Ban cluster bombs, urges charity

Cluster bombs are especially effective against tanks but leave a lasting legacy

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LONDON -- One of the world's leading charities has sought a ban on one of the world's deadliest warfare weapons - the cluster bomb. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said such weapons dropped by U.S. and British warplanes on Kosovo continue to wreak carnage more than a year after the conflict ended. In a report sent to UN diplomatic missions around the world, the ICRC said "around 30,000 unexploded cluster bomb submunitions remained after the (Kosovo) conflict". These alone had caused 150 deaths or casualties, it added. "Unlike anti-personnel mines, incidents involving these submunitions usually result in death or injury to several people as a result of their greater explosive power," the report said. Cluster bombs are specifically used to cover a broad area rather than a single specific target. Used extensively from the Vietnam War onwards, cluster bombs are dropped from high altitude and, before reaching the ground, open to release up to 150 smaller bombs, known as "bomblets."

Children at risk

Richard Lloyd, a spokesman for the U.K. Consulting Group on Landmines, estimates that more than 250,000 bomblets were ejected by the 1,400 cluster bombs seeded on the Yugoslav countryside. "If you assume that between five and 10 percent don't go off, that is a very sizable problem on the ground," Lloyd told CNN.com. "While I was in Kosovo, a 50-year-old man was collecting firewood. He was in a forest and stepped on a cluster bomblet. He was blown to pieces. That's exactly the kind of threat that's going to continue as people go back to their farmland," he said. Serb landmines have killed or injured a further 290 people in Kosovo since the bombing campaign ended, he said. But in terms of their potential to cause harm, cluster bombs are considered a greater menace than the mines that the ICRC and many other organisations have also protested against. Despite efforts by the ICRC and others to raise awareness of the danger of the bomblets, their often-colourful casings attract the attention of children, putting them at even higher risk. And each packs 30 times the explosive punch of an anti-personnel landmine. The clearance and destruction of cluster bombs is also more dangerous and painstaking than mine clearance. The ICRC report states: "As a result of the sensitivity of their fusing mechanisms, the slightest touch can cause them to detonate. Unlike anti-personnel mines, they cannot be cleared mechanically or located using dogs. "The dangers inherent in their clearance place them in a category all their own".

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