

Cluster Munitions— The Bomb that Keeps on Killing

In the last 15 years, the U.S. has dropped cluster bombs in civilian-populated areas of the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. The cluster bombs the U.S. dropped 40 years ago in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are still killing people today. Since the last cluster bomb was dropped on Laos in 1973, 12,000 Laotian civilians, many of whom were not born when the bombs were dropped, have been killed or injured by an unexploded cluster dud.

At least 75 countries stockpile cluster munitions, meaning there are billions of cluster bomblets in the world that have yet to be used. The U.S. stockpile alone totals close to one billion.



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Congress Can Stop the Killing

Urge your senators and representative to cosponsor legislation that puts controls over the use and transfer of cluster bombs. Find out more: www.fcnl.org/weapons



What is the problem with cluster bombs?

A cluster bomb consists of a canister designed to open in mid-air and disperse smaller submunitions, often referred to as bomblets. Cluster bombs are designed to kill every living creature within a specific area that is often as large as two to four football fields. These weapons have a particularly deadly record of killing and maiming civilians both during and after an attack.

In the last 15 years, the U.S. has dropped cluster bombs in civilian-populated areas of the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S. made cluster bombs have also been dropped in many other countries. Iraqis are known to call cluster bombs “steel rain,” as these bomblets seem to fall from the sky as rain. Each weapon scatters dozens to hundreds of explosive bomblets that spray deadly shrapnel fragments over wide areas of land, making it very difficult to avoid civilian casualties. In the last 15 years, the United Nations has discovered U.S. made cluster bombs dropped in front of hospitals, schools, and other civilian areas.

Cluster bombs are weapons that keep on killing. While designed to explode on impact, many of the individual cluster bomblets initially fail to detonate, leaving behind large numbers of hazardous explosive “duds” that are akin to landmines. Unexploded bomblets are usually no bigger than a size D battery, and in some cases, resemble small metal tennis balls. A bomblet is extremely volatile and can explode when a child picks it up and attempts to play with it or when a farmer hits it with a tool.

Since the last cluster bomb was dropped on Laos in 1973, for example, 12,000 Laotian civilians, many of whom were not born when the bombs were dropped, have been killed or injured by an unexploded cluster dud. Further research by humanitarian organizations in Southeast Asia has revealed that at least 60% of casualties from unexploded cluster munitions are children.

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The U.S. maintains a stockpile of close to one billion bomblets and at least 74 other countries also have similar unreliable and inaccurate stockpiles. While civilian casualties are disproportionately high where these weapons have been used, cluster bombs have thankfully not yet been used on a widespread basis. Were the U.S. or any other country to use their immense stockpiles, the humanitarian impact both during and after the conflict would likely dwarf the humanitarian threat posed to populations by landmines.

Where Are We Now and What Can You Do?

Legislation that would ban the use of cluster munitions in or near civilian populated areas has been introduced in both the Senate and the House. The Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act of 2007 (S. 594 and H.R. 1755) also would prohibit the expenditure of government funds for the use, sale, and transfer of inaccurate and unreliable cluster bombs.

Specifically, this legislation would

1. Immediately prohibit the use of cluster bombs in or near populated or urban areas;
2. Prohibit the use, sale, and transfer of U.S. made cluster bombs containing submunitions with a failure rate of more than one percent;
3. Require governments using U.S.-made cluster munitions to plan for quickly cleaning up unexploded bomblets.

In the 1990s concerned citizens played an important role in persuading the U.S. to adopt a more sensible landmine policy. A similar effort is needed today on cluster bombs. Here is what you can do:

- Communicate with your members of Congress. Urge your members to support legislation that controls the use and transfer of cluster bombs.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper explaining the threat posed by cluster bombs and why the U.S. must change its policy.
- Educate you community. Large-scale progress will not occur until there is a groundswell of support for banning cluster bombs. Help create that momentum by educating your friends, family, and others in your community. Go to www.fcnl.org/weapons for more information.

