

Landmine Free 2025

Speech by HRH Prince Harry, International Mine Awareness Day, 4 April 2017

Twenty years ago, in the last months of her life, my mother campaigned to draw attention to the horrific and indiscriminate impact of landmines. She visited affected areas such as Huambo in Angola and Travnik in Bosnia. She heard how people in these communities lived in constant fear that each step may be their last. She met with those who had suffered life changing injuries as a result of anti-personnel mines, she listened to their stories, and helped share them with the world.

At the time, the attention my mother brought to this issue wasn't universally popular; some believed she had stepped over the line into the arena of political campaigning – but for her this wasn't about politics; it was about people. She was an advocate for all those who she felt needed her voice most: whether it be marginalised men dying of AIDS in East London, ostracized sufferers of leprosy in India, or the teenage girl who had lost her leg to a landmine in Angola. She knew she had a big spotlight to shine, and she used it to bring attention on the people that others had forgotten, ignored or were too afraid to support.

My mother had been shocked and appalled by the impact that landmines were having on incredibly vulnerable people and on children in particular. She did not understand why more people were not willing to address the cause of so much suffering. She refused to accept that these destructive weapons should be left where they were, just because they were perceived as too expensive and difficult to remove.

In June 1997 at a seminar organised by Mines Advisory Group and the Landmine Survivors Network, my mother said in a speech -

'Even if the world decided tomorrow to ban these weapons, this terrible legacy of mines already in the earth would continue to plague the poor nations of the Globe. The evil that men do, lives after them...'

Ken Rutherford, who is here with us this evening, was working for a humanitarian organisation in Somalia when he lost both his legs to a landmine. Ken opened a Landmine survivor's project in Bosnia with my mother and, in my mind, sums up her contribution to this cause perfectly. He says that... 'she transformed landmines from a security issue into a humanitarian issue.'

I know if my mother was here with us today, she wouldn't be willing to accept any credit for the fact that the Ottawa treaty was signed by 122 states in the same year as her visits to Angola and Bosnia. Rather, she would have applauded the public outrage and the resolve of those in positions of power to end the indiscriminate killing of civilians. She would have applauded that, in a moment of global conscience, the treaty put humanitarian, not military, considerations at its heart.

There is no question that a huge amount has been achieved in the last 20 years – landmines remain politically toxic weapons in the eyes of people around the world; vast government stockpiles have been destroyed; and production of these weapons by the world's arms producers has all but ceased.

Additionally, thanks to the bravery and dedication of the teams from MAG, The Halo Trust, Norwegian People's Aid, Danish Demining Group and others; 27 Countries have been declared mine free and of the 30 countries deemed to have massive scale contamination in the 1990's, thankfully only a handful remain in this perilous position.

The contribution of these demining organisations cannot be overstated; if you were to retrace my mother's footsteps through Huambo in Angola today, you would see no danger signs and have no need for a helmet or body armour. Where the land was once contaminated with deadly explosives, there is now a thriving community, with a small college and a workshop making wooden furniture.

It is right that we should celebrate the huge progress which has been made, thanks to the difficult and dangerous work of the field teams, the dedication of all those who support them and the tremendous financial support, especially from the governments' of the United States, Japan, Norway, Germany, Netherlands, the EU and our own government here in the UK. But in marking how far we have come, we must also acknowledge that there is more which needs to be done to fulfil the commitments of the Ottawa treaty.

It is estimated that 60 million people still live in fear from the threat of landmines. In 2015, global deaths and injuries from landmines reached a ten-year high; but perhaps more shocking is the fact that almost 80% of them were civilians. It is typically the most vulnerable who are at the greatest risk; those attempting to rebuild their lives or returning home after conflict, where food is in short supply and medical services are often limited.

Families trying to meet their basic needs for survival – growing crops, gathering wood or collecting water – are facing unacceptable risks in their daily lives. In fact, somewhere in the world right now, a parent is making the grimmest of choices: to risk cultivating mine-contaminated land or to let their family starve. That is no choice at all.

Last September, not far from Kuito Angola, an area my Mother also visited, a young boy found an landmine and took it home. What he mistook for a toy killed him and eight members of his family.

Such tragedies undermine the promises made by the world twenty years ago; too many communities remained shackled in a cycle of poverty and fear. But it doesn't need to be this way. With the renewed focus this anniversary demands, we should celebrate MAG and HALO's joint commitment to 'finishing the job' and use their example to bring other organisations into this collaboration.

I have seen first-hand the work of demining field teams in Cahora Bassa, Mozambique and Cuito Cuanavale, Angola and can attest to their discipline, expertise and determination. MAG and HALO alone have a combined workforce of 9,000 people – almost all from mine-affected communities. They, and other organisations, have the knowledge, experience and capability to realise the Treaty's vision by 2025.

It would take just an additional £100m each year until 2025 – the cost of a star signing for some professional football teams – to clear the world's most affected countries of landmines; countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, where the debris from bygone wars denies men and women the ability to cultivate their land, feed their children and re-build their lives.

I applaud the Secretary of State and our government for their bold commitment to supporting this vital work with additional funding. I hope this example will be seen by the international community as a reminder of the commitments made in 1997 and that other countries will redouble their efforts. The sooner we are able to clear all remaining landmines the less chance there is of innocent lives being lost or changed forever.

I would like to end by briefly introducing two people to you all. As I mentioned earlier, in August 1997, my mother travelled to Bosnia with Ken Rutherford. When she was there she met two young boys – one Muslim, one Serbian – who had both lost legs to landmines. She shared their stories with the world, and helped campaigners – many of whom are in this room – to change history.

Those two young boys, Malic and Žarko, are now grown men and are with us today. 20 years on, they both still struggle with their physical and emotional injuries and with the high costs of replacing their prosthetics.

When my mother said goodbye to Žarko that August, just weeks before her untimely death, she told him he would not be forgotten. Please help me keep her word to Žarko and Malic, and other people like them throughout the world, who still need us to finish the job and rid the planet of landmines. Collectively we have the knowledge, skill, and resources to achieve it, so let's make future generations proud.

Thank you.