Singapore urged to give up its landmines (SINGAPORE)

Govt says claim cited at KL seminar of several million in stockpile 'highly exaggerated'. SINGAPORE has been urged to destroy its arsenal of anti-personnel landmines under a global agreement that aims to rid the world of these hidden killers.

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One of Canada's most senior soldiers, General (Ret) Maurice Baril, called on officials from the Foreign Affairs Ministry and Defence Ministry last week to discuss the possibility of Singapore acceding to the Ottawa Convention, a mine ban treaty signed by 147 countries.

'We discussed the utility of the anti-personnel landmine in a professional and very non-emotional way,' said the retired general, who led the Canadian forces from 1997 to 2001 as its chief of the defence staff.

Singapore is among 40 countries that have not signed the 1997 Ottawa Convention and is one of the few countries in the world that can make landmines.

It is unclear just how many landmines Singapore has in its stockpiles. The Defence Ministry declined to reveal specific details of the Singapore Armed Forces' assets for operational security reasons. But it said that the estimate of 'several million landmines', cited at a seminar in Kuala Lumpur last week by Ms Sumita Dixit, a Canadian foreign ministry official accompanying the general, was 'highly exaggerated'.

Though Singapore has yet to sign the Ottawa Convention, a Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman said the Republic has observed a self-imposed ban on selling landmines without self-destruct mechanisms since May 1996. In 1998, over a year before the convention came into effect, it extended this ban to include all types of Singapore-made anti-personnel landmines.

Weapons company Singapore Technologies Kinetics said it does not produce landmines for export or 'act as a sub-contractor to anyone that does', and has not sold mines in the last 15 years.

Landmines cost several dollars apiece to make, but Gen Baril said the cost of demining - the detection and extraction of landmines - can cost US$1,000 (S$1,700) a mine. These devices can remain active decades after being planted and are dangerous even after conflicts end.

Anti-personnel landmines and anti-tank mines that can destroy armoured vehicles continue to claim lives in places such as Afghanistan and Cambodia.

In recent years, there has been growing opposition to the use of landmines. A sum of US$2 billion has been spent to clear mines, and this has 'killed' the market for mines, said Gen Baril.

He added that some of the staunchest critics of landmines are soldiers who have been in combat and seen the damage they can cause.

As of September, other countries that have not signed the treaty include the United States, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Vietnam and South Korea.

The Republic's position

'THE Singapore Government is against the indiscriminate and irresponsible use of anti-personnel landmines (APLs). That is why Singapore has and will continue to support all initiatives against the indiscriminate use of APLs, especially when they are directed at innocent and defenseless civilians.

'With this in mind, Singapore declared a two-year moratorium in May 1996 on the export of APLs without self-neutralising mechanisms. In February 1998, over a year before the Ottawa Convention came into effect, Singapore voluntarily expanded the moratorium to include all manners of APLs, not just those without self-neutralising mechanisms, and extended the moratorium indefinitely.

'At the same time, like a number of countries, Singapore firmly believes that the legitimate security concerns and the right to self-defence of any state cannot be disregarded. A blanket ban on all types of APLs at this time might therefore be counter-productive.

'Singapore supports international efforts to resolve the humanitarian concerns over APLs. We will continue to work with members of the international community towards finding a durable and truly global solution.'