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Editorial: Ban cluster bombs

Bill a first step toward protecting civilians

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Anyone traveling through Laos, Cambodia or other recovering war zones is likely to come across children and adults who have lost limbs or eyesight after stumbling across a long-buried bomb.

Every few days, a civilian somewhere is killed or maimed because of remnants of past wars. It could be a farmer in Afghanistan running his plow across a field or a child in Kosovo who picks up what seems to be a harmless chunk of metal.

Over the last decade, more than 150 countries have unsuccessfully pressed the United States and other countries to sign a treaty banning the use of land mines. Yet even as they crusade on that unfinished task, widespread use of another indiscriminate weapon of war -- cluster bombs -- has increased the threat to civilians.

"Cluster bombs" are a catchall term for munitions that armies have stockpiled all over the world. They can be dropped from planes or fired from artillery. Once in the air, these munitions disperse smaller "bomblets." These bomblets are designed to explode in the air or when hitting their targets, and can be effective in taking out an area of infantry and armor. Yet many of these bomblets prove to be duds and fail to detonate. This results in hundreds or even thousands of tiny bomblets left behind, later exploding when someone disturbs them.

Although not alone in deploying these weapons, the United States has been a major user and supplier of cluster bombs.

During the war in Indochina, U.S. forces dropped thousands of cluster bombs in Laos. These leftover bomblets have killed or injured 11,000 people in Laos since the war ended, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Cluster bombs have also caused high civilian casualties in Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Vietnam and Lebanon.

No law or treaty will ever ensure that wars are carried out cleanly, with no cost to civilians. But there are steps that nations can take to limit the after-effects of war. In the U.S. Senate, Dianne Feinstein of California and Patrick Leahy are now urging their counterparts to take one of those steps.

For the second year, Feinstein and Leahy have introduced a measure to ban the sale, use and transfer of cluster bombs that have a dud rate of 1 percent or more. To win over reluctant senators, the Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act of 2007 doesn't call for an absolute phaseout of these weapons. Instead, it bans their use where civilians are known to be present.

Even with such concessions, this bill faces an uphill fight. The Pentagon has long defended its use of cluster bombs, describing them in a 2004 report as "a versatile weapon ideally suited to attack time-sensitive area targets in a fluid battlefield experience."

According to the Pentagon, restrictions on cluster bombs would force commanders to deploy increased numbers of other missiles or bombs -- the same argument that was once made against banning land mines.

Misguided arguments against the Feinstein-Leahy bill have also come from some pro-Israeli activists, who claim the bill is targeted against Israel. This is a red herring. While Israel's use of cluster bombs in southern Lebanon last year has certainly focused attention on their indiscriminate use, Feinstein says she first became alarmed about cluster bombs after learning about their legacy in Southeast Asia.

More than 40 countries have joined in the campaign to end or widely restrict the use of cluster bombs. The United States needs to participate in this effort. If pro-Israeli groups were to recognize the moral imperative of this cause and its true origins, it could turn the tide.

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