



*The Broken Chair* by Daniel Berset, Place des Nations, Geneva.

## Progress made in reducing the number of landmines worldwide

The world is starting to embrace a new international norm where it is no longer acceptable to use landmines in armed conflicts, says the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

The campaign's second annual report, *Landmine Monitor Report 2000: Towards a Mine-Free World*, which was released in September at the Second Meeting of States Parties to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty in Geneva, Switzerland, says nearly three-quarters of the world's nations have signed and/or ratified the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. The number of known producers of landmines has fallen, from 54 to 16, and trading of landmines appears to have been completely halted, with no known shipments of mines in 1999–2000. Furthermore, over 50 nations have destroyed more than 22 million stockpiled landmines, which includes 10 million since March 1999.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines is widely credited with being the driving force which led up to the Mine Ban Treaty. In 1997, the campaign received the Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution. Since then, the campaign has set up the Landmine Monitor, which includes a global reporting network, a central database and an annual report.

For the latest report, the group collected information worldwide on landmine ban policies, use, production, transfer, stockpiling, mine clearance, mine awareness, and the assistance given to survivors. Eighty-eight nations were found to be affected to some degree by landmines and/or unexploded munitions, a higher number than previously thought.

From the time the Mine Ban Treaty came into force in March 1999, up until mid-2000, 11 governments began new use of landmines in 20 conflicts, and these weapons were also used by at least 30 rebel groups or "non-state actors". One of the most deplorable developments since *Landmine Monitor Report 1999*, says the latest report, is the extensive use of landmines in conflicts in Chechnya and Kosovo. Some African countries are also thought to have continued use of antipersonnel mines.

Despite significant progress, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines remains concerned that too few resources are devoted to mine action programmes, including mine clearance, mine awareness and projects to help victims. The report says: "At a time when there is a danger of the international community turning its attention elsewhere, to deal with the next hot issue, there is instead a need for a redoubling of efforts to get mines out of the ground more rapidly and to better address the needs of mine victims and mine-affected communities." ■

Sharon Kingman, *London*

## Simple low-cost test for drug-resistant tuberculosis

Researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in London have developed a simple test kit that may be used to identify *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* isolates resistant to rifampicin. The kit is suitable for screening large numbers of tubercular strains and also has the potential for use in testing susceptibility to streptomycin. The end-point of the test is a simple colour change, and results are available within 48 hours.

The test uses mycobacteriophage D29, a type of virus which only infects and multiplies within live mycobacteria. Rifam-

picin stops infection of the mycobacteria by the bacteriophage in susceptible strains but not in drug-resistant bacteria. Thus, if the bacteriophage multiply when rifampicin is present, the bacteria under test are drug resistant.

This technology of rapid phage-based detection was first demonstrated two years ago and further cost-analysis work was presented at the World Congress on Lung Health held in Florence in September 2000. Dr Ruth McNerney, who was involved in developing the method, said: "... costs can be minimized by the use of a 96-well plate format. This enables efficient processing of a large number of samples and requires only reduced reagent volumes." Because the reagents needed are cheap (about US\$ 0.35 per assay), the major cost being the labour, the test may be suitable for developing countries.

Tests currently in use for screening for drug-resistant tuberculosis compare growth of the bacteria with and without the drug. However, since the bacteria grow slowly the tests take up to two weeks to complete. Other new rapid tests have been developed but they are too expensive for parts of the world where annual spending on health may be less than US\$ 10 per head.

The cost of the new test compares favourably with the expense of time-consuming methods of susceptibility testing currently in use in low-income countries. ■

Tudor Toma, *London*

## Women show increased susceptibility to malaria infection before and after giving birth

Pregnant women may be more susceptible to malaria in the later stages of pregnancy and during the two months following birth, according to a new study published recently (*New England Journal of Medicine*, 2000, **343**: 598–603). Researchers have found that in areas with high rates of malaria, susceptibility increased during the second and third trimesters, reaching a maximum in the 60 days after delivery when women were four times more likely to have an episode of the disease than they were in the year before the pregnancy. The study also found that