Springfield man reaches out to rid world of land mines (United States)

More times than he can count, Ken Rutherford has publicly shared the gory details of the day in 1993 when both of his legs were blown apart by a land mine while he was working in Somalia.

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He puts a face to the need to remove land mines and other explosive remnants of war, a cause becoming more urgent as fighting continues in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“A lot of people believe that when the war ends, people go home and it’s going to be safe,” said Rutherford, an associated political science professor at Southwest Missouri State in Springfield. “But that’s not the end of it. There are land mines and other explosive remnants of war to deal with. Things that are left behind to kill or injure innocent people.”

Soldiers arriving in Iraq last year found the country awash with artillery, including U.S. made shells left over from the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran War, and other explosive devices, said Paul Arcangeli, director of the U.S. Defense Department's Humanitarian Demining Training Center at Fort Leonard Wood.

“The magnitude of the problem is really beyond what I can explain to you,” said Arcangeli, who toured Iraq earlier this year. “We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of tons of explosive remnants.”

Landmine Survivor’s Network, which Rutherford helped co-found, estimates there are 80 million land mines buried in at least 60 other countries. Each year they kill or maim about 20,000 people, one-third of them children.

The trouble is, many of the land mines and unexploded ordnances often are invisible to innocent passers-by, Rutherford said. Farmers trip them while working their fields. Vehicles run over them and passengers are injured or killed.

That is how Rutherford became a bilateral lower leg amputee.

He was working with a credit union in Somalia to provide loans to help rebuild the country ravaged by war.

On Dec. 16, 1993, Rutherford was riding in a Toyota Land Cruiser en route to a visit a lime producer, who was seeking a loan.

Ten minutes into the trip, the vehicle hit a small gully and lurched forward. Rutherford looked down at his feet.

“A bone was sticking out where my right foot used to be,” he said. “The actual foot itself was hanging by stretched skin toward my knee.”

Rutherford's only reality was that his legs would not cooperate as he attempted to get out of the vehicle.

“Twice, I did partial sit-ups so that I could reach up and hit the bottom of my foot with the back of my hand, hoping that it would flip up and over onto the protruding bone,” he said. “It kept falling back down.”

The other passengers laid him on the sandy ground, where he waited for 30 minutes for help.

Rutherford was flown to Nairobi, where one of his legs was amputated. He eventually was transferred to the United States, where he has had at least 10 surgeries, including the removal of his other leg.

Rutherford doesn't bother hiding his two prosthetic legs under long pants on warm days. He even jokes about his inability to run swiftly enough to allude news reporters.

“It’s important that people see the impact that land mines have on...
It's important that people see the impact that land mines have on innocent people," Rutherford said.

But Rutherford wants people to do more than see. He wants them to donate their money and time to help rid the world of land mines.

It's a costly and dangerous venture. While it costs as little $3 to produce a land mine, it can cost up to $1,000 to remove it, Rutherford said.

Humanitarian de-miners often must work on their hands and knees. Some use metal detectors, while others have dogs to locate land mines. Under perfect conditions, one de-miner can clear seven to 10 square meters a day, Rutherford said.

"The problem is that one land mine, or even the fear that one land mine exists, can render an area useless to farmers and civilians," said Arcangeli, whose operation has trained over 1,300 people as humanitarian de-miners.

That is why Rutherford takes his story to the public. He has reached out to celebrities and politicians in hopes of raising awareness and money. Clint Eastwood recently raised $140,000 at a benefit at his Tehama Golf Club in Carmel, Calif., to clear mine fields in Cambodia.

Rutherford also toured Bosnia with Princess Diana in August 1997, shortly before her death.

"We didn't raise money with her, but she gave our organization the legitimacy to go and ask donors for money," he said.

He also works with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a coalition of more than 1,000 humanitarians that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

"What Ken is doing is huge," said James Lawrence, with the U.S. State Department's Office of Weapons Abatement and Removal. "Little by little progress is being made. It's something that we can resolve if we all work together."

These days, Rutherford is delivering his message to youths. He invited hundreds of college and elementary school students on April 15 to participate in "Land Mine Awareness Day" at the Springfield university. They learned how to detect land mines and watched demonstrations on explosives with the help of Arcangeli's staff.

Rutherford hopes to inspire the young to one day join his effort.

"We need to clean up these weapons of war," Rutherford said. "How can we have democracy with all this stuff laying around?"

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