

Statement by the Cluster Munition Coalition to the Lima Conference on Cluster Munitions

Delivered by Mr. Branislav Kapetanović

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Thank you Co-Chairs,

First, I would like to greet all present here today. My name is Branislav Kapetanović. I worked as an EOD operator in the Yugoslav Army at Ladjevci military airport in Serbia. I was trained to do disposal of all air delivered bombs, and I had special training in disposal of NATO cluster bombs.

During the war in 1999, I worked on disposal of unexploded cluster bombs on a large number of both military and civilian locations, including Niš, Kraljevo, Ponikve and Sjenica. During the air campaign, I spent 45 days at the military airport in Niš, where I destroyed duds from cluster bombs on a daily basis. But in the case of Niš, cluster bombs did not only hit military objects and installations, but also the city centre - the city market place, the city hospital and several suburbs.

I witnessed the attacks on 7 May 1999, when dozens of civilians were killed and injured by cluster bombs in the city centre. We had to dispose of the duds when the bodies of the dead were still lying in the streets. I will never forget having to jump over the dead bodies to dispose of the bombs, as we had to prevent more accidents.

Even when the war was over, we continued with our work. We worked every day, because there were so many unexploded cluster bombs that we could not manage to dispose of them all. During the war, we cleared only the duds on the ground that could be visually detected, since we had no time to do more detailed searching. And we had little technical equipment and few trained people. We moved from one location to the other from day to day, we could not cover all affected areas. In spite of our great efforts, the number of duds from cluster bombs in Serbia is large even today.

On November 9, 2000 I was sent to Dubinje airfield in Sjenica. My task was to check for any cluster duds and make an estimate of the damages. I was told that there were several cluster duds by the runway. I went there, and in the moment when I moved the grass to get a better look at one of the bomblets, it detonated.

I lost both arms and both legs in the explosion. I was blinded and lost my hearing, and my heart stopped right before I came to the hospital. They managed to bring me back to life, but for more than a month, the doctors struggled to keep me alive. I had more than 20 operations. And I spent four years at the hospital in Belgrade.

I was a member of the Army, but I cannot see the point of using cluster bombs. There are alternatives that would not cause so many civilian victims. Cluster bombs affect large areas and there is no way to avoid that they also affect civilians. And the effect is not as desired even with the military targets. Once you see the civilian areas covered with duds from cluster bombs, you know that there is no excuse for their use.

I do not expect anybody to be surprised by what happened to me – I was a professional, it was my job – but most of the victims are innocent civilians and unknowing children, that have nothing to do with the war.

From the moment I joined the campaign to ban cluster bombs I have had a lot of faith in its success. The first step made in Oslo was a success, to my great pleasure. We must build on that success. With so many new countries here, it is clear that the momentum of this process is building up. I welcome this – as I am sure all survivors around the world welcome it.

A new treaty will not take away the suffering that has come before it, but it can prevent suffering in the future. And it can help people who have been disabled by cluster munitions. I - and all my colleagues in the CMC - hope that the delegates gathered here in Lima will keep a focus on addressing the needs of people and communities affected by cluster munitions.

We welcome the draft discussion text for this meeting. We have prepared a document with our reactions to it that you can find at the back of the room.

Finally, I commend Peru for hosting this meeting, and all the states for attending. This is a sign of your commitment to conclude a new treaty by 2008: A treaty that will be a real solution to the problems that cluster munitions cause.

I believe that more and more countries will join this process. And I believe that our efforts will be rewarded with success – with a strong ban. From my experience that is what is needed.

Thank you Co-Chairs.