

The reversal was hailed, but the administration went on to insist that it would not sign unless the treaty included two exemptions—one geographic, one technological—allowing the continued use of some mines.

At the urging of Pentagon strategists, the United States wants to keep using some one million of the most common kind of land mines to protect South Korea from an invasion by North Korea along the world's tensest, most heavily fortified border. It also wants to exempt a relatively new "smart" type of mine designed to destroy tanks.

The administration's position underscored the fact that for all their stigmatization as brutal, random weapons as strategically and morally obsolete as poison gas, land mines still have fiendishly effective purposes—even for the world's best equipped and most advanced military.

"The price of giving up land mines is thousands of lives," a senior administration official said bluntly.

Supporters of a ban question the Pentagon's justifications. They say the administration's position could stall or even scuttle the treaty negotiations by inviting other countries to seek their own exemptions.

"The diplomatic reality is that the U.S. mines have to go if the other countries are going to give up theirs," said Caleb S. Rossiter, director of Demilitarization for Democracy, an advocacy group in Washington that strongly supports a ban.

Anywhere from 80 million to 110 million land mines are buried in 68 nations, from Angola to Bosnia, Nicaragua to Cambodia. Egypt has the most, with an estimated 23 million, followed by Iran, with 16 million, Angola, with 12 million, and China, Iraq and Afghanistan, with 10 million each.

Land mines are estimated to kill or maim thousands of people a year, mostly civilians, long after the wars in which they were planted ended. And it is their random violence that gives impetus to the campaign to ban them. Given little chance of success when a handful of humanitarian groups began it a few years ago, the campaign has now attracted support from dozens of governments, from groups like the Vietnam Veterans of America, and from celebrities including the Princess of Wales, Diana.

The controversy over the administration's position has obscured the fact that the United States, by law, stopped exporting land mines in 1992, and since last year has forsworn