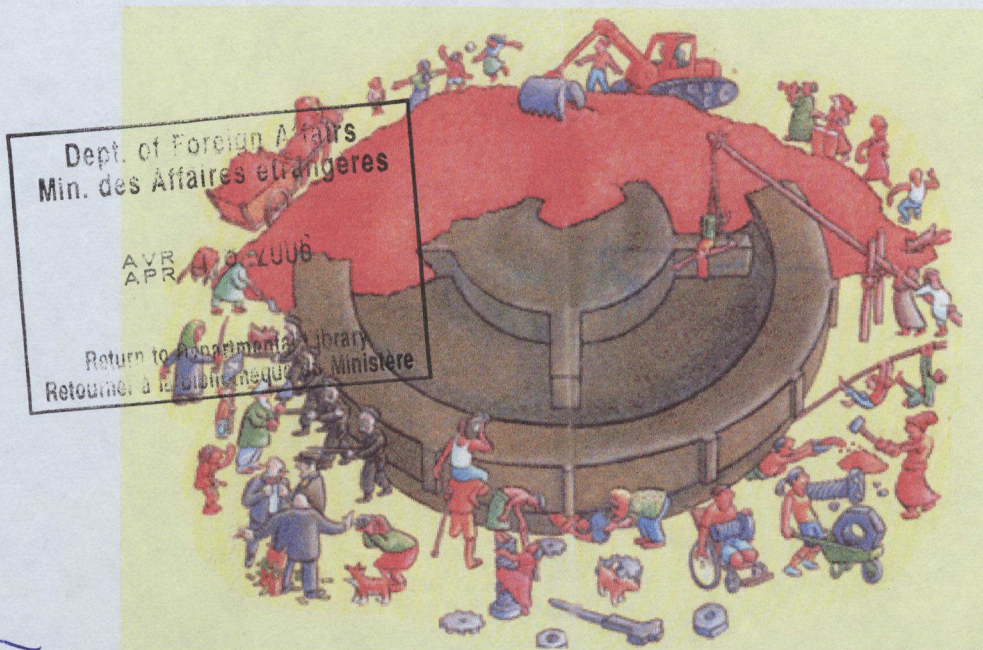


DEFUSING THE DEMON

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How landmines became such a hit in wars around the world – and how a gathering storm of protest has moved us closer to a ban.

BIRTH OF A KILLER

The first land mines were designed to stop the battle tank, that scourge of trench warfare, during World War One – they were effectively just buried artillery shells with exposed fuses. The development of the lightweight explosive TNT in the 1920s made the first reliable anti-tank mines possible. During World War Two 300 million of these were used, more than two-thirds of them by

the Soviet Union. Designed to explode under the weight of a vehicle, these mines were often removed by enemy troops on foot. As a result armies began protecting their anti-tank minefields by using small metallic or glass containers with about half a kilo of explosive which could be activated by the pressure of a footstep. From improvised hand grenades to the German "Bouncing Betty", a mine that sprang to the height of two metres before spraying its victims with hundreds of steel balls, the antipersonnel mine had come into its own.

GARBAGE AND BUTTERFLIES

After the Second World War mine technology advanced rapidly and in the early 1960s the US unleashed its sophisticated 'remotely delivered' mines or 'scatterables' on Laos and then Cambodia, in a vain attempt to stop the movement of soldiers and provisions from North to South Vietnam. Scattered from the air, these mines (nicknamed 'garbage' by the crews carrying them) landed on the ground without detonating. Weighing a puny 20 grams, they were capable of taking off the foot that stepped on them. The randomly scattered mines could not be mapped and US Forces often suffered heavy casualties when retreating through areas previously mined by their own pilots. A decade later the Soviet Union also used random targeting during its invasion of Afghanistan and millions of PFM-1 'butterfly' mines settled gracefully to the ground awaiting victims.

ETERNAL SENTINELS

Today a plague of land mines has enveloped the world's conflict zones, with an estimated 110 million antipersonnel mines in the ground and an equal number in military stockpiles. Most have been supplied by Northern producers to countries thousands of miles away, where political and economic instability are common. Cheap and easy to use, they are the favourite weapons in civil wars and wars of insurgency, used by governments and guerrillas alike. These 'eternal sentinels' stand guard long after the conflicts have ended and kill and maim without mercy or discrimination.

COWARD'S WAR

After the Vietnam War, senior US military officials attested to the inability of land mines to stave off an attack,

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