

International Mine Awareness Day 4 April, 2017

Sweden must increase its support for mine action

More than 6 000 people were wounded or killed by landmines in 2015 – 75 percent more than in the year before. Countries should act in response to these alarming numbers. Instead, Sweden has cut its support for mine action in half since 2012. The negative trend in the last few years must be reversed, say Megan Burke, Head of International Campaign to Ban Landmines, ICBL, and Aleksander Gabelic, President of the United Nations Association of Sweden.

Landmines prolong and worsen armed conflicts. In Syria, where war and the human suffering now is continuing in its seventh year, mines are used as part of warfare. Despite this, and despite that 162 states have signed the Ottawa Treaty against landmines, the struggle against the deadly weapon is now being weakened.

New numbers from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirms that Sweden is one of the countries that have reduced its support for mine action in the last years. During the last year, the government invested 54.3 million Swedish crowns to combat mines. Although it is a small increase compared to 2015, it is barely half of the Swedish support in 2012, when the sum was 95.4 million crowns.

Over 6 000 people were injured or killed by landmines in 2015, according to Landmine Monitor 2016, the latest report on the global landmine situation. That is an increase of 75 percent since the year before, and the highest number of casualties since 2006. Four out of five victims (78 %) were civilians. More than a third of these were children.

These alarming numbers should make the countries of the world assemble to once and for all rid the world of landmines. On the contrary, according to Landmine Monitor the support for mine action is at its lowest since 2005. At least in part due to the decreased funding, the pace of mine clearance worldwide has slowed down during the year.

Sweden is not alone in reducing the funds, but the Swedish cutbacks stand out. Among the Nordic countries one can make a comparison to Denmark, where allocations has been increased with 23 percent and Finland where they have been marginally decreased. Norway is on the same path as Sweden with a 36 percent reduction, but still contributes significantly more in absolute numbers.

An obstacle to development

Anti-personnel mines are constructed to inflict maximum damage. In war, the aim is to force the enemy to care for the wounded instead of fighting. After a war, countries that need to invest in reconstruction and social development instead have to commit resources to clear minefields and treat injured people. Remaining mines prevent children from going to school, farmers from farming their land, and refugees from returning home after the war. All this obstruct development, increasing the risk of conflict-ridden countries falling back into

violence. Taking care of mines is therefore an important part of preventing conflict and supporting peace building.

It is often the poor that are facing the risks of mines, as they need to use mine-contaminated roads and land to survive. Mine clearance therefore also improves the lives of the world's most vulnerable.

The Swedish development aid should contribute to conflict prevention. The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of many Swedish partnership countries that are having problems with landmines. Supporting mine action in the country's eastern provinces would be a positive addition to lessen the insecurity there, which the government also explicitly mentions in their strategy for development cooperation with the country. Another high-risk country is Colombia, where large areas are contaminated after fifty years of war. Clearing these minefields would be an important contribution to making the burgeoning peace sustainable.

Mine action is more than just mine clearance. It is also about supporting and assisting mine victims, destroying stockpiled mines, and educating people in how to avoid the risks of mines. Another important part is encouraging more states to accede to the existing international conventions and living up to their commitments under these to create a mine free world.

Despite the rallying around the Ottawa Treaty, mines are still deployed in 64 countries and territories. In June 2014 the Maputo Action Plan was adopted, with the goal of creating a mine free world by 2025.

“Sweden will do its part and continue its engagement for mine action all around the world”, declared Foreign Minister Margot Wallström when she last spoke at the UN's Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. One way for Sweden, and other countries, to do this is by increasing the support for mine action and thereby reverse trend of the last years.

Megan Burke, Head of International Campaign to Ban Landmines, ICBL

Aleksander Gabelic, President of the United Nations Association of Sweden.

Translation of an article in Swedish at www.bistandsdebatten.se/exkldebattartiklar/sverige-maste-oka-stodet-till-minhantering/