

War Child

In the desolate heights of Afghanistan, in the lush African savannas and steep Bosnian valleys, in cities and villages, tens of millions of landmines lie hidden; to be cleared, as one Cambodian surgeon put it, “one limb at a time.” Anti-personnel mines primarily target civilians. Victims are invariably the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. It is the subsistence farmers, nomads, children at play, fleeing refugees, and those returning home after the war to heavily mined villages and farm that are the most affected.

Effects on Children

Children’s size and natural curiosity make them particularly vulnerable to anti-personnel mines. They are often too little to see mines that are clearly visible to adults. Unable to keep up with older members of the family when travelling by foot, children will stray off safe routes into minefields. They may not be able to recognize or read warning signs. Also, in many cultures, young children are required to perform jobs that are crucial to the economic survival of the family, such as tending livestock, scavenging, gathering firewood and collecting water. In heavily mined regions, these simple tasks become fraught with danger. It has also become common practice in some areas for small children to be paid a few pence to retrieve landmines for resale.

Even if arms manufacturers deny allegations that some landmines are designed to look like toys, they surely cannot be unaware of the appeal and attraction that their lethal products have for children. Brightly colored, oddly shaped, easy to pick up or kick, children will seldom resist the temptation to play with these new “toys.”

In many heavily mined areas children have now become so used to landmines they forget that they are lethal weapons. In northern Iraq, rural children commonly use mines as wheels for toy trucks and go-carts and in Cambodia they play boules with B40 anti-personnel mines. Even when children understand the dangers, the risk element can prove a fatal attraction. For instance, in Afghanistan, a favorite game is to throw stones at “Butterfly” mines; the winner being the one whose stone causes the mine to detonate.

For children who survive mine accidents, the physical injuries are usually far greater, the emotional trauma much deeper, and the economic prospects significantly bleaker than for an adult victim. The majority of child mine victims have few prospects of going to school, of receiving counseling, of learning skills which could help them adapt to their new condition, or marrying when they grow up.

For all mine victims who live outside the provincial capitals, the journey to a rehabilitation clinic can be prohibitively expensive and extremely difficult, often involving a several day trek. Consequently, poorer children seldom receive the long-term care they need. Children require frequent medical checkups and new prostheses need to be fitted regularly because of a child's growth rate. Also, as a child amputee develops, the bone of the amputation site grows more quickly than the surrounding tissue, which may require reamputation, sometimes repeatedly.

Economically, child victims are a drain on limited resources, and the fact that they may be unable to contribute to the family can have a profound psychological effect on the child and on the family as a whole. Landmines can also have far-reaching effects on children when their parents are the victims. Loss of employment and the deprivation that can follow directly affect children. They may have to leave school to look after injured parents and supplement the family income.

Economic necessity forces people to enter known mine fields every day in search of food and water, to graze livestock, to raise crops, cut firewood, or gather thatch to sell or use for building materials. It is those who rely mainly on their physical fitness for survival, who are obliged to live and work in mined areas, who become the victims. It is these same people who can least afford the care and treatment necessary to treat landmine injuries.

Economic Cost

Landmines are indiscriminate weapons and their destructive capacity does not end with the signing of a peace treaty. In fact peace in a meaningful sense cannot be established while millions of landmines continue to kill and mangle civilians and thwart reconstruction efforts. The long-term economic cost to countries contaminated by mines vastly outweighs any immediate military usefulness.

The presence of huge numbers of unexploded mines, render vast areas of land inaccessible, prevents refugees and displaced people returning home, precludes farmers and shepherds from working their fields, hampers humanitarian aid and hinders development and rebuilding following the end of the war.

As well as the disruption to agriculture and farming, the mining of dams and electrical installations affects the ability of a country to produce the power necessary for reconstruction. When transportation systems have been mined, it interrupts the movement of people and the flow of goods and services. This disrupts market systems, which in turn has a direct impact on employment and contributes to inflation.

Many landmines are designed to disable their victims rather than killing them. The kinds of wounds they inflict often require extensive treatment over long periods of time. The medical costs stemming from landmine casualties result in a significant economic burden both to the nation and to the mine victims and their families. The countries most contaminated by mines are often also among the poorest nations in the world. Their fragile economies are easily destroyed, the basic requirements for self-sufficiency denied them, and they quickly become an economic burden on the international community.

These countries seldom have the ability to fund the extensive demining programs that are essential if their economies are ever to recover. Only when these lethal toxins have been removed will the war be finally over, and will it be possible to talk of peace in a substantive sense, only then will the long process of reconstruction and healing begin.

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