

while stressing the horrific injuries they had caused their own troops. In fact between a fifth and a third of all US deaths during the War were caused by these weapons. The earliest calls for a ban, however, grew out of the experience of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Afghanistan and Cambodia, where the high rates of injury and death amongst returning refugees presented a crisis of unprecedented proportions. In 1991 Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights published the first detailed study of how land mines were actually being used in *The Coward's War: Land Mines in Cambodia*. The book made a strong case for humanitarian demining, which aims to make the land completely safe for human use – a far cry from stock military mine-clearing techniques.

THE BALL STARTS TO ROLL

October 1992 marked the real beginning of the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines when six NGOs combined their separate initiatives: Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, Medico International, Mines Advisory Group, Physicians for Human Rights and Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. None of the six groups on the steering committee of the International Campaign came from the disarmament community. There was also at first a notable lack of indigenous organizations from mine-affected countries who were hard-pressed enough to deal with the everyday realities confronting them. But by 1995 the Campaign had embraced a multitude of groups from all corners of the world – and been given a huge boost when the International Committee of the Red Cross overcame its usual reluctance to deal with 'political' issues and launched its parallel, well-documented campaign. Attention focuses on the political initiatives and conferences but it is the tireless efforts of people on the ground – starting humanitarian mine-clearance, organizing support for those injured by mines, exposing the horrors of mine warfare – which have brought a ban closer.

LAWS AND INTENTIONS

In March 1995, Belgium became the first country to legislate a domestic ban on the production, procurement, sale and transfer of land mines and their components and technology, despite opposition from its armed forces. Previously it had been a leading mine exporter, and, while a declining market and the receding threat from the Eastern Bloc were probably factors in the decision, there is no denying the value of Belgium's example. Austria and Ireland have followed suit. At the regional level, governments from Central America and the Caribbean have announced their intention to create mine-free zones. Southern Africa is starting to talk along the same lines.

TREATIES AND TURNAROUNDS

If warfare were conducted according to agreed principles, then land mines would be illegal. The Geneva Convention and its two Protocols outlaw the use of weapons that do not distinguish between combatants and civilians and which cause needless injury. However, armies around the world haven't lost sleep over such proscriptions. In 1995-96 the review conference of the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol II brought together the world's biggest land mine producers and users as well as supporters of a comprehensive ban. The review worked (and got stalled) by consensus and thus achieved very little that would limit the use of land mines. It did, however, get foreign and defence ministries talking about mines and forced top soldiers, who had viewed them as conventional components of their arsenals, to reassess their utility against the wider humanitarian costs (not to mention the political heat).

THE OTTAWA PROCESS

Bypassing the failure of consensus politics, a Canadian initiative in October 1996 convened an historic conference in Ottawa. The 50 governments who fully participated signed a declaration recognizing the urgent need to ban antipersonnel land mines. At the end Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy boldly announced his country's willingness to hold a treaty-signing conference in December 1997, thus imposing a definite time-scale. The Ottawa Process, which has included NGO input, has brought real hope of a widespread ban regardless of whether or not countries opposed to it, such as China and Russia, follow suit. Currently 97 countries support the Ottawa Process. If a substantial ban materializes in December, then attention will need to focus on the gargantuan task of demining the world and destroying the existing stockpiles – to say nothing of support for the people whose lives have been devastated. Mine clearance is expensive and former producers may not exactly be eager to pay for it. A worldwide ban is still some years away.