

Videotaped Statement of Reception Held for Landmine Clearance in Armenia

Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr., Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action

The Greater Boston Committee Event for Landmine Clearance in Armenia, Sponsored by the Children of Armenia Fund and the Humpty Dumpty Institute
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Good evening. Pev. I'm Linc Bloomfield, a native son of Cohasset, Massachusetts where I still have family. Normally, I'd leap at the chance to return to the Bay State and great city of Boston to speak with you in person. But given the current circumstances, I'm working here in Washington.

Nevertheless, I'm honored by this opportunity to recognize your initiative, to share my thoughts about humanitarian mine action, and discuss our common interest in helping Armenia to solve its landmine problem.

I thank our host, Mr. Vaughn Kailian, Vice Chairperson of Millennium Pharmaceuticals, for opening his home for this event so that Armenia may become mine-safe. I also thank Eva Medzorian and all of the people that she represents from the Greater Boston Committee who were instrumental in coordinating this private initiative.

I'm pleased to greet our new friends, Dr. Garo Armen, Founder and President of the Children of Armenia Fund (COAF) and his Executive Director Mary Ann Kibarian. COAF is a co-sponsor of the mine detecting dog demonstration that took place earlier this evening at the St. James Church in Watertown, and also helped to arrange this reception. I hope that we will have further occasion to work with COAF.

I'm delighted to acknowledge Michael Sonnenfeldt and Ralph Cwerman, Founder and President respectively, of one of our oldest public-private partners in humanitarian mine action -- the Humpty Dumpty Institute -- that also co-sponsored the mine detecting dog demonstration and this reception. The Humpty Dumpty Institute has been instrumental in putting this mine detecting dog initiative together and seeing it through to its completion. Michael and Ralph are innovative and entrepreneurial partners. Their organization works hard to bring new supporters -- such as the Children of Armenia Fund -- to mine action in Armenia and elsewhere.

I want to acknowledge another valued partner -- Perry Baltimore, Executive Director of the Marshall Legacy Institute, with whom we recently celebrated a separate initiative to deploy mine detecting dogs to Thailand.

Two of my staff are here with you this evening: Kara Bue and Jim Lawrence. Kara is a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. Her responsibilities include helping me to oversee the State Department's bilateral humanitarian mine action programs in over 30 countries, including Armenia, and encouraging private mine action initiatives such as the Greater Boston Committee's that we are honoring tonight.

Jim Lawrence, Director of the Office of Mine Action Initiatives and Partnerships, which is also in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, develops new relationships with groups like this and supports the efforts of the private sector to reinforce official humanitarian mine action programs.

There are four points I want to touch on this evening:

- First, the vital role that private citizens have in supporting humanitarian mine action;
- Second, how democratic governments and their free citizens working in partnership can help undo damage from past conflicts and lessen the risk of future conflicts;
- Third, the U.S. Government's efforts to help Armenia become mine-safe; and

Fourth, the role of mine detecting dogs as efficient, cost-effective aids in achieving a mine-safe world.

The initiative we are honoring tonight is a wonderful example of how private American citizens, exercising their rights in our civil society, are helping to solve a serious humanitarian problem around the world. In this case, a group of concerned Americans have joined together to help rid Armenia of landmines that threaten the lives and limbs of its people, and which have taken valuable farmland out of production.

The landmine problem affects public health, hinders economic growth, threatens social stability, and colors Armenia's relations with its neighbors. Fortunately, you're in good hands with these non-governmental organizations -- the Children of Armenia Fund and the Humpty Dumpty Institute -- to help you implement this initiative. And I think we can all agree that you are in the best company of all by joining forces with mine detecting dogs -- truly man's, woman's and children's best friend -- as the focus of your initiative.

The landmines and unexploded ordnance that threaten civilians and hinder farming in Armenia pose similar challenges in neighboring Azerbaijan and Georgia. These deadly hazards left behind from the conflicts that erupted as the Soviet Union disintegrated a decade ago, are a burden on all three nations as they try to move towards a peaceful and prosperous future.

The sad reality is that many conflicts in the post-World War Two era have involved the indiscriminate use of persistent landmines by one party or another. These explosives, buried often randomly in the ground, can maim or kill decades after the conflict is over. We see this today in Armenia and elsewhere in the Caucasus. We see it in Iraq where landmines that threaten the innocent population were planted by Saddam Hussein's regime. As if he needed one more black mark on his legacy.

So there are more than enough landmine problems around the world. What I want you to understand is that real progress is possible, and is happening, thanks to efforts by many government and private entities.

The once embattled province of Kosovo is now mine safe. El Salvador is mine safe. Kosovars and Salvadorans can now move around freely, maximize the rich potential of their land, and permit their children to play outdoors without fear.

In Kosovo, the rapid rate at which that province was demined was due not only to the assistance lent by donor nations such as the United States, but also the active involvement of non-governmental organizations, notably the United Nations. With your help we can all make Armenia a success story too.

Beginning in 1993, when the United States first provided assistance to Armenian landmine survivors, we have given Armenia over 7 1/2 million dollars of mine action assistance, helping Armenia to establish its own national humanitarian demining program, training Armenian deminers to internationally accepted standards, and providing them with the best demining equipment.

In 2000, the United States arranged for Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian soldiers to undertake humanitarian demining training together -- the first time that Armenian and Azerbaijani troops worked peacefully side by side since the tragic war that ended in 1994.

There is no single, foolproof, one-size-fits-all method for safely and effectively finding and clearing landmines. However, a well-trained mine detecting dog and an equally well-trained human handler who has developed a rapport with the dog, can provide an affordable and very effective component in what is often referred to as the deminer's "toolbox."

These dogs can speed up the task of marking the boundaries of a mined area and then perform quality assurance after human deminers have cleared the area. The dogs can also assist in what we call "area reduction" -- that is, helping to determine that suspected mine fields are in fact mine-free, so that precious assets can be directed to other areas where the mine threat actually exists.

The Quick Reaction Demining Force funded by the United States has successfully used mine detecting dogs in Sri Lanka and Sudan. Mine detecting dogs have a proven track record working in many other disparate cultures and environments too, ranging from Afghanistan to Thailand. Of course, some mine detecting dogs have already been deployed in Armenia. This new team of dogs for Armenia, being underwritten by the Armenian-American community, will be a welcome and valuable reinforcement, I assure you.

So I thank you all for joining in this initiative. Thank you for helping to make Armenia, and our world overall, a better and safer place.

I toast your health and success this evening.

Genatz!

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