

EIGHTH MEETING OF THE STATES PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON THE PROHIBITION OF THE USE, STOCKPILING, PRODUCTION AND TRANSFER OF ANTI-PERSONNEL MINES AND ON THEIR DESTRUCTION

Dead Sea, Jordan, 18-22 November 2007

Closing remarks

**Statement by Markus Reiterer, Austria
Co-Chair of the
Standing Committee on
Victim Assistance and Socio-Economic Reintegration**

21 November 2007

Your royal highness,

Mr. President,

This week has been a very busy week for those colleagues dealing with victim assistance: first, there was an excursion to three remarkable institutions in Amman – an excursion which we undertook together: 12 survivors, other victim assistance experts, colleagues from international institutions and NGOs and diplomats; secondly, we had a whole day of parallel meetings on victim assistance, which culminated in an unforgettable session entirely planned and facilitated by our survivor friends. Moreover, more than one third of the side events during this conference were dealing with victim assistance questions, including the remarkable sitting volleyball match of yesterday. And now today, in plenary, experts from relevant States Parties, survivors and others spoke to us about their progress, problems, projects, priorities and plans.

During our excursion to Amman we visited 3 facilities which are examples of the excellent work that Kingdom of Jordan is undertaking to assist mine survivors and other persons with disabilities. We thank our hosts for their warm welcomes and in particular, His Royal Highness Prince Raad bin Zaad and Her Royal Highness Princess Madja Raad. I would also like to thank the NCDR for providing transport and the Landmine Survivors Network Jordan for valuable support to this excursion.

Mr. President, during the course of the day we have heard a number of substantive presentations. I would like to briefly comment on two of them:

In the statement by the Honourable Minister from Uganda he noted that there was already an extensive array of legislation and policies in Uganda that aimed to protect the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, including landmine survivors. However, there was need for a comprehensive plan of action to operationalise existing policies to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities. The fact that Uganda was able to develop that comprehensive plan by addressing its obligations in relation to victim assistance in the context of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention is a clear indication of the value of the work undertaken by the States Parties in the implementation of this important aspect of the Convention.

Another important message was made by Afghanistan that “*it takes time to build the capacities of the ministries to develop and implement appropriate policies and strategies; it takes time to develop the capacities of services providers; and it takes time to build the infrastructure necessary to provide the services.*” In a world where we often look for “quick fixes”, we need to remember that unlike mine clearance and stockpile destruction there are no deadlines for victim assistance. Many mine survivors and other persons with disabilities have rights and needs for medical care, rehabilitation, psychological support and social and economic opportunities that will last for their lifetime.

It seems to me quite obvious that mine action and victim assistance may have certain overlaps, but essentially they are two very distinct phenomena. Mine action is essentially a technical issue,

dealing with different technologies and techniques, or machines and methods. Victim assistance, on the other hand, is about human beings. And caring for human beings is a long-term engagement which permeates all areas of human life and various disciplines ranging from medical care to social and economic inclusion.

Achieving the aims of the *Nairobi Action Plan* will require committed and coordinated efforts at all levels and requires cooperation and coordination between all the relevant ministries and key actors to avoid duplication and to ensure a holistic approach to meeting the needs of the population, including mine survivors and other people with disabilities. However, our efforts to advance national planning and objective-setting through inter-ministerial coordination have shown that these are challenging tasks for States Parties. In many of the 24 relevant States Parties, there continues to be a lack of communication and coordination between ministries and with other stakeholders. Often progress is hindered by a lack of capacity to give disability issues the attention that it warrants, and as a result, disability issues are often given a low priority in planning processes. Of key concern, is the lack of opportunities for people with disabilities to have a voice on issues that concern them.

If we are to make real and sustainable progress, we all need to work together: states, international institutions, civil society, survivors – and as outgoing co-chair of this committee I challenge all of you, all of us, to do more. I call on affected States to show national ownership, donors and international organisations to reinforce their commitment and I also call on our friends from civil society to do more to support States Parties at the national level in their victim assistance planning efforts. And I challenge civil society to further improve its monitoring of these efforts, ensuring that civil society's important oversight role recognizes the responsibility of individual affected States and appreciates the significant challenges these States face.

When the framework and guiding principles for victim assistance were formally clarified by the States Parties at the First Review Conference in 2004 many within the disarmament community were sceptical of our prospects to actually achieve the aims of the *Nairobi Action Plan* in relation to victim assistance. However, since 2005, the focus of efforts of the Co-Chairs has been to empower the 24 States Parties that reported responsibility for significant numbers of mine survivors to take matters into their own hands.

Mr. President, when I started to deal with the Mine Ban Treaty some three years ago, my first impression was that this convention was basically about clearance and stockpile destruction. Victim Assistance seemed to be – yes important, but somewhat like an after-thought. In the last three years we have seen an increasing focus on victim assistance and I think it is fair to say that by now, victim assistance has arrived at the centre-stage of our efforts under the Convention.

One of the key lessons learnt in the victim assistance-related work of the Convention is that if a meaningful difference is going to be made in enhancing the well-being and guaranteeing the rights of landmine victims, victim assistance must no longer be seen as an abstraction but as a concrete set of actions for which specific States Parties hold ultimate responsibility. As you have recorded in the *Dead Sea Progress Report*, Mr. President, these actions in victim assistance should be specific, measurable and time-bound, with specific measures logically needing to be determined by individual States Parties based on their very diverse circumstances.

