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The Ottawa landmines treaty: A major step toward human security

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The Centre for International Governance Innovation hosted a “Symposium on the 10th Anniversary of the Ottawa Treaty Banning Landmines” in December 2007. The following is an adaptation of a presentation made during the symposium.

The Ottawa Process, which led to the treaty banning anti-personnel landmines now signed by almost 160 states, was a tangible advance in human security. In the late 1990s, at a time when the notion of human security was an emerging political and foreign policy concept, the Ottawa Treaty was an important, and conceptually simple, instrument that demonstrably improved the security of people.

The Ottawa Treaty was not about providing security in the traditional sense—by building state security, by participation in military coalitions, or by spending more on military equipment and personnel. Indeed, some military leaders at the time argued that the treaty would reduce state security by denying armed forces a legitimate weapon. Rather, the treaty was about advancing human security because, at its core, it was about making ordinary people more secure.

For a definition of human security, we can do worse than the combination of “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear.” When peoples’ wants and fears are magnified by the proliferation and misuse of weapons—as they are in so many parts of the world—then a key strategy for advancing human security is arms control and disarmament. Other strategies are also required: addressing pressing environmental challenges, eliminating poverty and improving human development, protecting human rights, and strengthening good governance.

For the moment, however, let us confine our thoughts to the work ahead for arms control and disarmament. We should not forget that the Ottawa Treaty is a disarmament treaty, aimed at global disarmament of a particularly egregious conventional weapon. Equally important, the Ottawa Treaty is a major step in a larger disarmament journey that is and will be needed to achieve widespread human security. It was a success from which we can draw inspiration, and its lessons can inform other disarmament efforts.

The arms control and disarmament agenda is tasked with advancing two enormous efforts. The first is eliminating weapons of mass destruction, the most prominent being nuclear weapons. The second is reducing the negative consequences of the innumerable types of conventional weapons. Human security requires dedication to both efforts. In the case of nuclear weapons, despite

important disarmament steps in recent years, an estimated 27,000 nuclear weapons remain. If used, deliberately or accidentally, these would easily obliterate life on earth.

Many arguments regarding international obligations that were successfully employed to secure the Ottawa Treaty also apply to nuclear weapons. For example, nuclear weapons are, without doubt, indiscriminate and disproportionate weapons. Conceptually, and morally, the case for banning nuclear weapons is easy to argue, even if abolition remains a politically formidable task.

But here let us consider recent progressive arms control and disarmament initiatives on conventional weapons that could make use of examples of best practice from the Ottawa Treaty process. Although this list is not exhaustive, all of the following conventional arms control and disarmament initiatives of civil society postdate the Ottawa Treaty:

- The Cluster Munitions Coalition

The CMC is a group of nongovernmental organizations comprised of many of the leading members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize with Jodi Williams for its work to achieve the landmines treaty. The Coalition is calling for a global ban on cluster munitions, whose failures result in landmine-like weapons that have killed thousands of civilians.¹ The “Oslo Process” for an international treaty was launched in Norway in February 2007, backed by 46 states. In December 2007 a Vienna conference on the treaty text was attended by over 80 states.

- The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

Founded in 1998, the Child Soldiers Coalition works to end the use of child soldiers and to assist with their effective demobilization and reintegration into their communities. The Coalition was central to states’ adoption of an Optional Protocol on children and armed conflict, which came into force in 2002 as part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Coalition pressures for implementation of the Protocol, conducts research on the use of child soldiers, and publishes global reports.

- The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA)

IANSA was founded in Canada in 1998 at a meeting hosted by Project Ploughshares. It is now a network of over 700 member organizations in 100 countries that works to reverse the worldwide gun violence that results in 1,000 deaths every day. IANSA pressures for implementation of the 2001 UN Programme of Action on small arms and IANSA members are active at the global, regional, and national levels. Many IANSA members also address small arms violence at an immediate, local level.

