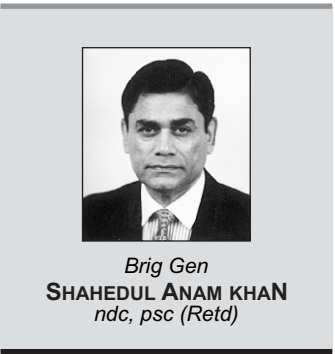


Landmines: Another weapon of mass destruction



TO the casual reader, a small bit of news appearing in the national dailies a few days ago, stating the completion of destruction of all but 15,000 anti-personnel mines may have conveyed very little and meant even less. Considering the grave impact of landmines on human security and the military compulsion to retain a cheap but very efficient protective apparatus, getting rid of the landmines at one's disposal, demonstrates Bangladesh's unwavering commitment to international treaties and conventions such as the Landmines Treaty (the Ottawa Convention) or the Mines Ban Treaty (MBT) as it is also known, in spite of the strategic

ramifications of that position. Of the two most significant legal events of the last decade, commentators aver, the Ottawa Convention is one of them. The other is the treaty on the International Criminal Court.

Landmines possess some peculiar characteristics. It is said to be the weapon of the poor and yet it is the poor it affects most. Its randomness and indiscriminate use, both by state and non-state actors, accords it the most inhuman character. It does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. It does not degrade with time and causes injury long after its intended use. About one third of all landmine casualties are children, and the number of people that suffer its aftermath is actually many more than the 26,000 or so directly affected by them annually. It costs as little as three US dollars to procure but billions of dollars to remove, and notwithstanding the international conventions designed to regulate their use, its indiscriminate use was on the rise. No wonder it is called a weapon of mass destruction in slow motion.

Bangladesh is the only South Asian country, apart from the Maldives, to have signed and ratified

the MBT and fulfilled its commitment to the treaty by destroying the more than quarter of a million anti-personnel mines in its arsenal. Although, initially our attitude towards the whole process of banning landmines, initiated in 1992, was lukewarm, and not surprisingly so, since doing away with it went against common military impulse and strategic sense,

destruction, not many are aware of the use of landmines and the serious destructive impact it has had, and continues to have, on the civilian population. Commentators have termed landmines as the most potent of the weapons of mass destruction whose effects last longer and are more painful. This is how the Report of the United Nations Secretary General, Assis-

According to the same UN report, it is estimated that there are more than 110 million landmines spread in 64 countries around the world, and that between 2 and 5 million more are being laid each year. By another estimate, 250 million landmines still exist in stockpiles in a handful of countries, including India, Pakistan, Russia, Belarus, and the United States.

divested of their livelihood since large tracts of lands have remained no-go areas causing social and economic disintegration, famine, and disease. For example in Afghanistan, one of the countries most heavily infested with mines, agricultural production has gone down by 55 percent. It may take a while to internalise the fact that it would take 4,300 years to demine

up refusing to sign up. In this case, the US wanted to have the cake and eat it too. While it advocated the elimination of landmines, it wanted to retain for itself the ability to use it selectively like in South Korea. But its rationale can be called into question when, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Nearly half of the anti-personnel mines retained by the United States for use in Korea are actually stored in the United States." What are these doing in the storehouse in the US when they are needed in DMZ?

The US had earlier expressed its intention to sign the treaty in 2006, which is when it had hoped to come out with adequate alternatives to the current crop of landmines. But the alternative is even more dangerous, and according to the HRW, Pentagon is pursuing a replacement for anti-personnel mines that violates the MBT of 1997. On February 27, 2004, the Bush administration announced the results of a two-and-a-half year policy review, abandoning the objective of joining the Mine Ban Treaty eventually, and declaring its intention to retain anti-personnel mines indefinitely.

Close to home, both India and Pakistan are ardent advocates of doing away with landmines but only

after they have devised, "appropriate militarily effective, non-lethal and cost effective alternative technologies." No one knows when that might be.

Signing of the treaty is only the start. What is needed is the universalisation of the treaty and bringing every country on board. According to Landmine Monitor Report 2004, forty-two countries, with a combined stockpile of some 180-185 million anti-personnel mines, remain outside of the MBT that includes three of the P-5, most of the Middle East, most of the former Soviet republics, and many Asian states.

Merely acceding to the treaty will not be enough. We tend to overlook the fact that there are the non-state actors that are no respecters of treaties or conventions. These elements use mines rampantly as we have noticed being done in our neighbouring countries.

Production of landmines must be halted and all existing stocks destroyed without delay in order to prevent these falling into the hands of the recalcitrant and the non-state actors.

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Bangladesh became the first South Asian country to ratify the MBT on September 6, 2000. It entered into force on March 1, 2001. As of December 22, 2004, 152 countries have signed the treaty, out of which eight are yet to ratify. Some of the countries which have not signed the Mine Ban Treaty include the United States, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and the Koreans.

While the world is alive to the other forms of weapons of mass

tance in Mine Clearance, describes landmines effect on human beings and environment, "Of all the forms of debris left in the aftermath of conflict, landmines are the most widespread and pernicious. Landmines may be one of the most widespread, lethal, and long-lasting forms of pollution we have yet encountered, and we are currently losing the battle to protect innocent civilians from their effects."

Let us put a perspective on the matter.

China possesses 110 million landmines, 60 to 70 million are possessed by Russia, ten million by both Belarus and Ukraine, six million by Pakistan, and approximately four to five million by India. In fact, with 11 million landmines, the United States has only the fourth largest stockpile in the world. No clear statistics exist on how much land is cleared annually of landmines.

According to an ICRC report, local communities have been

only 20 percent of Afghan territory at the current manually demining rate!

Given the horrific nature of landmines, one wonders why some countries, including the US, have not signed the treaty.

The US position on the Ottawa Convention is as perplexing as its position with many human rights and environmental issues. Surprisingly, it was the US that started up as the leader in the international effort to ban landmines but ended

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