

On Bombs and Human Rights

by Janet Jagan

Sometimes we tend to overlook some of the very positive decisions and discussions going on at the international level as we become so self-absorbed with local events. Besides the many horrific events going on overseas, like the non-stop slaughter of Afghans and Iraqis, the shame of Darfur, the threats by Israel to bomb out Iran, the electoral scandals by Mugabe in Zimbabwe (not much different from the PNC vote rigging from 1968-1991), the crime of Guantanamo Bay Prison, the starvation of children worldwide but particularly in Africa and the spread of HIV/AIDS, etc, it is heartening to see some welcome advances by society.

In May this year, in Dublin, a hundred countries agreed to a treaty banning cluster bombs. As one commentator, Gwynne Dyer (Sunday Chronicle June 1, 2008) said of the efforts to get agreement on the banning of cluster bombs: "The British armed forces clung to their cluster bombs like a baby to its rattle, and some suspected that they were trying to sabotage the treaty on behalf of their American friends (who were not there, of course). But Prime Minister Gordon Brown overruled them in the end...". Good for Gordon Brown! I doubt that his predecessor Tony Blair would have done the same, so lovingly close he was to the Bush administration.

I feel close to this subject for two reasons. One, the ghastly results of cluster bombs and land mines on civilians, particularly children, has always horrified me. And two, when I was President, I had the exact same experiences as Gordon Browne. Our military positively refused to agree to a decision to ban land mines and support a treaty that was being signed in Canada. They didn't understand how incorrect was their stance until much later.

There are large areas in the world, where wars have taken place, that are literally littered with unexploded bomblets. I remember seeing a documentary about Afghanistan, showing hundreds and hundreds of children and adults with at least one limb missing as a result of such a bomb exploding while they were tilling the land, just taking a walk or playing in a field that had not been combed safely of cluster bombs.

These bomblets, left unexploded, can go on killing civilians for years after they are dropped. For example, Israel dropped some four million bomblets on Lebanon and to date some 30 have been killed by the unexploded bomblets, not mentioning those injured.

Actually, warfare has produced two types of small explosives – some air dropped and some scattered by the victorious army as it leaves the territory it has conquered, leaving additional chaos and suffering.

The USA has excused itself from the cluster bomb treaty by declaring: "While the United States shares the humanitarian concerns of those in Dublin, cluster munitions have demonstrated military utility, and their elimination from US stock piles would put the lives of our soldiers ... at risk." Not mentioned are the massive profits made by the munitions manufacturers!

Another positive development, in attitude, comes from a woman – one of the many strong women leaders who have emerged in large numbers over the years – United Nations Human Rights Chief Louise Arbour, who, in her farewell speech made a passionate call for people's rights. She attacked mistreatment of women and gays in many countries and called for equal condemnation of rights violations wherever they happen. (Reuters, June 3, 2008)

She urged condemnation of anti-semitism and Islamophobia, abuse of minorities, immigrants and people from `perceived' lower castes.

Said Ms Arbour: "A key aspect of women's legal disenfranchisement in many countries is the limitation placed on their ability to own or manage property, including through unjust divorce or inheritance laws... perpetuation of prejudices continues to deny equal rights and dignity to millions worldwide on the basis of nothing more innocuous than their sexual identity or orientation, or their ancestry in the case of caste discrimination."

These are the words of a genuine and creative women's rights advocate and a staunch, unbiased, human rights activist. She deserves our admiration for militant and fearless leadership.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre