

Kashmir rebel alliance decides against using land mines (India)

SRINAGAR, India: An alliance of Kashmiri rebel groups has decided not to use anti-personnel mines - except possibly for those that can be detonated by remote control - while battling government forces in Indian Kashmir, an international agency said Thursday.

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The United Jihad Council alliance was responding to yearlong efforts by the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, or ICBL, and its local affiliate organization.

"We affirm and pledge that we neither have, nor shall use anti-personnel mines or any other victim activated explosive device," the alliance said in a statement. "We may continue to use command detonated weapons against military targets."

The Indian government did not immediately issue a reaction to the rebels' announcement.

ICBL Executive Director Sylvie Brigot welcomed the alliance's announcement, and asked the Indian and Pakistani governments to consider a moratorium on the use of mines. Neither country has signed the ICBL's global ban on land mines treaty.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Brigot's statement also encouraged the two countries "to launch comprehensive mine clearance programs."

The Himalayan territory of Kashmir is divided between India and neighboring Pakistan, which both claim it all.

Various insurgent groups have been fighting since 1989 for Muslim-majority Kashmir's independence from predominantly Hindu India, or its merger with Islamic Pakistan. The conflict has killed more than 68,000 people.

Thirteen Indian Kashmiri rebel groups make up the United Jihad Council, which has also granted "observer status" to five other militant organizations - such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammed - which are based in the Pakistani portion of Kashmir.

Most mines in Kashmir are near the 720-kilometer-long (450-mile-long) cease-fire line dividing the territory between India and Pakistan.

Official Indian figures cite 15,397 cases of improvised explosive devices and mine explosions occurred between January 1990 and the end of 2006.

Officials say the blasts have killed more than 10,000 people and wounded more than 21,000 others.

Official Pakistan figures were not immediately available.

An Indian army spokesman, Col. A. K. Mathur, said anti-personnel mines have been planted along the cease-fire line to enhance India's defense.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir since their independence from Britain in 1947.

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