In the months after the Iraq war, the unexploded bomblets sat idly in parks, sandlots, school yards, and fields, waiting for kids.

Nihad Jewad, like thousands of Baghdad's children, wandered out to play soccer in late April, after the fighting had stopped. His older brother wasn't sure whether Nihad picked up the device or fell on it. By the time he reached the Saudi-run field hospital, his left hand blown off along with the thumb on his right one, most of his life had flowed out of the blasted femoral artery in his leg.

As the doctors attempted to revive him, an American soldier guarding the clinic approached a photographer. "It's terrible about those land mines," he said, just like that. The comment struck the photographer as sarcastic. Or disingenuous, at least, since the boy clearly hadn't stepped on a mine. The clinic couldn't issue death certificates, nor did it supply coffins, so the Jewads would have to go to another hospital. Later that afternoon, Nihad's family buried him at the cemetery in Abu Ghreib.

The bomblets look like fun to kids. Shiny, tossable pieces of metal, they resemble a large D battery or a small hand grenade. Attached to the bottom are long, white ribbons, rather like streamers a child might fasten to the handlebars of a bike. Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimates that coalition forces left 2 million of these little bombs all over Iraq, killing or injuring perhaps a thousand civilians. Cluster munitions, the group reports, caused more harm to noncombatants than any other weapon during the war.

While the U.S. Air Force has scaled back its use of cluster bombs, the army still favors the munitions, which can pierce armor and kill soldiers simultaneously over a wide area. M26 shells are usually fired, up to 12 at a time, from a Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) on the ground, and can travel up to 20 miles. Each shell contains 644 M-77 munitions. On average, anywhere from 5 to 16 percent of the bomblets are duds that don't detonate, leaving perhaps 100 deadly devices lying around from every shell fired. The high number of deaths and injuries from the shells are predictable when they are fired into populated neighborhoods, as they often were in Iraq.

HRW and a number of other groups got together last year to fight for a moratorium on the use of cluster munitions and other weapons that leave what they call "explosive remnants of war." The idea is to stop using the weapons until they can be made safer. The group, called the Cluster Munition Coalition, has said that because of the weapons' inaccuracy, wide dispersal patterns, and "the long-term danger they pose after conflict due to the high number of landmine-like submunitions duds," cluster munitions, like land mines, deserve international attention and regulation. Human rights workers say that the U.S. Army also has an interest in improving the effectiveness of cluster munitions, if only to prevent unexploded bomblets from slowing up or stalling troop movements.

Steve Goose of HRW said there is little chance of a ban on the weapons, which are stockpiled by at least 57 countries worldwide, so groups like his instead press for improvements in the technology. Complaints about cluster munitions have noticeably changed behaviors in the air force, he said. The service tested "brilliant" (think better than "smart") cluster bombs in Iraq, which boast lower dud rates and greater accuracy. The protests have also led to a recent international protocol calling for countries to do a better job cleaning up their unexploded leftovers and to assist the victims of these weapons.

Lurking underneath all this effort practice, encapsulated in General Tommy Franks's admission that "we don't do body counts." It is still nearly impossible to arrive at accurate figures for how many Iraqis died during the war, and the group best equipped to count Groups like the Project for Defense Alternatives, Civic, and Iraqbodycount.net have arrived at estimates ranging from 3,200 to 7,500 civilians killed during the war. And HRW admits that its estimate of 1,000 killed or injured by cluster munitions is probably conservative.

"Governments don't want to take on blanket obligations for what happens as a result of war," Goose said. Abu Ra'ed, whose white moustache is yellowed on the bottom from cigarette smoke, was once a military engineer and a kind of superintendent to a small, middle-class neighborhood just south of Baghdad's airport highway. In the weeks after the war, he also became the neighborhood's sapper, after an explosion in Yassin Al Genavel's garden. At the time, Abu Ra'ed showed a reporter the ordnance he had gathered and piled in a sandlot at the edge of the neighborhood, near a highway on-ramp. He had placed all the cluster bomblets in a basket, and a number of larger, unexploded shells all around them, and cordoned off the whole deadly salad with some chicken wire. But all his efforts had not come even close for...
with some chicken wire, but his efforts had not come soon enough for five-year-old Ahmed Al Genavel, who, along with his mother and siblings, had been sent by his father to sit out the war at a relative's house north of Baghdad. On the day they were all reunited, Ahmed and his seven-year-old sister Aiya ran out to the small garden at the front of their house. Aiya later told her father that Ahmed picked up the bomblet that killed him. Aiya was left blind in one eye.

Abu Ra'ed said he spoke with U.S. soldiers in early May, after he had collected the bombs, and asked the soldiers to remove them. But in the weeks after the war, the ordnance disposal teams Baghdad's chaos.

On another visit to Abu Ra'ed a few weeks later, some of the larger shells had been removed. He said a few soldiers took them across the highway overpass and detonated them, leaving a 40-foot wide crater in the sand. Strangely, though, the soldiers left the cluster bomblets in the basket. Sure enough, Abu Ra'ed said, a few days earlier another child had wandered toward the sandlot and was carried out, badly injured, with a body full of shrapnel.

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