

A Canine Solution for a Safer World

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, June 24, 2003

The image of innocent civilians blown up by landmines is "etched in my mind forever," says retired Colonel Perry Baltimore. A 27-year veteran of the U.S. army and former Director of the Middle East/Africa Division with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Perry has seen the slaughter first-hand. He says armies around the world "pollute the environment" with mines. About 60 countries are infected with tens of millions of landmines. The human costs are staggering: the Red Cross estimates about ten thousand people are maimed or killed by mines each year.

Baltimore and his retired military cohort, including two four-star generals, are doing something about it. They run a nonprofit humanitarian group, The Marshall Legacy Institute, dedicated to ridding the world of landmines. What's the secret weapon in their arsenal? Man's best friend: mine detection dogs.

The Institute trains and deploys dogs to work in danger zones around the world, sniffing out explosives in buried landmines and alerting their handlers to the insidious killers. German Shepherds or Belgian Malinois scour the terrain for plastic mines untraceable by traditional metal detectors and probes. Their noses are far more complex than any man-made device. The animals can go where few of the larger mine sweepers can tread: footpaths along a river, school playgrounds, rocky hills.

Angola should be one of the wealthiest countries in Africa. It's rich in diamonds, oil, and wide expanses of agricultural land. But most of the plantings in Angola, says Baltimore, are landmines. Aid agencies have to fly in food for a starving populace unable to plow fields riddled with explosives.

That's where the tragedy of landmines is compounded. Farmlands abandoned, villages transformed into ghost towns, communities evacuated. Acres lie fallow because no one knows where the devices are hidden. In Croatia during the Balkan wars, I visited a rural village sewn with mines. A farmwife motioned for me to come see her purple iris. She had inched her way across her yard with a fork, before daring to tend her garden. Her face was beaming as she stood in the doorway of the home to which she had recently returned. But all the houses around her were vacant. I wondered how long it would take me, with young children, to dare move back in. What mother can be assured that her child won't go off chasing a kitten onto a deadly plot of ground?

The scourge of landmines has been publicized by outspoken critics including the late Princess Diana and Queen Noor of Jordan. The international community has taken notice, passing a treaty to ban landmines in 1997 known as the Ottawa Convention. About 146 countries are signatories, with a few notable exceptions-including the United States.

Although the Marshall Institute doesn't take a political position on the U.S. government's landmine policy, its chairman Anthony Lake is himself a critic. Lake was President Clinton's national security advisor during failed efforts to persuade Congress and the Pentagon that we should sign the Ottawa treaty. The refusal to sign this and other international laws means "We are breaking away not only from our allies but from our own heritage on the most basic issues of human liberty and the rule of law," wrote Lake in a Massachusetts newspaper last year.

True, the United States has been the most generous country in contributing funds, personnel and equipment to eradicate mines, spending more than \$700 million dollars in 43 countries over the past ten years. The U.S. State Department is a partner in the Institute's canine mine-detection programs. But the recent admission by the U.S. military that it planned to drop "self-destructing small mines" around weapons depots in Iraq alarmed landmine opponents.

Outside the political fray, the Institute is focused on cleaning up civilian areas. Its dog teams are scattered in post-conflict zones, including Bosnia, Eritrea, Lebanon, and Nicaragua. A deactivating expert and a trained dog are a strong team, joined by a singular purpose. The next hot spots for the dog teams include Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and Thailand if the Institute's fund-raising campaign-with the Humane Society and other partners-is successful.

The Marshall Institute is clearly living up to its namesake, Nobel Peace Prize winner George Marshall, whose mission was to help the developing world help itself. In lands where bullets have ceased flying but mines keep killing, the Institute is determined to stop the bloodshed.