

GENEVA CALL NEWSLETTER

BRINGING HUMANITARIAN NORMS TO NEW FRONTIERS...

GENEVA CALL HEADS MISSION TO MINE-AFFECTED AREAS IN SOMALIA:
A STARTING POINT FOR ACTION

From 15 to 27 September 2004, a team of international NGOs headed by Geneva Call toured Somalia to assess the nature of the landmine problem and the need for assistance in humanitarian mine action. The mission was a follow-up to 16 Somali factions signing the DoC in November 2002. Signatory areas visited included Puntland, Hiraan and Bakool. In the latter two regions, it was the first time international NGOs came to assess the landmine situation since the fall of the government of Siyad Barre in 1991.

The assessment team, which included specialists from the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) and the Danish Demining Group (DDG), met with local authorities, UN agencies, NGOs and landmine survivors. Visits were made to mine affected areas, hospitals as well as military camps. The team faced no security threat and enjoyed a high degree of cooperation from the local authorities, some of which gave access for the first time to existing stockpiles. The mission enabled Geneva Call and its partners to gauge the significant humanitarian and socio-economic impact of landmines and unexploded ordnances (UXOs) on the local population: human and livestock casualties, denial of pastoral and cultivable land, road closure, etc. Most of the mines and UXOs appear to be concentrated along the border with Ethiopia and scattered across the hinterland near towns and military installations, blocking access to key civilian infrastructure, water and roads.

Beyond assessing the extent of the landmine problem in the regions visited, the team led by Geneva Call sought to monitor the implementation of the Deed of Commitment (DoC) by signatory factions. The limited means available highlighted the need for international assistance in order to translate the mine ban obligations into a reality for local communities. As a result of the mission, three concrete action plans were identified for Geneva Call and its partners: (1) promote the launch of mine action programmes; (2) initiate advocacy and dissemination projects; and (3) monitor the evolution of the peace process.

The first plan is now underway with several events scheduled in order to report on the findings of the mission and promote the launch of mine action programmes, starting with a meeting with the Somali Aid Coordination Body late November in Nairobi. DDG and FSD have already prepared demining, mine risk education and explosive ordnance disposal projects for Puntland and both organisations are in the process of seeking funding for these projects. As for the second action plan, Geneva Call is directly involved in the creation of a Somali civil society Campaign to Ban Landmines, which is projected to be launched at the end of November. Also on Geneva Call's agenda for the upcoming months is the organisation of a series of workshops



intended to inform the local authorities, militia and community leaders about the DoC and seek input on how best to address the challenges of implementation.



[Photo: FSD 2004]

In Somalia, there are no demining activities so the population places mines and UXOs under piles of wood in order to avoid stepping on them.

“There is need for rapid action to reduce the impact of landmines and UXOs, starting with mine risk education and clearance. International assistance is imperative as there is little or no mine action currently underway in central and south Somalia.”

Pascal Bongard, Geneva Call Programme Coordinator and Head of the Somali mission.



Geneva Call has adopted a new logo, which symbolises its commitment to landmine victims and its efforts at universalising the mine ban.

INTERNAL CHANGES AT GENEVA CALL

Beyond the news in the field, there is news on the inside. With each new signatory group comes heightened expectations, challenges and responsibilities - financial and otherwise. In light of this evolution, Geneva Call agreed to submit itself to an external evaluation this past spring. The evaluation team considered the structure, functioning and management of the organisation as well as its relations with partners, both operational and financial. Its findings were positive and their suggestions were useful and constructive. Parallel to this evaluation process, Geneva Call decided to become a foundation under Swiss law, appointing a new and more international board of directors and advisory committee. Finally, in the past months, there has been a shift in Geneva Call's partnership strategy with stronger emphasis being placed on reinforcing cooperation with indigenous organisations that operate locally, in regions where NSAs are active.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since our last edition of the Newsletter, much has happened at Geneva Call. With commitments from non-State actors (NSAs) now numbering 26, needless to say that a lot of time and effort is being spent consolidating achievements and devising ways of ensuring that commitments materialise into improved situations for civilians living in mine-affected communities. Signatures are not enough. They are a necessary first step but the real challenge begins once a group has accepted the terms of the Deed of Commitment (DoC) and faces the reality of having to implement its obligations. In the past months, Geneva Call has been assisting signatories from Burundi, Burma and Somalia to move forward in the implementation of mine action programmes. In the case of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement / Army (SPLM/A), important steps have been taken by the group itself to monitor respect for its commitment and launch initiatives for addressing the needs of the mine affected communities living under its control. This is an encouraging development that sets a positive example for other signatory groups.

