

"A Weapon of the Past and a Symbol of Shame"

The following is an excerpt from the address by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Diplomatic Conference on Landmines, in Oslo, Norway on September 3

It gives me great pleasure to address your meeting at this vital point in our efforts to

achieve a worldwide ban on anti-personnel mines. On behalf of the United Nations, I wish to thank the Government of Norway for hosting this Conference. It is the last step before the final culmination of your efforts in the signing of the Convention in Ottawa in December.

The Ottawa Conference will be a historic event in the

peacemaking efforts of our time, and I am proud to say that I will be attending the signing ceremony in Ottawa on behalf of the United Nations. This Conference will be attended by symbolic representatives of the voiceless, the victims and the maimed. The memory of those who have died will be honoured.

Your deliberations

here in Oslo — aiming to complete a convention on the prohibition of the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines — represent the worldwide determination to see this process to its historic conclusion.

The elimination of landmines has become a truly global cause, propelled by the demands of citizens everywhere and promoted tirelessly by regional and non-governmental organizations.

I have committed myself to strengthening United Nations ties with civil society, and I am greatly encouraged by our co-operation in the struggle against landmines. In this area, in particular, the leadership of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the energy of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) have been the driving forces. The fight against landmines has become a model of international co-operation and action.

I believe we stand at the edge of a new age of disarmament. With the threats and fears of the Cold War behind us, the international community must seize the moment to turn the tide on the production of arms.

There is a new and growing consensus that the proliferation of arms of all kinds — whether they be weapons of mass destruction or small arms — inherently constitutes a threat to peace. We must make landmines a weapon of the past and a symbol of shame.

The foundation that was built at the June Conference [Brussels] is a solid one. Ninety-seven countries announced their support for the Ottawa Process and agreed to negotiate the terms for an international treaty to be signed in December.

In my message to the Brussels Conference, I urged that we seize the opportunity to eradicate this invisible enemy. I also pledged, as I do today, the support and the commitment of the United Nations toward the aim of a total ban.

I do so not only because the use of a weapon whose victims are overwhelmingly women and children is fundamentally immoral. I pledge our support also because the curse of landmines affects every aspect of the work of the United Nations — from peace and security, to health and to development.

A total ban on anti-personnel mines will mark the end of only one aspect of our

fight against landmines. No less important is the removal of millions of mines that have already been laid.

Landmines remain the most deadly and destructive obstacles to our work in post-conflict societies.

Each mine cleared may mean a life saved. But we know also, that for every 100,000 mines cleared a year, between two and five million mines are laid at the same time. The presence — or even the fear of the presence — of just one landmine can prevent the cultivation of an entire field, robbing a family or perhaps an entire village of its livelihood. Landmines remain the most deadly and destructive obstacles to our work in post-conflict societies.

Whether it is the rebuilding of infrastructure, the repair of homes or, most importantly, the return of refugees, landmines are enemy number one. In countries as diverse as Angola, Cambodia and Bosnia, we have seen how the long and hard work of post-conflict rehabilitation is marred many years into the future by the presence of landmines.

Though civilians, of course, are the first and foremost victims of mines, we should

not forget that the very work of peacekeeping and peacebuilding is imperilled by landmines.

You have embarked on a mission of genuine promise. The universal revulsion at the use of landmines has reached unprecedented levels.

Even within military circles, there is a growing conviction that landmines are as great a threat to those who plant them as to anyone else. There is a widening consensus that the strategic utility of anti-personnel mines is marginal, and that in the growing number of conflicts with fluid frontiers, defensive minefields limit operational actions rather than enable them.

Finally, it is development itself that is held hostage to the curse of landmines. Developing countries are too often twice cursed — with poverty and with war — landmines being the most permanent, the most destructive wound of war. Without their elimination, refugees will be far less able to return, idle fields will be far less accessible, and peace itself will be elusive.

That is why your work is so important, that is why your aim of a complete ban holds such promise for imperilled millions around the world, not only the citizens but also the soldiers at risk. I salute you for your vision. I look forward to seeing you in Ottawa.



Wazir Hammad (9), landmine victim at Wazir Hosital, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Photo: Robert Semeniuk