

Conference takes stock of demining work

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Landmines are still a danger in many countries (Keystone)

The fight against landmines is being won, but the battle is far from over, according to a Swiss diplomat at the end of an international conference in Croatia.

The meeting of signatory countries to the 1997 Ottawa Convention on banning landmines served to review progress on global demining activities.

The treaty prohibits the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of anti-personnel mines.

At last year's meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, delegates adopted a five-year plan for clearing mines, destroying stockpiles and improving care for victims.

During this week's talks in Zagreb, participants reviewed the implementation of the plan, which covers the period from 2005 to 2009.

"We have made progress, with more countries joining the convention this year," said Swiss diplomat Jürg Streuli.

"But we know that some countries have major difficulties when it comes to carrying out demining work within the timeframe [set out under the plan]."

"Disappointment"

Streuli told swissinfo that it was a "disappointment" that some large countries – including the United States, Russia and Pakistan – had yet to join the convention.

He added that one of the main goals of the annual meeting was to "keep the pot boiling" and to ensure that governments do not get complacent about progress being made.

Stephan Nellen, the director of Geneva's International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, said "steady but not breathtaking progress" was being made.

"There is still a lot to do in terms of getting mines out of the ground... and providing assistance for victims of landmines. One of the big questions is whether countries can meet the deadlines [set out in the five-year plan] by 2009."

Action plan

For his part, Streuli believes it is unlikely that the plan will be fulfilled in its entirety.

"There is a certain amount of idealism. But if we don't set high goals, we won't achieve anything," he said.

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Jürg Streuli

Conference delegates urged governments to ensure further progress in detecting and clearing mine fields, assisting landmine victims and respecting all the obligations set out in the convention.

According to Nellen, the challenge for the international community is to set up demining programmes in an increasing number of countries.

"You have countries which everyone knows are heavily mined, like Cambodia and Angola," he told swissinfo.

"But you also have countries where the problem of mines is only now emerging. I'm thinking here of places like Vietnam, Iran and Iraq."

Swiss contribution

Switzerland has been active in the field of demining for many years and is the biggest financial contributor to the International Centre for Humanitarian Demining.

Streuli said the Swiss government has set two main goals for the coming year. The first is to make a success of the task of co-chairing the committee on landmine-victim assistance.

Switzerland will also be attempting to raise awareness of the fact that mines are not just the result of conflict between countries but also within them.

"Mines can be an internal problem between governments and rebel groups, and this is something we would like to focus on," said Streuli.

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<http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=6286105>

Related Sites

Full text of Ottawa Convention:

http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm

Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining: <http://www.gichd.ch/>

Swiss foreign ministry: <http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/e/home.html>

Mine Action: <http://www.mineaction.org/>