

Remarks by Olympic medalist and marathon world record holder Paul Tergat

Nairobi – 27 October 2004

-- To be checked against delivery --

During a trip to Southern Sudan recently, I was struck by the incredible impact that landmines can have, not just on a person physically but on an entire community and region. The terror that was evidently written on the faces of the victims, their families and the entire community at large was deeply shocking. Almost everyone who had been exposed to the landmines in one way or the other wore, before us, a subdued and terrified look. It was clear to me that landmines, although most devastating when stepped on, can be just as damaging to a community by simply being there, spreading fear by what they COULD do.

It was through this experience that I was able to gain an understanding why there has been such a strong movement to try and ban these weapons forever. Personally, I never knew that war, in all its subtle forms, could reduce human nature to its elemental form where self interest and necessity prevail, stripping away our civilized adornments and revealing our nakedness. More than ever before, I appreciated the gift of peace and tranquility, which provides the fitting environment for anyone to maximize his/her own potential.

As a runner and a professional one at that, the swiftness of my legs and feet form such an integral part of me that I dread to even contemplate a minor injury to them. To every runner, our legs are not only our God given heritage but also a treasured possession. This treasure had, unfortunately, been robbed from these victims of landmines in Southern Sudan.

While walking amongst the minefields of Southern Sudan, I realized how quickly that could change; how one step in the wrong direction could alter my reality so drastically and so permanently. Fortunately, Kenya is not strewn with invisible dangers that threaten the lives of everyone who lives around them. Where I grew up and where I live now, I

can run in any direction for any amount of time and I don't need to do so with the fear of my next step being the last.

In Southern Sudan, hunger, desperation, or even just wanting to run freely for once can drive people to take risks that are unimaginable to us. Such risks can easily, and indeed do result in injuries so gruesome, so harmful and so permanent that they can devastate a family forever. I was deeply broken and moved to encounter more than five victims of landmines in one locality alone during our drive to Kapoeta, a heavily mined area and town reduced to nothing but ruins by war in the Eastern Equatoria area of Southern Sudan.

For me, standing in these villages, speaking to people who deal with these dangers everyday, I had a disturbing thought. What if one of the children from this region had the potential to be a runner like me? What if he had a potential to be a STAR runner, to represent his country and inspire his people? How would he ever know? The greatest runner in history could be right now carefully walking a path to avoid blowing off his feet. Nobody would ever know the potential of this child because these weapons, someone else's weapons, are preventing him from using it.

Imagine for a moment the greater risk posed to a child, who out of curiosity steps on a landmine. The most obvious likely result is that the landmine will blow off. This may have blown off just one foot or hand, but it is more likely to have taken off both limbs completely, if not the entire life (God forbid it). The journey to the nearest hospital, if someone could be around to help, would be one of excruciating pain and agony since transport would be neither smooth nor particularly fast. Chances are that at the hospital, this would lead to the unenviable option of amputation. This will be done above the wound, which being a child, would have to be repeated every time the bone starts to grow out through the skin that covers the child's stump. Indeed, this is too painful to imagine but sadly, it is the exact situation that happens somewhere in the world to a child who's completely innocent of everything except its own curiosity and inexperience.

Take it further and think of this farmer or mother who steps on a landmine. Their livelihood or potential is suddenly taken from them. A farmer cannot plough a field with one leg and a mother cannot fetch water or cultivate her land without all her limbs. The expense of caring for landmine injuries, the constant rehabilitation, the surgery and the new prosthetics make the task of recovery very hard. Finally, the mental stress of dealing with ones own injury, or that of a relative, is enormous. Living with such a fear is something not many of us can understand, but it is hard, and it is unfair, and it is totally unnecessary.

The extent of disruption to normal life that landmines can bring to a community became extremely clear and disturbing as I journeyed along the only access road that is being demined currently by the Mechem Company of South Africa in conjunction with the WFP. I was informed that on both sides of the road were landmines. If we had lost control or turned off or even pulled to the side for a rest, we could easily have set off a massive explosion that could have killed us. Similarly, the people of this region walk paths that are surrounded by mines. These paths are safe but they are strict. Any straying from worn-out routes will result in devastation. In a sense, the people here are trapped. They cannot run off in any direction, they cannot take a stroll to any part of the field. A weapon that was not meant for them, unfortunately, strictly controls their lives. There is a feeling of claustrophobia here that is totally foreign to someone like me, an invisible barrier that keeps people back. Crossing this barrier is akin to crossing back to a war zone.

Fortunately, such a grim reality is not the norm for some of us, especially in Kenya. I am afraid that we sometimes forget that we have such a freedom. Other countries around the world, including some of our neighbors, have had an experience like the above as result of conflicts, internal or external. Such conflicts are a danger with critical consequences for socio-economic development. Years of conflict in Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda and Uganda, to mention but a few, can attest to this problem. For instance, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea left millions of landmines strewn throughout both countries, meaning the conflict has not really ended for the rural peoples of these nations. It is

therefore our duty to ensure that our neighbors have the same freedom from such fear as we do.

As for me, am able to be here with you because of my talents, which I have been able to exploit because of this freedom. People can listen to what I have to say. I am fortunate that these skills affords me the opportunity to effect change where and in a way I can – not just as runner but as a Kenyan and an African as well.

I realize that we have a fantastic and unique opportunity to be part of the world community towards a ban on landmines. I am here to ask for your support and everyone else in this city towards this noble objective of a complete and universal ban on landmines. We, as athletes, are taking a leading role to raise the necessary awareness and hopefully stimulate action towards this objective. We realize that the statistics are horrifying if we look into the fact that landmines kill or injure up to 20,00 people every year, 85% of whom are innocent civilians, not soldiers. Worse still, surveys have shown that 25-40% of these comprise of children.

It is my humble plea to soldiers and statesmen that they ought to know the dangers of cruelty and injustice that abound in unresolved conflicts. They should, therefore, worry about them and take steps to avoid them so that there will be no need for the use of landmines. I am encouraged that Africa has shown incredible unity and commitment to the Mine Ban Treaty, with every sub-Saharan nation (except Somalia) signing on and only Ethiopia left to ratify, while. Egypt, Libya and Morocco being the only other African countries that have not signed. I urge them to do so.