

'Devastating': Amnesty Rips Hegseth Memo Reversing Limits on Landmines

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By STEPHEN PRAGER | Dec 23, 2025

In a move decried by [human rights](#) organizations, the [Trump administration](#) has scrapped a Biden-era prohibition on the use of antipersonnel [landmines](#), which killed thousands of noncombatants last year.

The [Washington Post](#) [reported](#) on Friday that US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth sent a memo on December 2 reversing the policy, saying the use of such mines would provide the [US military](#) with a “force multiplier” against enemies during “one of the most dangerous security environments in its history.”

“Antipersonnel landmines are inherently indiscriminate weapons that take a disproportionate toll on civilian lives, oftentimes long after conflicts end,” [explained](#) Ben Linden, [Amnesty International](#) USA’s advocacy director for Europe and Central Asia, in a statement on Tuesday.

According to a [report published](#) earlier this month by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Committee to Ban Landmines (ICBL), antipersonnel landmines and other explosive remnants of war killed at least 1,945 people and injured another 4,325 in 2024—the highest yearly casualty figure since 2020 and a 9% increase from the previous year.

Ninety percent of those casualties were civilians, and 46% of those civilians were [children](#).

More than 160 countries have signed an international treaty, written in 1997, [banning](#) the use of antipersonnel landmines, defined as mines “designed to be exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person and that will incapacitate, injure or kill one or more persons” in war.

The US military has not used antipersonnel mines widely since the Persian Gulf War over three decades ago. However, it is one of the few countries that has not signed the treaty, known as the Ottawa Convention, and until earlier this year was the only NATO member not to participate.

In June 2022—just months after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine—then-President Joe Biden announced the US would begin to follow many provisions of the convention, outlawing the use of antipersonnel mines in war zones with the exception of the Korean Peninsula. It was a return to a policy instituted under former President Barack Obama, before it was rolled back during the first Trump administration.

The Biden White House cited the mines’ “disproportionate impact on civilians, including children,” and drew a contrast with Russia, which it said was using the mines “irresponsibly” in civilian areas.

But Biden would reverse the policy just two years later, opting in 2024 to greenlight their provision to Ukraine, which was forbidden from acquiring or using the mines under the treaty.

The ICBL, a leading donor to global mine clearance, condemned the move, noting that “Ukraine already faces years of demining due to Russian landmine use.”

In his memo, Hegseth has delivered another blow to global demining efforts. According to the *Post*:

He outlines five objectives for the new policy—including lifting geographic limits on the use of landmines, which would allow for their use globally, and giving combatant commanders the authority to use the explosives. It would also limit the destruction of landmines in the US inventory only to those that are “inoperable or unsafe.”

The decision comes as other state actors are rapidly abandoning their obligations under the landmine treaty. Last week, Poland announced that after withdrawing from the convention, it plans to start producing antipersonnel mines again, deploying them to the eastern border, and possibly exporting them to Ukraine.

According to the ICBL report, Cambodia, Iran, Myanmar, and North Korea have all been alleged to have used mines within the last year. Meanwhile, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania are also in the process of withdrawing from the Ottawa Treaty, while Ukraine is trying to “suspend the operation” of the convention during its war with Russia.

Hegseth's memo also states that President Donald Trump has rescinded the US Humanitarian Mine Program, a long-running government initiative that helps partner nations find and destroy unexploded landmines.

According to the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, the research arm of the Campaign to Ban Landmines, the US was the largest global donor to mine-clearing actions around the world in 2024. According to the State Department, it has provided more than \$5 billion in assistance to more than 125 countries and areas since 1993.

Some of the money for the program has already been revoked through the Trump administration's slashing of funds for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) at the beginning of his term. The administration ordered mine-clearing nonprofits funded by the agency to cease operations "effective immediately."

According to a report earlier this month from the Century Foundation, the State Department "terminated or let expire" nearly 100 security assistance programs, which included demining programs, as part of its "foreign aid review" in January.

Hegseth's memo states that despite the end of the program, the US will remain "a global leader in unexploded ordnance clearing assistance and in conventional weapons destruction." It provides no details on how the new policy would allow for this.

Linden at Amnesty International called Hegseth's reversal of the landmine policy a "devastating decision."

"Not only will this policy change put more civilians at increased risk of harm, but it will undermine global efforts to eliminate the use of these dangerous weapons," Linden said. "This landmine policy reversal would make the United States and its partners less safe by eroding the prohibition against the use of these indiscriminate weapons on the battlefield."