The smaller of Colombia's two main rebel groups is ready to reduce its use of anti-personnel mines but won't give them up altogether, the head of a Switzerland-based humanitarian organization said Friday.

(22.01.2004)

Elizabeth Reusse-Decrey, president of Geneva Call, said she had recently met three times with leaders of the 5,000-strong National Liberation Army, or ELN, in Cuba and also held talks this week with a jailed ELN commander, Francisco Galan.

“They are open to discussions about how to reduce the number of mine victims,” she told reporters in Bogota. However, she said the use of mines remained part of the ELN's military strategy to defeat the government.

Although Colombia is a signatory to the 1997 Ottawa Convention that requires it to destroy all its mines by March this year, the country's various illegal armed groups have in the past three years steadily sowed more mines.

The army estimates that 100,000 mines are now scattered across the country.

Anti-personnel mines claimed at least 602 victims -- half of them civilians -- in 2002, up from just 29 in 1990, according to the government's Mine Observatory.

Reusse-Decrey said Geneva Call, which presses non-state combatants across the world to adhere to humanitarian norms, was financing a project in Colombia's northern Bolivar region to raise awareness about the threat. The program will also encourage people to share information on the locations of mine fields.

Colombia is the only country in South America where mines are still being laid.

The ELN and another guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, have been battling to topple the government for four decades.

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