- The Control Arms campaign

At a time when there is no global agreement on arms transfers, the Control Arms campaign is calling for an Arms Trade Treaty based on the obligations of states under international law. “Control Arms” is backed by three global nongovernmental organizations: Amnesty International, Oxfam International, and IANSA. Launched in October 2003, the campaign was largely responsible for the UN resolution in December 2006, “Towards an Arms Trade Treaty,” which received overwhelming support in the UN General Assembly. A UN Group of

Governmental Experts will report by the end of 2008 on the way forward and it is possible that a treaty will be signed as early as 2010.²

Although these initiatives are well developed, all could still benefit from checking their experience against the lessons of the Ottawa Process. These lessons include:

- *Framing the initiative as a response to a humanitarian (that is, a human security) problem.* As demonstrated by the landmines campaign, it is important to emphasize the protection of civilians that will result from the initiative.
- *Adopting a holistic analysis and approach.* The landmines campaign was a broadly based campaign of civil society organizations experienced in arms control, development, human rights, public health, and international law, among other fields. All this expertise informed the analysis and tactics of the campaign. The cooperation across sectors also broadened outreach to the public.
- *Collaboration between civil society and states to set, achieve, and implement joint goals.* As with other conventional weapons, the nature, distribution, and impact of landmines offer challenges that cannot be met by either civil society or states alone. There is a need for mutual and coordinated resources and efforts, even after hard-won agreements are signed.
- *Drawing on civil society experience, expertise, and commitment, especially from the South.* Civil society groups bring knowledge and analysis of conventional weapons problems and solutions from which state officials may be distant. This is particularly true of the southern NGOs that operate in regions suffering most from the impact of conventional weapons.
- *Emphasizing international legal obligations and thereby reinforcing the rule of law.* The landmines campaign benefited from the work of the International Red Cross and international legal authorities that reminded states of their existing obligations under international law. Other initiatives have also emphasized the fundamental importance of adhering to international law.
- *Committed state leadership.* Canadian leadership of the Ottawa Process was crucial to its success and became a source of national pride. State leadership in other disarmament efforts is also a key to their efficacy.

With regard to the last point, there is reason to be concerned that leadership by the Canadian government in particular has waned. Jodi Williams was quoted in late November 2007 as asking, “Where’s Canada’s leadership in global issues right now?” Indeed, in the area of arms control and disarmament, there are notable instances in which state leadership has been conceded by Canada to others—the Norwegians in the case of cluster munitions and the UK in the case of the arms trade treaty.

Canada’s important work on small arms and light weapons is being screened by and, in some instances, held hostage to an influential group of gun advocates. We saw this most recently in the delay in implementing marking requirements for firearms imported into Canada. Canada’s police boards, police chiefs, and rank-and-file police associations have all called on the federal government to ignore pressure from a gun lobby that wants Canada to drop the marking requirement. It has become apparent that Canada’s “new government” is not enamoured of human security approaches to arms control and disarmament. Consequently, it is incumbent on civil society groups and others to closely monitor developments and to apply political pressure as

necessary to ensure, at a minimum, that Canada does not backslide on existing arms control and disarmament commitments.

Will these current disarmament initiatives be as successful as the Ottawa Process? We don't know yet. What we do know is that we must continue to work, using all the ways and means proven to be effective. Advocating arms control and disarmament is an incremental, often tedious activity with surprisingly rapid and successful exceptions—like the Ottawa Process. It should continue to inspire us in our pursuit of more broadly based human security.

Notes

1. For more information, see Janis Grychowski's article, "Preventable harm, foreseeable solution: The campaign to end the use of cluster munitions" in the Autumn 2007 *Ploughshares Monitor* (<http://www.ploughshares.ca/libraries/monitor/mons07e.pdf>).
2. Project Ploughshares is a member of IANSA and of Mines Action Canada, which belongs to the Cluster Munitions Coalition.