Clinton's Cruel Decision On Land Mines Risks Too Many Lives

Twelve-year-old Ema Alic wasn't waving at President Clinton but maybe she got his attention. For two hours last Monday, the girl lay mortally wounded in a minefield on the outskirts of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Two other 12-year-olds lay by her, killed instantly when one of the three tripped a land mine. She called and pleaded for bystanders to rescue her. No one did. No one dared. ...

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Until a mine-removal team could get there, it was suicide to go into the field after the girl. The field was marked but, for lack of money, not fenced off. The team arrived -- 2 1/2 hours after being called -- and worked feverishly and in defiance of many safety standards, to clear a path to Ema. But they were too late. She died, in agony and terror, before they could reach her. Estimates are that there are as many as 1 million mines within 115 square miles of land in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There may be as many as 30,000 minefields in Bosnia. There are records for only 12,000 of them. The million mines in that war-torn country are among an estimated 100 million anti-personnel mines sown across the world's troubled lands -- in Afghanistan (5 million), Cambodia (4 million to 6 million), Vietnam (3.5 million), Kosovo (1 million), Angola (6 million), Iran (16 million), Iraq (10 million), China (10 million), Somalia (1 million), Mozambique (1 million), Korea (1 million). These three children, Ema and her friends Goran Biscevic and Haris Balicevac, were among the more than 25,000 people killed around the world each year as these deadly seeds reap their dark harvest. Clinton would do well to note these three deaths, these unanswered cries for help. He ignored the cries of the world more than two years ago when he refused to add the United States to the list of 125 nations signing a treaty to ban anti-personnel land mines. Sen. Jesse Helms cheered. That refusal left the United States standing on the moral low ground with Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, Libya, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, North Korea, South Korea, Turkey and Vietnam. (The Soviet Union garnered infamy in Afghanistan with its terror technique of littering the countryside with small anti-personnel mines that looked like toy airplanes and were thus a deadly favorite of curious young children.)

The ostensible U.S. reason to balk at signing the treaty was the protection of 35,000 U.S. troops near Korea's Demilitarized Zone. The first line of defense against a massive attack from the north is a sea of anti-tank mines. But if the treaty bans only anti-personnel mines, why the anti-tank mine excuse for not signing? Anti-personnel mines protect the anti-tank mines from tampering by North Korean soldiers. Clinton's rejection of the December 1997 land mine treaty was particularly disgraceful because the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize had gone to Jody Williams of Vermont and her grass-roots coalition that pressed for the banning of these inhumane devices. And it wasn't just the bunny-hugging peaceniks who backed Williams. A driving force in the movement was Bobby Muller, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation -- himself rendered a paraplegic in that war. Muller recruited 14 retired generals, including Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf of Desert Storm fame, to lobby for the treaty. The global banning of a weapons system is rare but not unprecedented. Exploding bullets were banned in 1863, fragmenting (so-called "dum-dum") bullets in 1899, poison gas in 1925 and blinding lasers in 1995. In the cold-blooded terms of military logistics, the device in Sarajevo was a dud -- because it failed its mission. Its highest and best use isn't supposed to kill but to maim and cripple. A dead soldier takes merely one enemy out of commission. A wounded soldier can cost the enemy at least two, maybe three lost to combat. Technology has wrought its magic on these nasty tools, too. More and more are made of plastic and other non-metallic materials, making them more difficult to detect during combat and to remove in peacetime. Some of them even do tricks, such as exploding not in the ground or underfoot, but popping up into the air about belt-high first, so that the shrapnel tears into soft tissue and vulnerable organs. The 1997 treaty would, of course, have come too late to prevent the planting of the mine that killed Ema and her friends. But to chance putting hundreds of thousands more children at risk through the continued manufacture, sale and use of these devices is unconscionable. Perhaps the president will see that small hand still waving, hear that small voice still crying and reconsider his cruel decision in 1997.

Von: Source: Seattle Post-Intelligencer April 17, 2000, Thomas Shapley is an editorial writer and member of the P-I Editorial Board.

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