



## APPEL DE GENÈVE GENEVA CALL

### Geneva Call in the Press

#### **Southeast Asia: Rebels Agree to Permit Landmine Monitoring (Thailand)**

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A novel effort in the Philippines to get a rebel group to stop using landmines is being closely watched by activists, since it may serve as the model for an international push to get militant groups across the world to stop using these indiscriminate weapons.

The key players in this effort, still in its infancy, are the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) -- which is talking peace with Manila after more than two decades of fighting for a separate Muslim state in the southern island of Mindanao -- and Geneva Call, an international humanitarian organization.

Under a "humanitarian mechanism" signed by both parties on Apr. 7, MILF leaders have agreed to permit members of Geneva Call to carefully monitor and verify its willingness to carry out a "total ban" on anti-personnel mines.

The level of monitoring permitted is unprecedented, says Alfredo Lubang of the Gaston Ortigas Peace Institute in Quezon City, the Philippines, which is involved in the Geneva Call initiative. "This is the way to engage with rebel movements, to get them to respond." "So far the MILF has refrained from using landmines since the signing and has maintained its commitment," he adds. "It shows we could have a mechanism to hold them accountable."

According to this agreement, Geneva Call's mission has the freedom to visit and inspect all areas where the MILF operates to verify if anti-personnel mines are present and to ensure that the MILF has kept to its side of the bargain to "undertake stockpile destruction."

The Geneva-based humanitarian body is also able to verify and check other assurances given by the MILF, like mine clearance, victim assistance and mine awareness.

"The jury is still out on how well this effort works. It is still early to gauge," says Liz Bernstein, coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), the Washington-based organization that won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its campaign against the use of anti-personnel mines (APMs).

But still, this option is being watched as a mechanism to be replicated in other regions where rebel groups are fighting, adds Bernstein, who was in the Thai capital this week for a two-day meeting on landmine use and its effect in Southeast Asia.

"We need to influence non-state actors," she stresses, to push the effort to stop the use of landmines in conflict.

Already, activists cite evidence that implicates rebel movements in two Southeast Asian countries, Burma and the Philippines, in the rising number of landmines used in this region.

"At least 11 ethnic armed groups (in Burma) are believed to use anti-personnel mines," states a report launched here today on the status of banning APMs in the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

All of the 30 rebel groups involved in Burma's decades-long civil war "are believed to be capable of building blast mines and improvised explosive devices," adds the 72-page report, "ASEAN and the Banning of Anti-Personnel Landmines."

Meanwhile in the Philippines, the report draws attention to the New People's Army, the military wing of that country's Communist Party, and the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim rebel movement that has gained notoriety for banditry.

The MILF, too, has been identified among the rebel groups using mines through 2001.

"The Abu Sayyaf has been using primarily improvised landmines in its operations, but it is also believed to have laid foreign-made mines," the report states.

The Philippine government has ceased sowing the terrain where rebels operate with landmines, affirming its commitment as a signatory of the international Mine Ban Treaty.

This treaty, formally known as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, came into force in March 1999. As of January, 142 countries had signed it and 122 had ratified it.

But among the countries that have been reluctant to abide are four from ASEAN: Laos, Vietnam, Singapore and Burma.

Rangoon has not only side-stepped the Mine Ban Treaty but has supported the wide use of APMs by the Tatmadaw, the military, in its civil war with ethnic rebel groups and along the country's borders.

"Government forces, both the Tatmadaw and the NaSaKa (border security force), have continued to use anti-personnel mines extensively," the report states. "In 2000 and 2001, the government continuously used mines near Myanmar's (formerly Burma) eastern border with Thailand, as well as maintenance of a large boundary minefield along the border with Bangladesh."

Already, the use by both the rebels and the government of landmines in Burma has made it the country with the most number of new mine victims - an estimated 12 victims a day, or a person hit by a mine explosion every two hours.

By contrast, Cambodia, one of the countries worst affected by landmines because of decades of civil strife, has an APM injury rate of more than two a day, according to the report.

"Burma is the biggest worry in the region; it is the biggest producer of APMs and biggest user," says the ICBL's Bernstein. "Burma has surpassed Cambodia in having new mine victims."

This is amplified by the regular demand for artificial limbs in Burma. "The ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) fixes three artificial limbs a day in Burma," says Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, Southeast Asia coordinator for Nonviolence International.

"Operations happen in primitive conditions at times," he adds. "In the Karen and Shan state areas there are very little health services available for the victims."

The Filipino anti-landmine activist, Lubang, is hoping that the exercise in the Philippines with the MILF will eventually become an example that would help halt the worsening climate in Burma.

"We need to engage non-state actors in Burma to end landmine use in our efforts," he says. "It is a start, it is a way of getting rebel groups to behave responsibly, with their legitimacy and political face at stake if they violate a mine ban agreement."