

CHILDREN & LANDMINES

Protecting the innocent victims



In over 70 countries around the world, anti-personnel (AP) mines lie in wait, armed and ready to take a limb or the life of a child. These cheap and deadly remnants of war continue harming civilians years after the end of the conflicts in which they were planted. By their very nature they are unable to distinguish between the footsteps of a soldier and those of a child.

Tackling these hidden killers is the aim of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (the 1997 Ottawa Convention). As of August 17, 2001, a total of 118 states had formally ratified the treaty, agreeing to abide by its comprehensive ban on these weapons. Vast tracts of mined land have been cleared and millions of stockpiled mines have been destroyed in fulfilment of Convention obligations.

Even so, mines continue to bar access to millions of hectares of land and to infrastructure vital to the well-being of thousands of communities. And in some areas where conflicts are raging, new mines are being laid.

In these mined areas, protecting children is a major challenge. One way to meet it is by teaching them about the danger of mines and by seeking to limit high-risk behaviour. Successful mine awareness education programs can significantly reduce the likelihood of a child's injury or death in an AP mine accident. For this reason, such programs are a priority of the international community.

Vulnerable targets

In general young men suffer the highest rates of injury and death caused by AP mines, but children are perhaps the weapons' most vulnerable targets.

Children are liable to touch and play with objects that appear interesting, including mines and unexploded ordnance. Some mines are particularly enticing—for instance, the colourful PFMN-1 butterfly mine, dropped in vast quantities from aircraft over Afghanistan.

Mine accidents often injure children more severely than adults because their relatively small stature places them closer to the ground and hence to the point where a mine explodes. If a growing child loses a limb to an AP mine blast, the prosthetic will have to be replaced far more frequently than in the case of an adult. Often the cost is prohibitive and prosthetics of good quality are unavailable.



photo: John Rodsted

Years after a conflict has ended, anti-personnel mines continue to indiscriminately harm civilians, such as this Bosnian boy. Successful mine awareness education programs can significantly reduce the likelihood of a child's injury or death in an AP mine accident.

Children also suffer when adults in their families and communities are injured or killed by AP mines. They may find that the caregivers on whom they depend have more difficulty providing for their well-being.

The role of UNICEF

UNICEF is the United Nations agency taking the lead on mine awareness education. It plays an important role in the direct delivery of mine awareness education. In addition, it has developed the *International Guidelines for Landmine and Unexploded Ordnance Awareness Education*, a manual for international donors and mine awareness providers.