

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 14/050/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 069
27 March 2003

Iraq: Risk to civilians if landmines and cluster bombs used

Indiscriminate weapons must not be used by any side in the conflict in Iraq, Amnesty International said today, as claims of the use of cluster bombs and anti-personnel mines continued to emerge.

The organization reiterated its call to the US, UK and Iraqi authorities to immediately halt the use of "weapons which are inherently indiscriminate or otherwise prohibited under international humanitarian law".

Both US and UK officials have refused to rule out the use cluster bombs. Amnesty International's concern is heightened as allegations emerge that cluster bombs have been dropped on Basra and may be responsible for civilian deaths and injuries.

Cluster bombs release numerous bomblets over a large area. At least 5% of these 'dud' bomblets do not explode upon impact, turning them into de facto anti-personnel mines because they continue to pose a threat to people, including civilians, who come into contact with them.

"An immediate moratorium on the use of cluster weapons must be established because such weapons present a high risk of violating the prohibition on indiscriminate military attacks," Amnesty International said.

"The 'dud' bomblets remain a continued threat to people, including civilians on the move, who suffer loss of life and limb when coming into contact with them."

Iraqi troops were reportedly laying anti-personnel mines and using landmine booby-traps in southern Iraq. There have been other reports that Iraqi forces were laying mines around Kirkuk in the north and elsewhere in the country.

The US Pentagon has stated that "it retains the right to use landmines." The International Campaign to Ban Landmines has stated that the US has already deployed about 90,000 landmines to the region for possible use in Iraq. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair has so far refused to rule out the use of cluster bombs by UK forces. The US has been stockpiling thousands of anti-personnel mines (banned under UK law) off the coast of the British territory of Diego Garcia for use in Iraq. If anti-personnel mines had entered the territory of Diego Garcia, this would appear to breach the UK Land Mines Act.

"The US and Iraq must immediately halt any deployment of anti-personnel landmines," Amnesty International declared.

"The use of landmines and cluster bombs could massively increase the scale of civilian casualties, so their use must be ruled out," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Ottawa Treaty), which entered into force on 1 March 1999, forbids the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention and transfer of anti-personnel weapons. Neither the USA nor Iraq are parties to the treaty. The UK and Australia have ratified the treaty.

The Ottawa treaty has been ratified by 131 states and signed by 146.

In December 2002, a Working Group to the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons was established to draw up measures aimed at curbing the casualties caused by unexploded ordinance.

To see an interview with Amnesty International's expert on arms and human rights, please visit:
<http://emedia.amnesty.org/mines.ram>

A media briefing on indiscriminate weapons is available on
<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/act790062003>

For comment, please contact the following media officers:

Between 0800 GMT and 1900 GMT

Judit Arenas on + 44 207413 5810 or mobile + 44 7778 472 188 (English and Spanish)

Teresa Richardson on + 44 207413 5554 or mobile + 44 7768 182 445 (English)

Kamal Samari on + 44 207413 5831 or mobile + 44 7778 472 126 (English, Arabic and French)

Magda Wendorff-Kowalczyk on + 44 207413 5729 or mobile + 44 7778 472 173 (English, German and Polish)

Between 1900 GMT and 0200 GMT

Alistair Hodgett on +1 202 544 0200 ext 302 or mobile +1 703 861 7384 (English)

Between 0200 GMT and 0800 GMT

Rebecca Lineham on + 64 21 422 562 (English)

For further information on Amnesty International's concerns and recommendations about the crisis in Iraq please visit: <http://www.amnesty.org/go/iraq>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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