SUB-SAHARAN Africa is still the world’s most heavily mined region despite concerted efforts over the years by aid agencies and governments to clear anti-personnel landmines, which have killed or maimed thousands of people on the continent.

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Harare: Landmines in Africa are either a legacy of the anti-colonial armed struggle or armed conflict in Africa’s trouble spots. And recently, the African Union held a three-day summit to map out an action plan to rid the continent of landmines which are still killing or maiming thousands of people and livestock, retarding the pace of economic growth. “The greatest harm to the civilian population and children is from landmines,” said an Austrian diplomat addressing delegates to the United Nations. “We must eliminate this weapon. A lot has been achieved but much more needs to be done. “The human devastation of this weapon is immense, as is the extent to which it pauses a significant obstacle to social and economic development.” The AU summit on landmines sought to find meaningful ways of helping victims on the continent, speeding up clearance, the destruction of stockpiles and the need to pressure certain governments to accept the ban on anti-personnel mines. So far a total of 48 African countries have signed the Ottawa Convention that bans the use of landmines and calls for the destruction of stockpiles.

According to the African Union, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Morocco and Somalia are the only countries in Africa that have not ratified the 1997 convention. Pressure is mounting for the countries to ratify the convention and send positive signals to the rest of the world that they are committed to the elimination of anti-personnel mines. Zimbabwe is a signatory to the Ottawa Convention and has in the last few years destroyed mine stockpiles and cleared vast stretches of land under its demining programme. Zimbabwe National Army engineers under the National Demining Office have since 1998 discovered and detonated more than 200 000 landmines saving the lives of people and animals in communities dotted along the country's mine-infested northern and south-eastern border areas. The National Demining Office says a total of 1 622 000 mines were discovered and detonated along the Mozamboci-Rwenzwa stretch in the north-western tip of the country. More than 10 000 mines were also detonated along the Victoria Falls-Mbizi stretch. Landmines were planted by the Rhodesian forces during the 1970s war of independence to prevent infiltration by Zanla and Zipra forces - the military wings of the country's two major liberation movements - Zanu-PF and Zapu respectively.

There are six major minefields covering 760km along the country's northern and southern parts which border Zambia to the north and Mozambique to the east and south with an estimated 1.9 million mines. These are the 250km Victoria Falls-Mbizi stretch, the 335km Mozamboci-Rwenzwa stretch, Shebba Forest, a 3km Burma Valley stretch, Rutsul-Mzite Mission stretch near Chipinge and the Sango Border Post-Crooks Corner in the Gonarezhou National Park along the border with South Africa. Since independence, the mines have killed more than 800 people, maimed 1 500 others and killed livestock and wild animals in the mine-infested parts of the country. The National Demining Office estimates that at least 40 percent of the minefields have been cleared and focus is set to shift to the Sango Border Post-Crooks Corner stretch in the giant Great Limopo Transfrontier Park. According to United Nations estimates, there are up to 40 million landmines buried in some 23 African countries.

In Africa, Angola tops the list as the most heavily mined country with more than 10 million anti-personnel mines buried within its territory, a legacy of a nearly two decades long bitter armed conflict pitting the ruling MPLA government against the Jonas Savimbi-led Unita rebel movement. Others include Ethiopia with an estimated two million landmines which have affected 60 percent of the Horn of Africa country's 70 million population, Mozambique with two million landmines covering nearly 70 percent of its territory, Chad, Uganda, DRC, Namibia and other zones in some parts of the continent. Since the treaty came into force, analysts say, global casualties have been cut by half from an estimated 35 000 a year.

But formidable challenges still lie ahead for the continent and the world as a whole. Only 37 million landmines have been destroyed out of the 200 million that still lie buried worldwide. “We must keep up the pressure. But there is light at the end of the tunnel. There are now fewer casualties,” said the Austrian diplomat. Poor funding, lack of equipment and skilled manpower have also slowed demining activities in most African countries owing to the huge sums of money required in this delicate process of identifying, excavating and detonating the deadly weapons. Most donors who worked with ZNA and other private demining concerns, pulled out of Zimbabwe following the imposition of sanctions by Britain, the US and their allies. This has hampered efforts to clear mines. But the National Demining Office says demining activities will continue despite the limited resources and support from other countries. The office estimates that about 535km (6.6 million square metres) has so far been cleared and like seven other African countries, expects to complete its demining activities by 2009. So far Djibouti and Costa Rica have cleared their mines while Mozambique says it might take up to 50 years to complete the exercise if it does not get adequate funding for its demining activities. But powerful countries are the major producers of anti-personnel mines, a setback for most Third World countries, which have shown real commitment to ending the manufacture and use of landmines. China, Russia, Singapore and the US are by far the largest producers, according to the Swiss-based Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. Third World countries must continue to make noise and exert pressure on these powerful countries to drive the Ottawa Convention forward and ensure continued support. The Mine-Free World summit scheduled for Kenya in November looks like an ideal forum for Africa to push for a world free from the menace of landmines.

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