Italy urged to condemn landmine use and promote mine ban (Italy)

Rome - The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) today called on Italy to use its powerful position as incoming president of the European Union (EU) to condemn antipersonnel mine use and actively promote the prohibition of the weapon. Today marked the opening of the ICBL's annual three-day Global Landmine Monitor Researchers’ Meeting in Rome, bringing together over 130 landmine specialists from 75 countries.

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"The EU presidency presents a great opportunity for Italy to speak out against antipersonnel mine use by Iraq and others and to convince hold-out governments to renounce this indiscriminate weapon now," said Liz Bernstein, Coordinator of the ICBL. "We condemn any mine use and urge all those who have banned the weapon to speak out publicly and privately against any use of antipersonnel mines," she added.

Last week deminers from the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) removed and destroyed hundreds of live Italian Valmara-69 antipersonnel mines stored by Iraqi government forces in a mosque in Kadir Karam in northern Iraq. Iraqi forces have been documented planting mines before the current conflict and have continued laying them in a number of areas. Italy manufactured and exported millions of antipersonnel mines to Iraq in the 1980s before renouncing the weapon in 1994.

All but two current EU member-states are party to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, which prohibits the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines, and requires mine clearance and assistance to mine victims. Greece is in the final stages of joining, while Finland has set a target date of 2006. Of the ten countries about to join the EU, all are party to the treaty except Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania. Lithuania's parliament recently approved ratification, while Poland has signed but not ratified. Globally, there are 132 States Parties – most recently Cyprus and Sao Tome and Principe – and fourteen signatories that have yet to ratify.

Neither Iraq nor the United States have joined the Mine Ban Treaty. While there is no evidence that the United States has used antipersonnel mines in the Iraqi conflict, it has been using cluster submunitions, as has the United Kingdom. The ICBL has supported efforts to address the humanitarian impact of cluster submunitions, which act as landmines if they fail to detonate on impact as intended. It has joined other organizations in calling for a moratorium on these weapons until the humanitarian concerns are addressed.

Italy will assume the six-month term EU presidency on 1 July 2003. It halted landmine production in 1994, completed destruction of its 7.1 million stockpiled antipersonnel mines in November 2002, and in 2001 spent approximately 5.6 million Euro on mine action activities.

"Italy and the EU are major donors to humanitarian mine action efforts, but at current levels of funding the needs of mine-affected countries are still far from met," said Stefano Calabretta, of INTERSOS, a member of the Italian Campaign to Ban Landmines, the host of the Rome meeting. "The Italian Mine Action Fund must be renewed at an increased level or at least continue at current levels if we are to meet the long-term needs of communities affected by this weapon," he added.

Recipients of Italian mine action funding in 2003 include Angola, Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Central America, Croatia, Iraq and Yemen. According to Landmine Monitor, in 2001, new landmine casualties were reported in 73 of the world's 90 mine-affected countries.

Italy is the main sponsor of the ICBL's Landmine Monitor research network meeting in Rome this week. The ICBL's Landmine Monitor initiative, established June 1998, is the world's first systematic and sustained civil society verification effort for a major multilateral treaty. In 1997 the ICBL and its then-coordinator Jody Williams were awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for their central efforts to bring about the antipersonnel mine ban.

For more information or to schedule an interview with meeting participants please contact the Italian Campaign to Ban Landmines: Simona Beltrami, Tel. 39 (06) 85-80-06-93 or (333) 71-42-251. See also www.icbl.org.

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