deed of Commitment and the LTTE response (Katherine Kramer, Geneva Call)
- * Questions & discussion

15:00 – 16:00 Diaspora initiatives & possible new activities

16:00 – 16:30 Coffee break

16:30 – 17:30 Recommendations & closing

20:00 – 22:00 Traditional Tamil dinner provided by TRO-France

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