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Chair of the Board

TESTIMONY: HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS - OUTSIDE PUBLIC  
WITNESS HEARING

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to present today. My name is Anastasia Staten, and I'm here representing The HALO Trust (USA). As the world's largest humanitarian demining organization, HALO leads the effort to protect lives and restore livelihoods for those affected by conflict. We remove and destroy landmines, cluster bombs and improvised explosive devices, and help secure weapons stockpiles that could fall into the hands of terrorist groups. For more than 30 years now, HALO has been a partner of the Department of State's Conventional Weapons Destruction program, and is the sole implementer of USAID's demining program in Nagorno Karabakh. I am honored to have the opportunity to draw your attention to these life-saving programs, and implore you to increase support for the State Department's Conventional Weapons Destruction program to a level of \$219 million. This will fund demining and weapons destruction efforts in approximately 40 countries and territories. From Guatemala to Angola, from Kosovo to Laos, these programs save lives, enhance security, promote development, support conservation, and demonstrates US leadership.

As you know, the State Department's Conventional Weapons Destruction program has three primary goals, and for the sake of public record, I think they warrant repeating: 1) To enhance regional security by destroying and securing weapons, at risk of diversion to terrorists, insurgents, and other violent non-state actors; 2) To clear landmine and unexploded ordnance contamination, thereby returning land to safe and productive use; and 3) To promote US foreign policy interests,

The most obvious benefit of these programs is saving lives. The latest Landmine Monitor report recorded more than 120,000 casualties between 1999 and 2017, with more than 7,200 killed or injured by a landmine or cluster bomb in 2017 alone. The vast majority of casualties were civilians, not military forces. And, tragically, more than 2,400 of the victims in 2017 were children.

I'm reminded of a family I met two years ago, while observing HALO operations in Cambodia. A husband and wife told me that just two weeks prior, their 17-year-old son had been on a tractor, doing some farm work for a man who'd hired him. Unfortunately, the tractor ran over an anti-tank mine in the middle of a field, and he was killed instantly.

No family should lose a loved one to a landmine. Families should not be at risk when cultivating their land to feed and support their family, and no parent should fear their child might suffer a fatal injury simply by walking to school or playing outside. Landmines kill indiscriminately, and we must continue to support programs that eliminate these threats.

Conventional Weapons Destruction activities also promote economic development that can transform communities. Within weeks of mine clearance, displaced families can return home, they can plant crops, and return to their livelihoods. Communities can build roads, schools, hospitals, and vital infrastructure.

These programs also support security objectives, through destroying insecure weapons, such as shoulder-launched missiles capable of downing aircraft. State Department partners have destroyed such weapons in more than 10 countries, including Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia. In Central America, weapons and ammunition security management programs also help to combat the illicit flow of black market weapons that fuel violence.

But people aren't the only victims of mines; wildlife suffers as well. The presence of mines in southeast Angola, near the headwaters of the Okavango Delta, has led to the death of elephants, hampered efforts to conduct biodiversity research, and interferes with anti-poaching initiatives.

One last benefit worth mentioning is that many State Department partners like HALO employ a local workforce. The deminers in each country are natives for whom we provide extensive job training. Some work in management, and all get to help their communities transition from fields of battle into safe and thriving homes and workplaces. While these men and women earn a living, they're also building skills transferable to other opportunities after HALO's work is done.

Since 1993, the US has led global demining efforts, providing more than \$2.9 billion in assistance to more than 100 countries for conventional weapons destruction activities. With US support, 17 previously mined countries around the world are now mine-free. We hope to see many more countries soon join this list, such as Kosovo, where the US is funding the clearance of NATO-dropped cluster bombs, and Sri Lanka, where the removal of mines leftover from that country's Civil War is nearly complete.

The State Department's Conventional Weapons Destruction programs save lives, promote development, support security objectives, facilitate environmental conservation, and reinforce US leadership. It also demonstrates this country's desire to help maintain peace in those parts of the world once ripped apart by conflict.

In conclusion, we again ask that the Subcommittee consider increasing support for this program in fiscal year 2020 to a level of \$219 million.

Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.