Explosive weapons in populated areas

International Network on Explosive Weapons

Background
Explosive weapons use blast and fragmentation to kill and injure people in the area where they detonate, as well as to damage objects, buildings and infrastructure. When used in populated areas they tend to cause high levels of harm to individuals and communities. Destruction of infrastructure vital to the civilian population, including water and sanitation, housing, schools and hospitals, results in a pattern of wider, long-term suffering. Victims and survivors of explosive weapons can face long-term challenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic exclusion.

In 2012, more than 27,000 civilians were reported as killed or injured by explosive weapons according to Action on Armed Violence, a founding member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). AOAV found that where explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 91% of the casualties were civilians.¹

Current context
Over the past few years the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community. Two types of explosive weapons—antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions—have been prohibited outright due to their devastating impact on civilian populations, but the broader problem of humanitarian harm from explosive weapons used in populated areas must also be addressed as a priority for the protection of civilians.

In 2011 a group of NGOs set up the International Network on Explosive Weapons to respond to this problem. So far around 30 countries have expressed concern about this issue, mostly in the context of the UN Security Council debates on protection of civilians. The UN Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross have called on states to avoid the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area effects.

This acknowledgement has taken place against the background of heavy casualties from the bombardment of populated areas in Côte d’Ivoire, Gaza, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria. The use of certain types of explosive weapons causing wide-area effects such as mortars, rockets, artillery, and large aircraft bombs in such populated areas have stood out as particularly harmful in these contexts. In addition, civilians have been killed and injured...
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Data based on English-language media reports

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from the regular bombings in towns and cities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, where car bombs and suicide bombs have been detonated amongst crowds of people in public places.

Over the course of 2013 international efforts have been stepping-up on explosive weapons. At a conference in Oslo attended by 90 countries in May, the Co-Chairs’ Summary stated that: “the use of explosive force in military operations in densely populated areas has devastating humanitarian consequences for civilians. In particular, the use of explosive weapons with a wide area effect should be avoided.”

In July, on her return from a trip to Syria and the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict said that “all parties must stop the shelling and use of explosive weapons in populated areas.”

On 23-24 September, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Chatham House will host an experts meeting on the use of explosive weapons, bringing together individuals that have built up specific expertise on the issue from their work within government departments, the armed forces, and humanitarian and other relevant organisations.

Further such discussions are expected next year with a view to developing stronger standards to protect civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Recommendations for governments

During the First Committee, governments should:

- Set out national policies on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including in response to the letter sent by INEW to all states, via their Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York.
- Endorse the statement from the UN Secretary-General that the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area effects should be avoided. This can be done during the UN Security Council open debates on the protection of civilians, or any other relevant forum.
- Work with states, international organisations, and civil society to identify concrete measures that can be taken to prevent humanitarian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.