In Colombia and in Sri Lanka, Geneva Call is working with groups that have yet to adhere to the DoC but that have nonetheless been willing to engage in a humanitarian dialogue on the question of landmines. The aim continues to be a total ban on mines. The political climate in both countries affects Geneva Call's work and, to a certain degree, we are observing that the reverse is also true. Indeed, the conclusion of a humanitarian agreement on the question of landmines has been put forward by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) as an axis around which to reopen peace talks with the Government of Colombia. In Sri Lanka, mine ban commitments are being sought from both the Government and the main opposition group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Engaging the latter is Geneva Call's job but this cannot be done without taking into account the evolution of the peace process and its impact on the group's willingness to take the first step in banning mines. We are currently exploring ways of using the question of landmines as a confidence building measure for both parties in this protracted conflict.

PROGRAMME UPDATES

Burundi: There is steady progress on the mine ban front in Burundi, following the signature of the DoC by the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Defense Forces of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) last December. Almost immediately after signing, the CNDD-FDD announced its intention to destroy mines in its possession and requested technical assistance from Geneva Call. In response to this request, Geneva Call arranged for a specialist from the FSD, one of its partner organisations, to visit Bujumbura and advise the group on the destruction process as well as to explore possibilities for launching mine action programmes in Burundi. The destruction process, originally planned to be held in February 2004, was delayed for technical and political reasons. It was decided that joint destruction of the group's stockpiles and the transitional government's stockpiles was a preferable option. Efforts were deployed to persuade the government to reconsider its intention of retaining stockpiles of 1,200 mines and to give up a symbolic amount for destruction. Representatives of the Government of Burundi appear open to the proposal but have suggested that collaboration at this level will not take place before the CNDD-FDD becomes an official political party.

Combined with an improving political situation, the ratification of the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT) by the Government of Burundi and the signature of the DoC by the CNDD-FDD, have given a much needed boost to the implementation of mine action programmes in Burundi. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) has established a mine action coordination centre in Bujumbura. With the support of the Swiss Government, FSD is preparing to begin clearance operations. DanChurchAid, a Danish organisation involved in mine action, is planning to launch a survey, marking and demining program in the province of Makamba. The mine issue has also gained a higher profile domestically where a coalition of local NGOs, including Geneva Call's partner – the Independent Centre of Research and Initiative for Dialogue (CIRID) – have launched a Burundi Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Geneva Call continues to maintain regular contacts with the Palipehutu-FNL, particularly with spokesperson Pasteur Habimana, regarding allegations made by the army of mine use in the province of Bujumbura Rural. Palipehutu-FNL officials have denied the allegations. They have also told Geneva Call that the possibility of signing the DoC was discussed at the movement's congress held in Kigoma, Tanzania, in late April. On this occasion, a decision was reached not to sign the DoC for the time being because of the tense political situation and because ongoing fighting is prohibiting independent assessment and verification missions in areas where the group operates.



[Photo: Geneva Call 2004]

As a result of the Somali mission, the Danish Demining Group and the Swiss Foundation for mine action have prepared demining, mine risk education and explosive ordnance disposal projects for Puntland.

Colombia: Since the holding of the Forum on Landmines, Non-State Actors and Humanitarian Agreements in Bogotá, last June (see NSA News, Special Edition, June 2004), work has continued with Geneva Call and the Colombian Campaign Against Mines (CCCM) organising other regional meetings and new actors becoming interested in the question of NSAs and landmine use in Colombia.

On 18 and 19 August, in Bogotá, Geneva Call and the CCCM, with the support of UNICEF and the Organisation of American States, organised the first meeting of indigenous and afro-Colombian communities to discuss NSAs, humanitarian agreements, antipersonnel mines and unexploded ordnances. The impetus for this event came from meetings with several community leaders and representatives, which highlighted the severity of the landmine problem in areas inhabited by indigenous and afro-Colombian people. During the meeting, the assembled participants drafted a declaration that emphasized the importance of jointly implementing the obligations incumbent upon the Government of Colombia under the MBT as well as the mechanism proposed to NSAs by Geneva Call. Four other similar events were organised in Santander, Choco, Meta and Antioquia, each of which was retransmitted on live television. As a result of these various meetings, the question of humanitarian agreements on landmines is being widely discussed and has generated hope throughout the country.

