

ICBL Condemns U.S. "Closed Door" Renewal of Landmine Policy

Cartagena, 25 November 2009 -- The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) strongly condemned President Obama's abrupt decision to continue the Bush administration's policy of refusing to join the international treaty banning antipersonnel landmines. The announcement was made yesterday in an offhand remark by a U.S. State Department spokesperson who stated that an interagency review on the U.S. landmine policy had been concluded and a decision was made to maintain the status quo of the Bush years.

The ICBL, 1997 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureate, is calling on President Obama to publicly clarify his position on this issue without delay.

"We cannot understand this shameful decision. We cannot understand the Obama administration's decision to not be transparent in this 'review' process of the landmine policy and we definitely cannot understand President Obama's decision to continue with the Bush policy", said Jody Williams, 1997 Nobel Laureate. "This decision is a slap in the face to landmine survivors, their families and affected communities everywhere – especially because in just a few short weeks, he will be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize."

A further disturbing element of this announcement was that this policy review happened in a very cursory way, behind closed doors with no meaningful consultation with non-governmental organizations, legislators or NATO allies – flying directly in the face of the rhetoric of transparency that was so much a part of Obama administration's platform for change.

"The review shows a complete lack of transparency, and the outcome puts the U.S. once again on the wrong side of history and humanity," said Steve Goose, the Director of the Arms Division at Human Rights Watch and ICBL's Head of Delegation. "It is a decision lacking in vision, lacking in compassion, and lacking in basic common sense. The refusal to join the Mine Ban Treaty is completely at odds with the Obama administration's professed emphasis on multilateralism, disarmament and humanitarian affairs."

No official reason was provided for the hasty renewal of this policy except for the same arguments President Clinton used back in 1997 – reasons the ICBL deems as no longer relevant such as meeting U.S. security commitments to their friend and allies.

"Given that 158 countries, including all NATO allies, have endorsed the Mine Ban Treaty, we are not sure which allies the U.S. are concerned about meeting their security commitments to unless they are planning to align themselves with other states outside of the treaty such as Russia, China and Myanmar," said Tamar Gabelnick, ICBL's Treaty Implementation Director and a U.S. citizen.

The Mine Ban Treaty has been signed by every other country in the Western Hemisphere except Cuba. The international stigma against the weapon has become so strong that in recent years the only government laying significant numbers of new landmines has been the abusive military government in Burma. Production of the weapon has dwindled to a few states, and virtually no government still exports antipersonnel mines.

"We are shocked and disappointed because this announcement comes just days before the opening of the Cartagena Summit, the Second Review Conference on the Mine Ban Treaty where over 1000 activists including survivors and government delegates and dozens of high-level foreign affairs and defense ministers are expected to participate," said Sylvie Brigot, Executive Director of the ICBL. "The U.S. is registered to participate in the Summit as an observer – its first participation ever in an official Mine Ban Treaty meeting and we had great hope that this was a sign that they were moving in the right direction. Now, with a policy seemingly concluded, we feel the U.S. is not coming in good faith and we question what they hope to achieve by attending. Regardless, we will go on without them as we have for the past decade."