

Raising Awareness of the Landmine Issue

Burma/Myanmar has been plagued by an armed conflict between the Myanmar Government, which also refers to itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and numerous armed non-State Actors (NSAs), since shortly after independence. Anti-personnel (AP) mines are used and produced by the government as well as NSAs. Ten out of fourteen states and divisions in the country are contaminated by mines, mostly along the conflict affected border regions. Mines have been placed around military installations, in and near villages, and in agricultural areas, as well as used in ambushes against the opposing force. This has had a serious impact on the lives and livelihood of communities. Despite this, little action is being taken to address the AP mine situation in the short- nor long-term.

The Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), partnering with Geneva Call, completed its two year landmine awareness raising project among Burmese political and armed organisations. The joint project produced five brochures that explained different aspects of the landmine issue that have often been misunderstood, including what are the humanitarian norms governing mine use—including the ban on AP mines, what landmines are banned, what impact do landmines have on human security and development, and what is humanitarian mine action. The brochures were translated into Burmese, Karen, Mon and Shan languages and disseminated widely.

In addition, the joint project organised three workshops that targeted mid-level political and military leaders. Each workshop session developed further the issues explained in the brochures, allowing time for sharing of experiences and perspectives, reflection, and internalisation. Small working groups explored what each organisation as well as community based organisations could do to reduce and address the impact of landmines on communities. During the frank discussions, representatives of the armed movements admitted to the use of AP mines for defensive reasons, stating that “We will use landmines as long as the government’s army offensives continue”. However, participants recognised the devastating impact that mines have on civilians and their responsibility to address the problem. Much of the discussion therefore focused on brainstorming what measures- including revising mine use policies -.could be taken to reduce the risk for civilians. Many of the participants have taken the message back to their movements and exploring ways to integrate their learning into practice. While Geneva Call stands firm in its stand that a total AP mine ban by all actors in Burma/Myanmar is the only way in which to truly eradicate all potential risk to the population, it considers that partial steps towards the ban, such as being taken by Burmese NSAs, are significant and will have some positive impact on communities living in mine affected areas.

The Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) is an umbrella organisation whose members include both political and armed opposition groups. The project’s website can be found here <http://www.blicenter.com/>