

US and Israel refuse to attend international conference on cluster bomb ban

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This week, delegations from over 100 countries arrived in Dublin, Ireland for the drafting of a global treaty banning the use of cluster munitions. The weapons, scattered indiscriminately from the air, have maimed and killed more than 13,000 people, according to the United Nations, the vast majority of them civilians and a great many of them children.

The draft treaty may set a deadline on the banning of use, production and sale of cluster munitions, along with a six-year timeframe for the destruction of stockpiled bombs. The treaty, if ratified, would also require the clearing of cluster-bomb contaminated regions and the assistance of victims and bombarded communities.

Notably but predictably absent from the diplomatic conference was the United States—the largest producer, stockpiler, and user of cluster bombs in the world and consistently opposed to international protocols on military force—along with military partner Israel, also a major user of the weapon. Also absent from the conference were Russia, China, India, and Pakistan.

A cluster bomb can travel for miles after being dropped by plane over an area. The bomb's shell then opens, releasing hundreds of small, powerful bombs, called bomblets. The bomblets—which may be filled with metal fragments or incendiary chemicals such as white phosphorous and napalm—are spread indiscriminately across hundreds of acres, exacting high civilian casualties and widespread damage to infrastructure.

Cluster bombs also have a substantial rate of failure to explode on impact, with estimates by international agencies varying from 10 to 40 percent. Although land mines are banned under international law, unexploded cluster ordnances function effectively in the same manner.

Bomblets can make land uninhabitable and non-arable for decades after bombardment, and because the small bombs are often brightly colored and ball-shaped, children can mistake them for toys. The bombs, powerful enough to destroy bridges and tanks, obliterate the human body and inflict fatal injuries for up to 25 meters. According to a 2007 study by Handicap International, nearly every reported victim of unexploded bomblets (98 percent) has been a civilian, and one in three victims were children.

During a February 2007 conference preliminary to the one held this week, 46 countries agreed to develop a treaty to ban the use of cluster bombs by 2008. At the time, in addition to the US, Romania, Poland, and Japan were among those refusing to sign the declaration.

Cluster munitions have been used in military actions by 23 countries, and more than 30 countries have produced the weapons. Hundreds of people die each year from unexploded cluster bombs around the world, including in regions such as Vietnam, where the remaining bomblets are nearly 40 years old.

In addition to refusing to participate in the conference, the US government has pressed its allies in attendance to introduce measures weakening the treaty. Because the treaty could prohibit its ratifying signatories from engaging in joint operations in which cluster bombs were used by military partners, US military and Bush administration officials are concerned that it will have the effect of further unraveling its “coalition” in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

For this reason, much of the negotiation process has focused on definitions and the distinction between cluster bombs and so-called “smart” weaponry. Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and

Switzerland have all submitted revisions to the proposal that would exclude bombs—some containing sub-munitions—that are equipped with sensors and self-destruct mechanisms that supposedly would lower civilian casualty rates.

Germany has also sought to introduce into the treaty a “transition period” of up to 10 years, during which time countries may continue to use cluster bombs. This clause has been seconded by Britain, France, Switzerland, and Japan.

In pursuing criminal military objectives, the US and Israel have relied increasingly on air power and massive “shock and awe” bombardment campaigns. Within the last decade, US-led cluster bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo have resulted in the slaughter of thousands of people. According to the anti-cluster bomb organization Cluster Munitions Coalition (CMC), during the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 1999 bombing of Kosovo more civilians died from cluster bombs than from any other type of weapon. Many thousands more die as a result of the deliberate bombings of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, roads, and water treatment facilities.

These deaths are considered “collateral damage” by the Bush administration and its allies, an “unfortunate” but acceptable price to be paid by the civilian population.

A May 19 report from the BBC cited the charity Landmine Action, which estimates that in 2003 alone, the US and its military ally Britain dropped 13,000 cluster munitions—between 1.8 million and 2 million bomblets—in its invasion and occupation efforts.

The UN found that during the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, the Israeli military fired approximately 4 million cluster bomblets, of which as many as 1 million—one in four—landed without exploding. The bombardments killed at least 300 Lebanese civilians, and the CMC reported that more than 200 civilians died from the unexploded bomblets in the year after the ceasefire.



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