

Cluster-bomb treaty shows solidarity with victims, says Vatican official

VATICAN CITY - A Vatican official said the recent agreement on a treaty to ban cluster bombs showed solidarity to victims of such weapons and opened an important new chapter in international humanitarian law.

The accord also demonstrated a “spirit of partnership” in making the world a safer and more cooperative place, said Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican representative to a cluster-bomb conference in Dublin, Ireland.

Archbishop Tomasi spoke May 30 at the close of the conference of 111 countries that adopted the treaty. His remarks were released at the Vatican June 5.

The treaty specifies that participating countries cannot use cluster bombs, and requires participants to destroy existing stockpiles within eight years and fund programs to clear bombs from old battlefields.

The United States and other major countries that produce cluster weapons - including Russia, China, Israel, India and Pakistan - boycotted the conference.

A State Department spokesman said the treaty would not change U.S. policy and called cluster bombs essential to U.S. military operations.

Archbishop Tomasi said the agreement now needs to be implemented effectively. He expressed the Vatican’s deep satisfaction with the success of the conference.

It was the dramatic situation of cluster-bomb victims, their families and their communities that led the international community to take decisive action, he said.

The archbishop noted three specific advances offered by the treaty:

- Wider care for victims and their communities, including psychological and material assistance and the clearance of territories contaminated by unexploded munitions.

- Greater provision for coordination of governmental and nongovernmental agencies in caring for victims.
- A strong message sent to the international community in favor of overall disarmament.

Archbishop Tomasi noted that Pope Benedict XVI had called for a “strong and credible agreement” against cluster weapons at the start of the 12-day conference.

Studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of cluster-weapon victims are civilians. The weapons spray huge areas with shrapnel. They have a high rate of failure, and unexploded munitions can remain on the ground for years before being detonated accidentally.