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Exhibit puts land mines in Loop

Demonstration in Block 37 kicks off conference raising awareness of problem

By Lisa Fleisher

Tribune staff reporter

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An empty water bottle stuck on a tree branch in Block 37 Thursday was the only marker to show Kristen Neria that she was within

2 feet of a deactivated land mine.

"Whoa," said Neria, 33, after searching the ground in the vacant Loop lot and spotting the buried dummy, a tiny piece of its black plastic barely visible. "You would never see that."

One of dozens of deactivated devices buried beneath wood chips and dirt, the contraption was part of an exhibition to show the difficulties of spotting the hidden killers.

The demonstration kicked off a two-day national conference on land mines. The conference, organized by the State Department and the Chicago Coalition for Landmine Action, aimed to raise awareness of the problems with land mines.

There are an estimated 40 million to 50 million abandoned mines in about 90 countries, said James F. Lawrence of the State Department's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement. The six with the biggest problems are Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia, Cambodia, Iraq and Vietnam.

"We're not creating a fantasy world here," Lawrence said. "This is a real problem throughout the world."

There are about 12,000 land mine casualties annually, down from about 26,000 five years ago, he said.

Villagers develop rudimentary warning signs to mark dangerous territory, such as sticks arranged in a tripod, skull-and-crossbones drawn on bark, red-painted rocks and orange ribbons, experts said.

Decommissioned mines on display ranged from the size of a can of shoe polish, designed to blow off legs and arms, to anti-vehicular mines the size of hubcaps, which can create deadly blasts reaching up to 100 meters away.

Visitors saw how a device as simple as a cell phone or garage door opener could remotely trigger a mine.

"Buried mines, they're just terrifying," said Neria, who wandered in after jury duty. "The fear people in those countries must feel every day, because it's nothing you'll see in your front yard."

Several at the exhibit noted that the United States had not signed a 1997 treaty banning land mines, though it did pledge more than \$100 million at the Ottawa, Canada, conference to help eradicate them. At the time, U.S. officials said existing land mines were vital to the defense of troops in Korea. To an amateur, buried land mines often look like small stones or the tops of sprinkler systems found on many suburban lawns.

But Rosa, a Belgian Shepherd, found one easily. She methodically sniffed out a deactivated mine, demonstrating how nearly 800 dogs overseas do their jobs. While a human minesweeper on a good day can clear about 40 to 80 square feet, a dog can clear about 1,000, her handlers said.

Nigel Robinson, vice president of Halo USA, the organization championed by Princess Diana, gave a tour of a mock minefield being cleared.

The group is clearing one in a Cambodian village where 83 percent of the population is supported by family members who knowingly enter a minefield to make 75 cents a day, he said.

A fifth of the families have suffered casualties, and most of the injured return to the fields, their only source of income, Robinson said. After a mine is discovered, workers place a small explosive device, clear the area, and detonate both objects.

lfleisher@tribune.com

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