

United Kingdom Under Fire from Treaty Allies for Failure to Clear Landmines (26 Nov. 2008)

Geneva, 26 November 2008 – Nobel Peace Prize laureate International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and a long list of countries belonging to the international treaty banning antipersonnel mines today sharply criticized the United Kingdom's failure to clear mines in the Falkland Islands.

The UK is requesting a 10-year extension of its mine clearance deadline under the Mine Ban Treaty, without having cleared any of the 117 mined areas in the Falklands since the treaty entered into force in 1999. The request is being considered by States Parties to the treaty at an annual meeting in Geneva that concludes on Friday.

"If the UK's request is accepted, it will jeopardize the integrity of the treaty, sending a dangerous message that countries can pick and choose which of their obligations they honor, and which ones they thumb their nose at," said Steve Goose, head of the ICBL delegation to the 9th Meeting of the States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty.

The United Kingdom, speaking at the meeting, confirmed today it had no clear plan, nor any timeframe in mind, to comply with its obligation to clear all mined areas in its territory. All mine-affected states must clear land under their jurisdiction or control "as soon as possible but no later than 10 years" after joining the treaty. That 10 year deadline for the UK is March 1, 2009.

Reacting to the request, more than a dozen States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty expressed concern, including Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, France, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and Zimbabwe. These states and others called on the UK to compromise by revising its request for a shorter time period. By initially asking for only one to two more years, the UK would have the time to undertake the necessary technical work to develop a concrete and time-bound plan for full compliance with its mine clearance obligations. The UK flatly refused to change its request.

The UK tried to gain support for its request by announcing that it would issue a tender in 2009 to begin demining three areas. But the ICBL and others said this was insufficient since the UK still had no starting date, no timetable, no detailed plan, no budget, and no completion date for demining.

The UK argues that there is no humanitarian impact to delaying its clearance of the Falklands. However, accepting its ten-year extension request as is would be highly detrimental to the Mine Ban Treaty that underpins so much critical demining work around the world. It would send a message to other States Parties that a country can essentially circumvent its mine clearance obligations through the treaty's extension provision. "An approval of the UK's extension request would set a precedent that would haunt the Mine Ban Treaty for years to come," added Goose.

The United Kingdom is responsible for clearing 117 mined areas in the Falkland Islands. They have submitted an extension request to their initial 2009 deadline for clearance, which is to be decided upon by the States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty. The decision on the extension request is scheduled to be taken by the States Parties on Friday 28 November.