The year 2007 marks half way between the First and Second Review Conferences. The Mid-Term Review of the Status of Victim Assistance, which the Co-Chairs have presented to this meeting, highlights that we are indeed making progress in achieving the aims of the *Nairobi Action Plan*. By the Second Review Conference, victim assistance in the context of the Convention will have become measurable. Furthermore, there will be a body of evidence pointing to how the understandings on victim assistance agreed to at the First Review Conference will have been converted from words on paper into action.

Overall progress may have been slow, but it is progress none the less. It is only through collaboration and cooperation – affected States, international agencies, non governmental organisations, the donor community, civil society, and survivors themselves, working together – that we can do our very best to improve the quality of daily life of mine survivors, victims of other war-related injuries, and all persons with disabilities in a non-discriminatory fashion.

Mr. President,

allow me at the end of my presentation, to make a couple of personal remarks.

14 months ago, when – together with my colleague Rahma from Sudan – I took over the co-chairmanship of the Committee on Victim Assistance, I virtually knew nothing about the plight of the victims of this weapon nor did I know much, what victim assistance really means.

And as others, I had a somewhat distant knowledge that people loose their lives and their limbs – as they say – as a result of this inhumane weapon. But still: that sounded fairly theoretical.

I had never visited a survivor in his or her village or had a chance to really understand what this is all about.

Now this has changed. Over the last 14 months we have tried to push victim assistance into the centre of our endeavours.

A year ago, or at least until my trip to Northern Albania, 200 kilometres seemed a fairly short distance. But after this unforgettable trip from Tirana to Kukes, where most of the Albanian mine survivors live, I knew what is meant by a “long and winding road”.

And, we were travelling in the luxury of a four wheel drive of the Albanian Mine Action Executive – and all of us in good health.

Imagine, you would be seriously injured and the only way to get the help you need is to take that road to go to hospital! It will take you almost six hours just to get there. And many victims may consider six hours even a short time in comparison to their own experiences and realities!

To me, that symbolizes both the hardship that victims have to endure - in dimensions many of us will never be able to fully grasp – and also the long and winding road towards putting measures into place to overcome these manifold and untold challenges.

Mr President, over the last months, I have seen a lot of effort and determination going into assisting survivors and their families as well as communities.

I have participated in a very active and successful workshop in Sarajevo – where governmental experts, colleagues from international organisations and NGOs and survivors worked together to define their strategy for victim assistance – and I am glad to note that this work continues.

I meet with colleagues in Albania, to re-define a plan to improve the lives of survivors in their country.

I saw colleagues in Uganda coming together and doing the same – and I will never forget the traditional Ugandan dances. They were beautiful to watch, but became just unbelievable when Ugandan mine Survivors – some of them single or double amputees, one in a wheel chair – joined the performers and started to dance.

They did, however, make the serious mistake of asking me to join them dancing, which lead to a considerable decrease in the quality of the performance.

What I have learned over the past 14 month was not so much the technicalities and intrinsic complexities of the wide field of victim assistance. It relates much more to the human side of it:

Being blown up by a mine must be the worst nightmare come true, and those of us, who were lucky enough not to undergo these horrors, can hardly imagine the anguish and agony that landmine survivors experience and need to overcome.

How do you find hope again? How do you manage to survive – often in situations where survival for human beings without disabilities is difficult enough? How is it, when for the first

time after the accident, you meet your wife again, your husband, your children? How do you feed them? And: How do you stand the pain?

The answers to these questions, are only known to survivors themselves. And this makes it so important to have people like Adnan, Saleh, Kosal, Margaret, Jesus, Firoz, Reth and all our other survivor friends present – and I can only encourage you to talk to them, profit from their presence and learn from them.

In the last fourteen months, I had the privilege to meet a good number of survivors from around the world. I have seen their energy, their enthusiasm and their hope, their humour, their troubles and their smiles – and I can tell you: they count on us. They count on us all – not to let them down, to care about them, to respect their rights and their dignity and to meet their needs!

Having lost part of their body, part of their life, they have all the right to challenge us. The survivors we have here, are true ambassadors for all the other survivors out there: they represent their cause and we should all recognize their excellence.

At the end of this statement: I would like to thank a number of very special people:

Let me thank, all my survivor friends, for being friends.

Let me thank Ken Rutherford who can be demanding and supportive at the same time.

Kirsten Young, who is not here, but gave me a crash course in the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

Patricia Campbell, perhaps the only person here, who has worked for the cause of this convention as government representative, NGO activist and member of the ISU,

All the colleagues from LSN, HI, the ICRC, UNDP, UNMAS, WHO, ILO, the ITF, etc. for providing support, when support was needed;

All the experts from the VA 24 who work hard to make progress;

The donors who contributed to the Sponsorship Programme and, hence, enabled the participation by experts;

My very special thanks, however, go to one person, whose gentle persistence and enormous expertise is only excelled by her deep humanity: Sheree Bailey who really is the backbone of the victim assistance work under this convention.

This list by no means is exhaustive. But, what you can see is that progress has many parents and that we go nowhere, if we don't work together. And by "we" I mean all of us: survivors, experts, donors, representatives from states, organisations, civil society. We must not spend our time for futile fidgeting: but concentrate our efforts and resources for the benefit of those in need: the victims of this weapon.

I thank you very much.