

“The Impact of Cluster Munitions on Children”
UNICEF Statement
Global Day of Action on Cluster Munitions
5 November 2007

On this first Global Day of Action on Cluster Munitions, UNICEF is honoured to make this statement on behalf of children.

UNICEF strives in all its work to promote the best interests of children, whether during peace or during war. The rights of children have been enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention is a global legal instrument that promotes, protects and enhances respect for children as individuals and members of their communities and countries. Children have the right to life and to enjoy a safe environment in which they can grow, play and learn. The responsibility to protect children’s rights is shared by individuals and governments.

A number of conflicts have demonstrated the terrible impact of cluster munitions on children both during and after open warfare. The last example was Lebanon in 2006. But children also continue to fall victim to cluster munitions in countries where they were used years or decades ago, such as Bosnia, Cambodia, Iraq, Laos, Serbia and Viet Nam. In these and other countries, cluster munitions still pose a real threat to the fulfilment of the rights of children.

Children make up a significantly high proportion of all casualties caused by these devastating and indiscriminate weapons. In Afghanistan, for example, children make up more than one-third of cluster munitions casualties. During the Kosovo war, more children fell victim to cluster munitions than to anti-personnel landmines -- terrible weapons in their own right which have correctly been prohibited by most of the international community.

Children are neither the architects nor the intended casualties of war, but they continue to be killed and injured by cluster munitions. Too many stories show us that cluster munitions cannot be used in populated areas without jeopardising a child’s right to life, to health, to play and to a safe environment.

Many cluster munitions are shaped like every-day items, such as balls and canisters, while others are unusually shaped and brightly coloured, often proving fatally attractive to children. Because of the shapes of these weapons and their wide dispersal in communities, it is likely that a child will pick up unexploded cluster munitions.

In UNICEF, we know that a child’s natural curiosity and desire to play, touch, and discover, is risky in an environment contaminated with explosive remnants of war, particularly cluster munitions. Daily activities such as exploring after school, herding livestock, fetching water, or playing soccer can be deadly. Research shows that cluster munitions accidents involving children more often happen to groups of children, as they go about their chores or are at play.

A child who survives a blast may suffer permanent disability, blindness or loss of hearing. A child survivor may be deprived of schooling due to insufficient money to pay for both medical bills and education-related expenses. Increased vulnerability will typically persist into adulthood, and social and community discrimination against disability will negatively affect a child's psychological well-being and his or her future.

The impact of cluster munitions has the potential to go far beyond these direct effects. When a parent or caregiver is killed or maimed by a cluster munitions, children also suffer due to increased family hardship. Now we are pleased to note that there is agreement across the UN on this issue, strongly urging Member States to develop a legally binding instrument prohibiting cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians.

UNICEF has been working for more than ten years to protect children from landmines and other explosive remnants of war. UNICEF focuses on supporting awareness-raising efforts in mine-affected countries, risk education and assistance to survivors. UNICEF also address the threats that landmines and other weapons with indiscriminate effects – such as cluster munitions -- have on *all* the rights of children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We are committed to supporting all efforts to end the humanitarian impact caused by these weapons. This requires continued engagement of civil society and governments, working together.

It is with urgency that we encourage all Governments to develop a legally binding instrument prohibiting cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians, especially children.

Thank you.

For further information, contact:
Paula Claycomb
UNICEF Sr. Advisor, Landmines & Small Arms
1-212-646-3137
pclaycomb@unicef.org