

Currently the only international law restricting land-mines is Protocol II of a 1980 UN convention. Ratified by a mere 40 nations - Britain isn't one of them - it applies solely to international wars, not internal conflicts. "As things stand, you can do anything you want to your own people," says Toni Pfanner, chief of the ICRC's Juridical Division in Geneva. "It is obvious that this treaty must be revised or replaced."

To combat the growing menace of land-mines, the international community should agree to these steps:

1. Undetectable, metal-free mines and devices that target de-miners must be outlawed. These have no military use - their only purpose is indiscriminate killing and maiming, mostly of civilians.
2. Newly manufactured mines must be equipped with self-destruct mechanisms to make them inert after a brief time. New mines produced in Britain and the US are already equipped with such mechanisms.
3. Mapping and marking of mine-fields must be legally obligatory.
4. Funding must be stepped up for research into improved detection and removal techniques. It is absurd that de-mining has not progressed beyond hands and knees and garden tools.

A new international agreement can provide the undisputed legal and moral principles that no state or armed group can ignore without incurring pariah status among civilized nations. Violators should face soberingly serious consequences.

Last December the United Nations passed resolutions calling for a worldwide ban on the export of anti-personnel mines, a measure which the British Government opposes. Says General Sir Hugh Beach, vice-chairman of the Council for Arms Control, "It is a matter of shame that our Government should be dragging its feet on a worldwide ban. The forthcoming review of the UN Inhumane Weapons Convention provides the ideal opportunity."

Rae McGrath believes responsibility lies with all of us. "Debate in the UN is fine," he says, "and I favour it. But finally the answer has to come from average people in the street who will pressure their governments to do something about these disgusting killers. If you haven't been to Cambodia or Kurdistan, you can't understand the people's misery. If you know it is wrong, you've got to stand up and try to stop it".