

just ten degrees.

"These undetectable or unremovable mines are mostly useful to insurgent armies that want to break up a country's infrastructure," says Paul Jefferson, a world-respected mine expert who served as commander of disposal operations in the Falklands twice between 1985 and 1987. "They see non-detectability as a selling-point. It kills lots of people."

Jefferson is blind and one-legged, the results of injuries he sustained in 1991 while walking in a supposedly mine-clear area in Kuwait. He stepped on a Russian PMN mine and became a living object-lesson in the savagery of mines and the impossibility of clearing them 100 per cent.

The carnage is now so immense that thoughtful people have finally come together to try to stop it. Alarmed by a flood of reports from demoralized field surgeons, the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva has become involved in the effort. At an April 1993 ICRC-sponsored symposium in Switzerland, Ferruccio Petracco, an Italian economic journalist, told of how the Italian company Valsella Meccanotecnica - half-owned by the car maker Fiat - sold nine million mines to Iraq from 1983 to 1985.

Valsella's commerce soon became painfully familiar to thousands of Iranian schoolchildren. During Iran's 1980-88 war with Iraq, entire classes of boys were brought to the front as "scouts" and sent forward over enemy minefields. Tehran had previously used sheep, but decided that even children were to be involved in the war effort. Besides, their mission being "sacred", the youngsters were guaranteed direct access to heaven if they died. Survivors who merely lost limbs got wooden legs.

When Valsella could not obtain export licences to ship directly from Italy, the company, through a newly founded corporation, shifted production to Singapore - eventually earning £139 million from the deal. "It is impossible to believe that the Italian government, and event less the Italian secret service, was not well aware of these sales," Petracco said.

Combining first-rate research and development with aggressive marketing, Valsella has built itself into one of the world's largest producers of mines. Valsella leads the way in diabolically clever design: custom-coloured mines that blend into any background; booby-trapping mechanisms; plastic undetectables resistant to all countermeasures. Such is the high-quality craftsmanship of Valsella products that arms-trade insiders nicknamed one of its products "the Gucci."

Although Britain still manufactures mines for the Army, the Ministry of Defence says that none have been exported for more than a decade. Last September, the US Senate voted unanimously to extend by three more years the moratorium on exports of US-made anti-personnel mines, giving the campaign a much-needed boost. France announced last year that it also had stopped exports of anti-personnel mines. The European Parliament has issued a resolution calling on its members to impose a five-year moratorium.