

Cluster bombs: realism and reality

The global effort to ban cluster bombs will save lives because it is putting reality above "realism". At a meeting in Geneva this week many states held up "realism" as the reason why states should aim low and go slow in response to the suffering caused by these weapons. But the reality is that a new treaty is on the way - and we can make it happen by the end of 2008.

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The reality is that over the past 12 months a strong group of likeminded countries has worked with NGOs, the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to build a freestanding multilateral process which is now developing a treaty to ban cluster munitions. This "Oslo Process" (named after the first conference in February) provides a mechanism through which states can act on the values of humanitarian concern, justice and human rights without being held hostage by so-called great powers. The next in a series of meetings takes place in Vienna on December 4-7.

By contrast, at this week's annual meeting of the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) states such as the US, Russia and China sought to reassert influence over the issue. This was clearly a response to the Oslo Process. We heard a lot about the need for realism and the need to be realistic about what the international community could achieve on cluster bombs.

When these same powers were blocking work in the CCW last year the Oslo Process took responsibility for delivering an international response to the problem of cluster munitions. Now that there is clear progress, China, Russia and the US are desperately trying to reassert control. In return for them begrudgingly admitting a humanitarian problem with these weapons, they expect the rest of the world to accept that nothing substantial can be done.

In the world of "realism", we were told this week, this is what happens - a few big countries call the shots. The Geneva meeting saw a conference room but no real conference. Almost all delegations were frozen out of the real business of "informal consultations" through which the countries that matter worked in the backrooms to identify the lowest common denominator. And the lowest common denominator is extremely low.

In Gordon Brown's speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet on November 12 he reaffirmed the UK's commitment to a ban on cluster munitions. In fact the precise phrase he used - "ban on cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians" - is drawn directly from the declaration of purpose of the Oslo Process. Perhaps more important, though, are some of his other comments: "This is the main theme of my remarks this evening - we must bring to life these shared interests and shared values by practical proposals to create the architecture of a new global society."

The Oslo Process is part of that architecture. It is not only about specific weapons but about how individuals, organisations and states can work together to find better expression of their shared values - and it is succeeding. There are more than 80 countries on board, half of the world's producer and stockpiling nations, a commitment to a prohibition in 2008, a draft treaty text that has already been discussed once, a defined set of meetings ahead in Vienna and Wellington with negotiations set for Dublin in May next year. This process has the full support of civil society and is driven by the full participation of individuals and states directly affected by these pernicious weapons.

The UK should be a leading actor in this process. In order to take up such a role the UK should not waste too much more time pleading the case of "realism" but should approach the up coming meetings with renewed vision, positive commitment and urgency. And, of course, the UK needs to get rid of its remaining cluster bombs.

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