The Governor of Antioquia has taken the initiative of creating a Humanitarian Commission with a view to finding regional solutions to the humanitarian crisis provoked by civil war. Antioquia is one of the regions that suffers the most from landmines and a number of its villages have been completely deserted by its inhabitants due to the presence of such deadly weapons in the ground. Geneva Call was invited to become a member of this Commission, which will endeavour to negotiate agreements with guerrilla groups in order to demine affected zones and enable the safe return of internally displaced persons. In September, Geneva Call took part in a fact-finding mission to three municipalities in the Antioquia region in order to better understand the extent of the landmine problem.

The proceedings of last June's Forum on Landmines, Non-State Actors and Humanitarian Agreements will soon be available on Geneva Call's website.



[Photo: Geneva Call 2004]

In June, Francisco Galan, speaker of the Colombian armed group, Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), addressed the Forum on Landmines, Non-State Actors and Humanitarian Agreements in Bogotá, voicing the ELN's willingness to re-open peace talks with the Government.

Sudan: The New Sudan Authority on Landmines (NSAL) was formed in May by the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) with a view to building the group's capacity to address the landmine issue in southern Sudan. Among other things, the NSAL will develop and approve national policies on landmines, establish priorities for mine action activities and programmes, as well as oversee the activities of the New Sudan Mine Action Directorate (NSMAD), a body which will implement and coordinate mine action policies in the region. The NSAL is composed of members of the relevant SPLM/A secretariats and commissions, e.g. education, health, agriculture, security, etc.

In June, the NSAL appealed to Colombian armed groups to end mine use. Its message was read during the Forum organised in Bogotá by Geneva Call and the CCCM. Under the Deed of Commitment, signatories undertake to promote the mine ban to other NSAs. In August, in Nairobi, the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan agreed a common mine action strategic framework. Geneva Call was involved in the event.

Sri Lanka: The Jaffna Antipersonnel Mine Ban Workshop was held in Jaffna Town, Sri Lanka on May 15th. The workshop was organised as a joint initiative of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF), Geneva Call and Landmine Action, a UK-based organisation active in mine action. The Jaffna Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies provided logistical support for the workshop, which was jointly funded by UNICEF- Sri Lanka, the Government of the UK, Geneva Call and Landmine Action. Approximately 40 participants attended, representing Jaffna-based NGOs and other layers of civil society, including religious leaders, student groups and women's organisations. Also present were representatives from UN agencies and international NGOs working in Sri Lanka. This was the first concerted effort to create local pressure groups in favour of the mine ban. Jaffna was chosen because it is one of the more densely populated and mine-affected areas in the country. A key objective of the workshop was to seek recommendations for advocacy efforts and to encourage participants to take an active role in such efforts.

Presentations covered the landmine situation in Sri Lanka and advocacy efforts in the region; an overview of mine action programmes in Sri Lanka; as well as avenues open to governments and NSAs for joining the mine ban through the MBT and the DoC respectively. The questions that were put to the participants for discussion were aimed at identifying possible strategies for advocacy work and promoting the mine ban within their constituencies, as well as with the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the country's armed opposition.

Most of the participants placed strong emphasis on the role of indigenous organisations and individual citizens in advancing the call for a mine ban within Sri Lanka. The involvement of civil society was identified as a critical factor in creating a broad-based, informed lobby to convince the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka of the importance of the mine ban. The Jaffna workshop was a positive first step in empowering grass-roots organisations and individuals to take action against landmines and, in so doing, moving the Parties to the conflict closer to an acceptance of the mine ban.



[Photo: Geneva Call 2004]

At the Jaffna Antipersonnel Mine Ban Workshop, in Sri Lanka, participants from local NGOs discussed the role of civil society in promoting the mine ban.

CONFERENCES, ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH

Roundtable discussion with the CNDD-FDD and the Government of Burundi, Bujumbura

In late February, Geneva Call was invited to attend a roundtable discussion organised by ICBL and its Burundi contact, the Centre d'Alerte et de Prévention de Conflits (CENAP). The discussion was part of a three-day Landmine Monitor regional meeting and brought together representatives of the transitional government, the CNDD-FDD, donor governments, the European Union (EU), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and international and local NGOs in order to consider Burundi's participation at the First Review Conference of the MBT. The roundtable attracted significant media coverage because it marked the first time that the government and the CNDD-FDD sat together in Bujumbura since the peace talks. Geneva Call encouraged the movement's leadership to attend the roundtable discussion and briefed participants on the rationale behind the CNDD-FDD's commitment (see NSA News, January 2004), urging both parties to translate their obligations into concrete actions, starting with information sharing on mined areas and the destruction of stockpiles.

