

Videotaped Statement on the Occasion of the Fifth Annual Benefit Dinner for The Polus Center for Social and Economic Development

Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr., Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action
Fifth Annual Benefit Dinner for The Polus Center for Social and Economic Development
Northampton, Massachusetts
February 27, 2003

Good evening. I'm Linc Bloomfield and although I work in Washington, DC, I grew up in Cohasset, Massachusetts and many of my family still live in the land of the Red Sox.

To our friends at The Polus Center, to the Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Relations of Nicaragua -- Dr. Mauricio Herdocia -- and to all of the other guests who have gathered for the Fifth Annual benefit dinner, I extend my warmest greetings.

Although I'm unable to join you in Northampton this evening, I want to tell you how honored I am to have the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the Polus Center and the good works it is accomplishing in Nicaragua and Honduras.

The Polus Center exemplifies the best qualities of private American citizens. This is a classic example of committed individuals banding together at their own initiative and on their own time to establish a successful non-governmental organization that has effectively reached out the hand of kindness to our good friends and neighbors in Nicaragua and Honduras.

The U.S. Department of State was so impressed by the success of the Polus Center's activities, that in 2001 we invited them to become one of our partners in humanitarian mine action. We did this because we were genuinely impressed by the Polus Center's model of community-based, full-service prosthetic outreach and rehabilitation services -- the Walking Unidos center in Leon, Nicaragua that treats people who have been both directly and indirectly harmed by the effects of conflict.

Our belief in the soundness of the Polus Center's community-based approach, has been strengthened by its establishment of a second full-service prosthetic outreach and rehabilitation center -- Vida Nueva -- or New Life -- in Choluteca, Honduras.

Incidentally, the initial funding for the Vida Nueva center was provided by Grapes for Humanity, another one of our valued partners in humanitarian mine action.

My dual responsibilities as the Special Representative for Mine Action and as the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs give me good perspective on the effects of indiscriminately-laid landmines on innocent civilians. These persistent mines pose a serious long-term public health menace that hinders the economic recovery of nations years after a conflict is over.

I have also learned that landmines are but one of the hazards of past conflicts whose effects are equally threatening to life, limb and stability. Here I am talking about unexploded ordnance such as bombs, artillery and mortar shells that failed to explode when they were unleashed and which still await victims. These hazards also include millions of military small arms -- such as assault rifles and machine guns -- and other light weapons to include shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles.

The ubiquitous presence of this "detritus of war" -- whether it lies waiting in the ground or is widely available on the black markets of the world to almost anyone -- poses an ongoing danger to civilians, a threat to democracy and the

rule of law, and an opportunity for terrorists to exploit.

You could say that the U.S. Government's growing awareness that the post-conflict landscape must be cleared not only of landmines but other destabilizing hazards and excess weapons of war is "holistic." We need to achieve stability by addressing several factors at once.

Our Polus Center partners have also adopted a holistic approach in their activities in Nicaragua and Honduras. They recognize that enabling the disabled to reintegrate fully in their communities involves more than just fitting them with prosthetics, as important as that is. It also means providing them with the training to be valued, productive workers. And the Polus Center has even taken it a step further by creating a business enterprise -- the Ben Linder Cyber Café -- that provides employment as well as skills and networking opportunities to make the disabled more competitive in the job market.

There is one last broad parallel between the U.S. Government's mine action programs around the world and the Polus Center's activities in Central America. In order for national mine action programs to be successful and self-sustaining, they must ultimately be managed by the people of the affected countries themselves and not perpetually controlled by outsiders. In this spirit, the Polus Center has diligently worked to train Nicaraguan and Honduran citizens to manage and operate the centers in Leon and Choluteca.

I wish to thank the government of Nicaragua for the hospitality and assistance that it has extended to Michael Lundquist and his Polus Center team that has facilitated the establishment of the model Walking Unidos center in Leon.

And I thank Michael and everyone at the Polus Center for their extraordinary grass-roots efforts that have brought hope and made a real difference to so many people in Leon and Choluteca. Thanks to each of you for coming tonight and demonstrating your interest and commitment.

I toast your health and success this evening.

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