

Cluster bombs: U.S. declines to join weapons treaty

by [Tom Faulkner](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

In May, representatives of 109 countries met in a soccer stadium in Dublin, Ireland, and agreed to support a treaty to ban cluster munitions. I was present as a member of a delegation from the World Conference of Religions for Peace, and was one of nearly 300 accredited lobbyists in the Cluster Munition Coalition.

The path to Dublin was full of surprises. The first was when talks about cluster munitions stalled in the UN's traditional forum—the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons—and Norway called for a stand-alone process seeking to ban “cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians.” Forty-six countries joined Norway, and by the time of May's meeting, there were 109.

The big users stayed away: China, India, Russia, Israel, Pakistan and the United States. But that was also true in the case of landmines, and the good news is that after the signing of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning the use of landmines, major countries that hadn't signed reduced their use of them. The United States appears to have stopped using landmines altogether.

Some of the countries that came to Dublin sought exemptions from the treaty. Canada asked for leeway to work with nonsignatory allies in military operations. Germany sought an exemption for cluster munitions equipped with sophisticated self-destruct devices; the United Kingdom, for existing stockpiles of the munitions. Then, in a major breakthrough, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced from London that the U.K. would no longer seek exemptions for its own cluster munitions and would instead destroy them.

Perhaps the greatest weakness in the draft treaty is its failure to spell out whether or not signatories can work militarily with nonsignatories. Canada, for example, is the only NATO country whose armed forces are equipped to work in perfect integration with American armed forces. What effect will this have on Canadian/American joint missions in the future? I am optimistic that the Americans will quietly find a way not

to embarrass the Canadians by using cluster munitions in joint missions, but nothing is certain in this regard.

Yes, there are arguments to be made in support of the use of cluster munitions. The best ones assert that a judicious use of cluster munitions will save the lives of the soldiers that we send into battle. Those are the arguments that led Israeli and Syrian forces to use cluster bombs on each other in 2006, that led American forces to use them in Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War. But it's difficult to imagine a country dropping cluster bombs on its own citizens in order to meet its military objectives (exceptions may be Russia's readiness to deploy cluster munitions in Chechnya and Somalia's willingness to use them in Somalia.)

These political and military considerations fade quickly when one considers the effects of cluster munitions on civilians during and after battle. Like landmines, cluster munitions cost several times as much to clean up as to deploy, and they become a hazard that lasts for decades. Children pick them up to play with, farmers run over them with plows, impoverished scavengers actually look for them in hopes of selling their metal as scrap.

The Jamaican delegate pointed out that cluster munitions are generally produced and deployed by wealthy countries, but their deadly clutter is left behind in countries of the Third World that cannot afford to clean up the mess and care for the steady stream of victims. Yet aid to victims of cluster bombs is regarded as an optional charity by wealthy countries and not as a legal obligation.

The aim of the treaty to ban cluster munitions is to stigmatize their use—to create an international consensus among signatories and nonsignatories alike that nothing justifies using them. Stigmatization can work on cluster munitions just as it has worked on poison gas, expanding bullets and landmines. But advocates of a ban must persuade the international community that humanitarian considerations outweigh all military and political considerations.

Relatively few religious leaders or religious organizations were represented in Dublin. Pope Benedict XVI made a powerful public statement against cluster munitions on the day that the Dublin conference opened, and Bishop Raymond Field, who chairs the Irish bishops' Justice Commission, presided over an interfaith service attended by Buddhists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Muslims and others. But outside of the diplomats from the Holy See, who had seats at the table itself, the few religious

lobbyists tended to come from activist organizations rather than traditional hierarchies: a Muslim from the tribal districts of Pakistan who has organized a peace group, for example, and an Australian nun who has spent 15 years inside Cambodia working with Jesuit Relief.

As we near the December 2 date for ratification of this treaty, more effort is needed from the religious leaders of the world—particularly those in wealthy lands—in stigmatizing these horrible weapons and pressing for an international consensus that will support what was accomplished in Dublin.