Landmines in East Africa and the Ottawa Convention, Nairobi

In March, Geneva Call was invited to make a presentation on NSAs and landmines at a workshop organised by the ICRC and the Government of Kenya with the support of the Government of Canada. The workshop was aimed at assessing progress made in implementing the MBT in countries of East Africa, ahead of the First Review Conference. The NSA issue was discussed in terms of its importance in achieving a true universalisation of the mine ban.

Engaging Armed Groups in Peace Processes, London

In July, Geneva Call was invited to share its expertise in an international joint analysis workshop organised by Conciliation Resources, a London-based organisation working with conflict resolution projects and peace initiatives. The workshop enabled practitioners to exchange and reflect on the topic of engaging NSAs. The recommendations proposed by the participants will be used by Conciliation Resources in developing a thematic volume for its Accord series, in which Geneva Call will contribute a piece on its engagement experience in Colombia.

Women Combatants and Humanitarian Law, Geneva

In August, Geneva Call in collaboration with the Program for the Study of International Organisations (PSIO) of the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva held a three day workshop with more than 30 women combatants or former combatants belonging to rebel armed groups from some 20 war-torn countries. This event was a unique opportunity to learn more about the experiences of women and girls inside armed opposition groups and to discuss their potential role and interest in promoting humanitarian conduct in war.

The meeting was not only successful for the insight that it yielded but also for bringing together women from such different parts of the world who would otherwise not have had an opportunity to meet and share their experience of armed conflict. The views of the participants were placed at the centre of the debate in order to ensure that these would inform future strategies for ensuring respect for international humanitarian law during armed conflict. A written report of the proceedings authored by Dr Dyan Mazurana and published by the PSIO and Geneva Call is available on Geneva Call's website.

African Countries Agree to the Importance of Engaging Non-State Actors, Addis Ababa

From 15 to 17 September 2004, the African Union convened its second Continental Conference of African Experts on Landmines in Ethiopia. The Conference was aimed at devising a Common African Position on AP mines to be submitted to the MBT Review Conference and at reviewing developments since the adoption of the 1997 Kempton Park Plan of Action toward the elimination of AP mines in Africa and the establishment of the continent as an AP Mine-Free Zone.

Geneva Call was invited to discuss the importance of engaging NSAs in the mine ban and its approach was held out as a model for achieving the full universalisation of the mine ban in Africa. AU member States adopted a Declaration calling upon all NSAs "to respect the international norm established by the [MBT] and [welcoming] efforts by NGOs to engage those Actors, with the aim of securing their commitment to respect the highest standards of international law and humanitarian norms".

EP and OSCE adopt resolutions supporting NSA engagements

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 22 April seeking commitments from all parties involved in armed conflicts – both States and NSAs – to cease the use of AP mines in order to achieve a truly universal ban. The resolution supports NSA engagements in the mine ban, with particular reference to Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment (DoC), and urges states to accede to the MBT and to implement the obligations it sets forth.

In July, following several meetings with Geneva Call, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution calling upon all States and NSAs to adhere to a total ban on AP mines. The resolution further welcomed proposals to seek commitments from NSAs, citing Geneva Call's DoC as an example.

The text of both resolutions is available on Geneva Call's website.

Tour d'Afrique fundraiser places third in 11,500 km race

When the Tour d'Afrique bicycle marathon raced through Nairobi in March, Geneva Call and the Kenya Coalition Against Landmines organised a public reception welcoming Swiss double amputee cyclist Armin Köhli. Five local athletes, including a blind cyclist and a cyclist whose leg had been amputated, met Armin when he entered Kenya and cycled with him to Nairobi where they were greeted by reporters and a host of government officials, including the Kenyan Minister of Sports, the Canadian High Commissioner and the Swiss Ambassador. Armin, who placed third in the gruelling 120-day marathon, joined the race to raise awareness about landmines and disability issues in Africa. Proceeds raised by Armin were donated to Geneva Call and the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD).

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Website update - Geneva Call's website has undergone a series of changes. Most notably, the contents have now been translated into Spanish and Arabic. A search engine has been added making resources and documents more easily accessible. The 2003 Annual Report, newsletters, meeting reports and other documents are available online at www.genevacall.org