

Standing Committee on General Status and Operation, 12 May 2003

The role of Parliamentarians in promoting the Convention

Delivered on behalf of **Frank Cook MP** by Richard Lloyd, executive secretary, Parliamentary All-Party Landmine Eradication Group (UK).

[I've been asked to speak this afternoon on behalf of Frank Cook MP, chairman of the United Kingdom's Parliamentary All-Party Landmine Eradication Group, who had hoped to be here but very much regrets he was unable to attend due to a family illness.]

Thank you, co-chairs, on behalf of the UK Parliamentary Group, for the opportunity to briefly describe some of our activities. We hope that our experience as UK Parliamentarians might encourage others here to consider what similar activities might be possible and useful in promoting the Convention, both nationally and internationally.

The UK Parliament has a long-established tradition of creating All-Party Parliamentary Groups which bring together Parliamentarians with an interest in either a particular subject or country. As their name suggests, these Groups are required by Parliamentary procedure to be made up of Parliamentarians of the Government and Opposition political Parties. They are also required to elect officers, and to hold a minimum number of meetings in each Parliamentary session.

Our Landmine Eradication Group has some 90 Members of both Houses of Parliament (the House of Commons and the House of Lords), including Ministers. Its principal officers are all senior Parliamentarians, including a deputy speaker of the House of Commons, a former cabinet minister, and an Opposition spokesperson on international development. Landmine Action provides the Group with a secretariat.

Our mandate is to monitor developments in the field of landmine eradication; to press for progressive clearance of such devices; and to explore means of providing for the survivors.

The Group holds regular inquiries into different aspects of the landmine problem. In our early years, we focused on the need for a permanent ban on landmines and for more resources to tackle the problem. Members of our Group, for example, were instrumental in three political internationals reaching agreement at a meeting in Ottawa, April 1995 on seeking a ban on landmines; and they led scrutiny of the UK's own implementing legislation in 1998.

More recently we have been monitoring implementation of the Convention and developments in mine action very closely, primarily through public sessions in the House of Commons. Topics covered by these sessions have included:

- Assistance for landmine survivors
- The UK military's response to implementing the Ottawa Treaty
- The UK's mine action strategy
- Landmines in Sudan (jointly with the All-Party Sudan Group)
- Landmines in Pakistan (jointly with the All-Party Pakistan Group).

We have had many distinguished individuals assist us with our inquiries. Those who have addressed the Group since the Ottawa Treaty entered into force in the UK have included [in no particular order] the Secretary of State for International Development; the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs; Chris Moon; the Director of Security Policy, UK Ministry of Defence; the Mines Arms Unit of the ICRC; the directors of a number of mine action NGOs, from the UK and from mine affected countries; and the US Special Representative for Global Humanitarian Demining.

The Group's officers and members have also made a number of visits to mine action programmes in affected countries, including the Former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Cambodia, and Laos.

As well as frequently raising questions, Motions and issues relating to landmines on the floor of both Houses, members of the Group form delegations to take up issues of particular concern outside the formal Parliamentary meetings.

Three examples:

1. A delegation recently met the Secretary of State for International Development to continue discussions on UK policy towards mine action funding, especially the way in which funds should most effectively and efficiently be used, for example by direct support to our mine clearance NGOs, and also the need for an increase in the UK's contribution budget to mine action (which was followed shortly by an announcement of a 20 per cent increase in the budget for this work).
2. We have in past years focused on raising awareness of the landmine problem and the Ottawa Convention within NATO's Parliamentary Assembly, and more recently a delegation of our Group met senior NATO officials to discuss NATO policy towards both landmines and cluster munitions.
3. And we aim to bring together Parliamentarians with an interest in certain mine affected countries or countries which have not joined the Treaty, and senior officials, NGOs, and representatives in the UK of communities from those countries. For example, we have in this last Parliament prioritised engaging with the Ambassadors to the UK from India and Pakistan, raising our concerns about new mine use and the need for those countries to move towards signing the Treaty.

Our work has achieved a continuing profile for action on landmines both in Parliament and beyond. We believe that our regular engagement with those who were actively opposed to the Ottawa Convention (for example senior military officers) helped to enlighten them; and we have provided a useful forum where Parliamentarians, NGOs, and government officials can debate the issues and reach a better common understanding of the problems we continue to face.

We hope that this model might be considered as a useful way of working in other countries. We are also keen to explore ways in which we can extend this work in the run up to the Review Conference, in particular to find ways to make sure that the numerous bi-lateral and multi-lateral contacts between UK Members of Parliament, UK Members of the European Parliament and politicians from other countries can wherever possible encourage universalisation and implementation of the Treaty, in a co-ordinated way.

To conclude: Parliamentarians in the UK are constantly being lobbied to support a vast number of causes, many of them very worthy, and it can seem an uphill struggle to maintain interest, four years after the UK's Landmines Act became law. But we must keep involving politicians in our campaign, otherwise governments may lose the political will to sustain their commitment. The approach of the first Review Conference gives us an opportunity to renew interest in Parliaments as we assess the progress made, and I hope today's meeting produces concrete proposals to achieve this.

ENDS

Additional remarks by Richard Lloyd, director of Landmine Action.

If I may, co-chair, I would like to add a couple of remarks of my own. Since 1998 I have been the UK Parliamentary Group's executive secretary, and seen for myself the good work that they do, and I know that there is most definitely enthusiasm in the UK's Parliament for an extension of this interest and support for our work in the coming year. I also want to stress that many ICBL members are doing excellent work with Parliamentarians in a number of countries, and we are continually looking to connect these activities up.

The key lesson we have learnt in the UK is that interest in the campaign among Members of Parliament needs to be very actively encouraged, structured, targeted, co-ordinated and facilitated. Only a very dedicated few MPs will start or keep an interest in the Ottawa Treaty unless we provide them with concise information and advice, and make the subject relevant and important enough to get space in busy politicians diaries. And we need suitable vehicles, and the IPU's Committee to Promote Respect for IHL is one obvious example. Their report of 11 April 2003 includes a concrete structure for Parliamentary action, and we thank the IPU for responding so positively to the ICBL's request to address this.

That's why at Landmine Action we have decided to dedicate a staff member to working with Parliamentarians in the UK to encourage more intensive dialogue between them and those of other States to promote the Treaty, starting with some of the numerous bi-lateral Parliamentary Groups, where our partner national campaigns feel this would be helpful. This might be a resource others would find useful. I'd be happy to discuss this, and the way the UK Parliamentary Group works, with anyone here in more detail later.

As Mr Cook said in his message, the run up to the Review Conference creates an opportunity to beef up parliamentary action in support of the Treaty. We all know that political will is essential for our work, but that the attention span of politicians can be short. Getting political commitment to the Treaty is the responsibility of all of us – not just NGOs or campaigners.

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