

US, Israel, other military powers refuse to sign cluster munitions treaty

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22 December 2008

On December 3 nearly 100 nations signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions Treaty, which bans the production, stockpiling and use of cluster munitions. Several of the nations most affected by the weapons signed the treaty—Lebanon, Afghanistan, Laos, Cambodia, Serbia, and Sierra Leone. The majority of nations in NATO signed as well, including Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

Most major users and stockpilers of the weapons refused to sign the treaty. Most prominently, the United States and Israel, the largest users of the weapons over the last half-century, dismissed the ban. Washington even managed to secure a loophole in the agreement allowing signatories to continue military cooperation with the US without penalty.

Other significant military powers—Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Brazil and Turkey—also refused to sign. Many not only own stockpiles of cluster weapons, but also produce them. Advocates of the treaty cling to the hope that those nations who did ban the weapon will stigmatize future usage by non-signatories, but this overlooks the escalation of international tension only being worsened by economic crisis. Given the countries that stockpile the weapons and their history of usage, there is no reason whatsoever to believe they will stop deploying them in the future.

What is a cluster munition?

Originally developed in World War Two by Germany and the USSR, cluster munitions consist of a shell filled with anywhere from 3 to 2000 "bomblets," or smaller explosives. The shells carrying these bomblets can be dropped from the sky, or launched as missiles or artillery from the ground. Once over the target the shell opens to release hundreds of bomblets, which disperse over a wide area. Each bomblet itself is a fragmentary

explosive, which should detonate on impact.

Cluster weapons are called "area weapons" for their huge dispersal and the mayhem they unleash. If used against amassed troops and vehicles, they are incredibly vicious. They are like "steel rain", which not only kills, but also maims widely.

Aside from their incredible lethality when initially dropped, cluster munitions also have a notoriously high dud rate—reported to be anywhere from 1 percent to 40 percent, or in the case of older weapons, near total failure. In actual usage the failure rate is generally over 10 percent. This effectively turns the duds into land mines, even years after they were dropped. Because most cluster munitions contain from 200-600 bomblets, dropping only a few can leave hundreds of unexploded bomblets.

The development of cluster weapons displays an enormous perverse ingenuity. Produced by at least 34 countries, there are known to be over 210 cluster weapon designs. Whether launched from the ground or dropped from the air, each has complicated engineering to ensure that bomblets spread out widely and land properly. Individual bomblets can have pre-etched steel casings that are engineered to fragment into over 2000 flying steel shards upon impact. Bomblets can also contain explosives, incendiaries, electrical shorting devices or chemicals. Some contain a second fuse to ensure that duds, which failed to explode on impact, have a backup mechanism to explode with any other contact.

A newer American "combined effects munition" is designed to unleash hell against people and vehicles all at once. Each bomblet has a scored metal shell that explodes into three hundred jagged steel fragments, injuring people up to 500 feet away. A concave copper cone at the bottom of the bomblet turns into a molten slug that can penetrate 5 inches of armor. Lastly, an incendiary zirconium wafer also spreads incendiary fragments that can burn nearby vehicles.

Justifications for continued use

Nations continuing to stockpile and manufacture cluster munitions are generally in regions of inter-imperialist and other kinds of conflict. Nearly every country in war-torn central Asia and the Middle East will continue to stockpile. Both India and Pakistan, citing each other as a threat, and Sri Lanka—which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) alleges recently used the weapon—did not sign the treaty.

Finland, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, the ex-Soviet central Asian republics, North and South Korea and China will all continue to stockpile cluster munitions, citing either the threat of Russia or the US. In response to the treaty, Russian Lt. Gen. Yevgeny Buzhinsky stated "we stand for evolutionary development of these weapons. Russia's Defense Ministry objects to radical and prohibitive measures of this kind."

The Bush administration's response to the ban is that cluster munitions are "absolutely critical and essential" to US military options, "we do not believe they are indiscriminate weapons" and banning them would endanger American troops. The last argument is particularly cynical, as American forces themselves have died attempting to clear cluster bomblets, including six US army combat engineers in 1991.

The final American claim is that a new generation of precision cluster weapons that are supposed to have a one percent dud rate will eliminate the problem. They are precision weapons because each bomblet will heat seek a target—say, the engine of a tank—but if dropped in urban areas, this could be the engine of a car. In actuality this precision makes the weapons even deadlier, as every single bomblet would attempt to hit a human or vehicular target. Each bomblet also has a mechanism to self-destruct after a few days. This claim has been met with skepticism, as many cluster munitions with supposed failure rates of less than 5 percent have been found to fail anywhere from 10-40 percent of the time in actual usage. In total the new weapons may reduce the affect-effects, but the widespread and indiscriminate initial explosion would only be more fearsome.

In June a policy memo by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates ordered all cluster munitions to have a failure rate of less than 1 percent by 2018. Yet a recent *Economist* article states that cluster munitions make up over half of the US bomb stockpile, according to a Pentagon insider. Military analysts also say most American artillery shells are cluster munitions.

If the policy is followed through, it is likely that this enormous stockpile would not be dismantled, but resold or used. Israel used a massive barrage of cluster munitions in the

final days of its 2006 assault on Lebanon, some of which were the most recent US models with a lower dud rate. The Israelis also used ancient U.S. cluster bombs from the Vietnam War, which Human Rights Watch (HRW) stated have dud rates of "90 to 100 percent."

Failure rates are always high because from the air, bomblet parachutes get stuck in trees, and bomblets sink into mud, vegetation, and other soft terrain. Farming, herding, and transportation become a deadly risk where they land. Perhaps worst of all, their size and color frequently attract children. It is hard to imagine a more effective weapon with which to terrorize a civilian population for decades. A Handicap International report bears this out—over 98 percent of casualties from cluster munitions have been civilian. [1]

In face of this astonishing statistic, groups such as Human Rights Watch still fail to state the obvious: that indiscriminate pollution of a region with these deadly munitions is a *desired* effect of their use. It is not a mistake or the result of a misunderstanding that the major military powers, led by the US, did not sign the treaty—they fully intend to use the weapons. With the US planning to launch new wars of aggression, and tensions between world powers heightening, cluster munitions are among the foulest and most desperate measures nations will take to expand their global power.

1. http://www.handicap-international.org.uk/page_597.php



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