

Oppose the New Landmine System in Iraq

March 11, 2005: The U.S. plans to deploy a new system of remote-controlled antipersonnel mines in Iraq by May, according to Human Rights Watch. The new mine system, called Matrix, allows a soldier with a laptop computer based miles away from a target to detonate Claymore mines via radio signal. Claymore mines are directional fragmentation munitions mounted above ground level and are designed to have antipersonnel effects. They can propel lethal fragments from 130 to 200 feet across a 60-degree arc. However, U.S. Army tests indicate that the actual hazard range for these types of mines can be as high as 980 feet (300 meters).

While Claymore mines are not banned by the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and the USCBL has no position on use of these weapons, the plan to use the Matrix mine system raises two key unanswered questions in terms of their human impact.

1) How will a soldier, from great distances away, be able to ensure that a target is a combatant and not a civilian? A blip on a computer screen is not a foolproof way to ensure that the target is not a civilian.

2) Can civilians inadvertently detonate these mines, or can they only be activated by a soldier operating the system? The original technology behind Matrix was designed with a "battlefield override" feature that substituted activation by a victim for detonation by command. Although the U.S. is not a signatory, victim-activated mines are prohibited by the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

ACTION: Contact your Senators. Ask them to press the administration on their plans to deploy these weapons. Tell you Senators that you are concerned over the human consequences of deploying the proposed Matrix Mine System. Tell them that you are concerned that civilians will be harmed by remote controlled mines and that you oppose deployment of any victim-activated weapon. Urge you Senators to ask the Pentagon for concrete assurances that innocent civilians will not accidentally detonate these new Matrix mines. If they receive assurances, ask your Senators to share the details with you.

BACKGROUND: On 27 February 2004, the Bush administration completed a two and one-half year review of US landmine policy. According to the policy, it is no longer a U.S. policy goal to join the Mine Ban Treaty by 2006. Instead, the administration will work toward ending U.S. use of anti-vehicle and anti-personnel landmines that are not designed to self-destruct and self-deactivate within a specified period of time - usually between one day and two weeks. While non-self-destructing "dumb mines" will no longer be used outside of Korea, the use of self-destructing "smart mines" is permitted indefinitely. According to the policy, the U.S. will refrain from using "dumb mines" in Korea by 2010. It is not known whether Matrix possesses a feature to self-destruct or self-deactivate.

While the U.S. has not used landmines in a military operation since the Gulf War of 1991, it reserves the right to do so in future conflicts. The current U.S. landmine arsenal is comprised of roughly 15 million smart mines and 2.5 million dumb mines. U.S.-manufactured anti-personnel mines have been found in 32 mine-affected countries or regions.

The United States is on the wrong side of the global debate over landmines. Besides threatening the lives of innocent people throughout the world, by reserving the right to produce and use anti-personnel mines, the Bush administration is legitimizing the use of a weapon - smart or dumb - that is designed solely to maim people. Other countries looking at the U.S. may get the message that using landmines is legitimate use of force. According to Senator Patrick Leahy (VT), "we [the U.S.] are by far the most powerful nation on earth, and the world looks to us for leadership on this issue. When we back away from the progress we have pledged to rid the world of these indiscriminate weapons, others will ask why they, with their much weaker armed forces, should stop using them."

For more information see:

Human Rights Watch's press release, "U.S.: New Landmines for Iraq Raise Fears of Civilian Risk":

<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/02/28/usint10214.htm>
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Landmines Survivors Network's Action Alert on the Matrix System:

<http://www.landminesurvivors.org/>

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Dear Senator _____

I am concerned about recent reports that the Army may deploy a new antipersonnel mine system, called Matrix, to Iraq. The Matrix system allows a soldier with a laptop computer based miles away from a target to detonate Claymore mines via radio signal. I am concerned over the human consequences of this system.

How can a soldier, miles away from a target, be sure that the target is not a civilian? Soldiers in Iraq have a hard time distinguishing between a civilian and combatant when they are face to face. How much more difficult will it be when targets are represented only by a blip on a computer screen.

I am also concerned that these weapons can be activated by victims. Any weapon that leaves out the decision to fire by a soldier poses a grave risk to civilians. I urge you to contact the Pentagon. Please ask the appropriate officials to give you assurances that the Matrix Mine System is not indiscriminate and will not pose a danger to civilians. If you receive these assurances, please pass them on to me.

Thank you for addressing my concerns,