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Tun Channareth, a Cambodian anti-land mine activist, accepts a copy of the Global Ban on Land Mines from William Bowden in Ottawa Dec. 3.

Bishops voice criticism of U.S. mine ban stance

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — U.S. Catholic officials voiced regrets at the Clinton administration's decision not to join more than 120 other nations — including the Vatican — in a treaty for a global land mine ban, but they said it should give a new thrust to the Catholic Campaign to Ban Land Mines.

Speaking for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston wrote to Clinton: "The Catholic bishops, like many others, were deeply disappointed ... with your decision not to sign the Ottawa treaty that bans these insidious weapons."

He added, "Their terrible moral and human costs should compel us to help ban them, not resist or delay work toward this urgent moral imperative."

Bishop Fiorenza is NCCB vice president and acting president while the head of the conference, Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland, is recuperating from bypass surgery.

At a briefing at NCCB-U.S. Catholic Conference headquarters Dec. 3, as the Holy See and other nations were signing their names to the treaty in Ottawa, church officials called for emphasis on the recently begun grass-roots parish campaign to push for U.S. adoption of the treaty as well.

At a rally the next day in Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House, USCC political and military affairs adviser Gerard F. Powers joined other religious and humanitarian leaders urging Clinton to sign the treaty.

"Banning land mines is an issue of life and death," Powers said. "Anti-personnel land mines are a blight on humanity. Children lose their limbs. Parents lose their children. Farmers lose their land. All of us lose because of this moral abomination."

He said the Catholic Campaign to Ban Land Mines, led by the USCC and 15 other national Catholic organizations, "is working to mobilize the Catholic community in this country in support of a ban."

The campaign has sent education, prayer and action packets on land mines to every U.S. diocese and some 18,000 Catholic parishes, he said.

Powers said the U.S. bishops — who urged a global ban in 1995, when the worldwide ban movement was in its infancy — entered into the issue as a question of morality and of solidarity with bishops, missionaries and other church workers around the world who were reporting back on the human toll of death, injuries and obstacles to development caused by land mines in their countries.

"Banning land mines is a matter of American responsibility," he said. "While most of its allies now see anti-personnel land mines, like chemical and biological weapons, as a weapon of the past, the United States continues to see land mines as part of its future."

At the NCCB-USCC briefing Dec. 3, John Carr, USCC secretary for social development and world peace, noted that Pope John Paul II has been a leader in the worldwide crusade to bring about a land mine ban.

He urged grass-roots work to bring pressure on the government, saying that "turning this administration around (on the treaty) is going to be particularly difficult."

In his letter to Clinton, Bishop Fiorenza said the bishops "do not underestimate the challenge" of developing military alternatives to the use of anti-personnel land mines in the Korean peninsula, cited by the Pentagon and the administration as a key reason for U.S. refusal to join in the treaty.

"But if alternatives exist, and many experts say they do, the United States has a moral responsibility to pursue them — not in the distant future, but now," he wrote.

He said that if the United States does not join in the treaty, "this noble effort to achieve an effective global ban will be seriously undermined."

Pope John Paul has called for a worldwide ban on the weapons, which kill or maim as many as 2,000 people — most of them civilians, including women and children — each month.

In Rome Dec. 1, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro Valls said that by signing the treaty, the Holy See "wishes to bring its moral support to a convention which must be considered as a new and important element of humanitarian law."

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