

SPECIAL COMMENT

There is no longer any doubt that the use of cluster munitions causes untold human suffering. Unless progress is made in the efforts to establish an international, legally binding instrument regulating the use of cluster munitions, these heinous weapons may become an even greater humanitarian problem than anti-personnel mines used to be.

In the view of the Norwegian government, cluster munitions violate the Geneva conventions' prohibition against indiscriminate weapons and the principle of proportionality, that is to say they cause damage that is disproportionate to the military advantage gained. The Norwegian government therefore advocated an international prohibition against the use of such weapons in its inaugural address to parliament. We will actively promote a prohibition against those types of cluster munitions that cause great humanitarian suffering and pose a major obstacle to development.

Civil society, humanitarian organizations, parliamentarians and United Nations representatives are also demanding that states take responsibility for dealing with this humanitarian challenge now. It is therefore most timely and appropriate that this issue of *Disarmament Forum* is dedicated to this topic.

An international prohibition against certain types of weapons in the category of cluster munitions is urgent for at least three reasons: first, because of the immediate danger posed by such munitions to civilians due to their inaccuracy and wide dispersal pattern; second, because of the long-term danger posed by the enormous number of unexploded submunitions left behind after conflicts, which constitute de facto anti-personnel mines; and third, because of the risk that a generation of "outdated", unsophisticated cluster munitions could be dumped on the world market—as rich countries obtain better cluster munitions, today's munitions, with their high failure rate and poor accuracy, may be dumped in other countries.

Billions of cluster munitions are stockpiled around the world today. They could create a problem that surpasses that posed by landmines. Every year more than US\$ 400 million is spent on humanitarian mine clearance, including measures to reduce the humanitarian consequences of the use of cluster munitions. The only way we can prevent the huge numbers of cluster munitions stockpiled today from being used in the future, and the insuperable humanitarian challenge that this would create, is to establish an international instrument prohibiting such weapons before it is too late.

Current international efforts to regulate the use of cluster munitions have not achieved much. Little progress has been made since the issue was first put on the international agenda some years ago.

For its part, the Norwegian government has established a temporary moratorium on the use of cluster munitions. Norway will continue to play an active role in efforts to launch real negotiations on an international agreement that will effectively address both the immediate and the potential humanitarian problem we are facing; we will listen to other states and international and humanitarian

organizations. We see that there is increasing pressure to take action, and for good reason, considering recent events in the Middle East. We must take advantage of this pressure to promote broad international cooperation between states and humanitarian organizations.

Today, no serious actors advocate a total prohibition against all kinds of what might be classified as cluster munitions. We share the view that it should be possible to reconcile what is acceptable from a humanitarian point of view with what is militarily necessary and politically feasible in order to prevent the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of cluster-munition use. This will be our basis for finding a solution—as it was for our work that led to the prohibition against anti-personnel mines in the 1990s. Once again, we need to mobilize both governments and grassroots organizations in a broad campaign.

We must not allow the lack of interest in some quarters to prevent small and medium-sized countries from initiating a process to fulfil our humanitarian obligations. We will therefore continue to work toward an international prohibition against unacceptable types of cluster munitions. The time is ripe to intensify our efforts.

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