Statement by the International Network on Explosive Weapons
UNGA First Committee, October 2015

Thank you Mr / Mme President.

As we assemble here for the First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, civilians are being killed and injured by the bombardment of their homes and communities. Children are being killed and injured at school while they learn to read. Hospitals are struggling to cope with the influx of casualties from bombing and shelling, and hospitals are also often directly affected by attacks – one example being the devastating incident in Kunduz, Afghanistan, a couple of weeks ago. Parents are being psychologically scarred by watching their loved ones killed and maimed in front of them. Water and sanitation facilities are being damaged and destroyed, causing outbreak of disease and malnutrition. Families are making the heart-breaking decision to finally pack up and leave their homes, no longer able to bear living under the threat of bombing and shelling.

Members of the International Network on Explosive Weapons, a civil society coalition of organisations working to prevent this predictable pattern of unacceptable harm, systematically gather and present information on the impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This year alone it has been evident in many contexts including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.. We also continue to study the devastating long-term impacts of this use from previous conflicts, including in Gaza, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia – and many others.

We will continue to document and speak out about this harm. And we will continue our work in conflict and post-conflict environments to provide humanitarian assistance, clear explosive remnants of war, and fight for the rights of survivors. But, as long as bombing and shelling continue in towns and cities and even refugee camps, our actions will not be enough. It is for this reason that we are calling on states and other actors to respond to this urgent humanitarian issue by developing an international commitment with concrete measures to prevent harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

We are encouraged that discussions have now started towards a political response to this humanitarian issue. Last month the government of Austria hosted a meeting where several states indicated their support towards the development of a political declaration to tackle this problem.

Large aircraft bombs, inaccurate artillery shells, or multiple rocket launchers are examples of explosive weapons that will have an impact over a wide area.
Any future political declaration must include a clear commitment to end the use of such weapons in populated areas. Along these lines, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN Secretary-General have both called on states to avoid the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects. Many governments have supported that recommendation. We hope that more states will be in a position to speak out on this issue during the conventional weapons debate at First Committee and indicate their support for the development of a political commitment that will help prevent harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

States should also set out national policies and practices related to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including in response to the Note Verbale sent by the UN Secretary-General to all states, via their Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York.

The bombing and shelling of towns and cities during conflict must not be seen as inevitable. A key purpose of the development of international law has been to limit these practices. Recently we have seen examples of armed forces constraining their own practice in relation to explosive weapons in populated areas. In Afghanistan ISAF curtailed airstrikes due to concerns over civilian casualties from bombing in populated areas. In Somalia, civilian casualties prompted AMISOM to move away from the use of ‘indirect fire’ in response to mortar attacks by militants. There are no doubt more examples of such policies to constrain the effects of weapons in order to protect civilians. We are confident that collectively we can prevent humanitarian harm from this practice. An international political commitment is a single, yet crucial step, towards doing so. We look forward to working with committed states to take concrete action nationally through stronger policy and practice and internationally through a political declaration.

Mr / Mme President,

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is what is killing civilians in conflict today.

This is what is destroying the places where people live, where children go to school.

This is what is driving people to flee their homes and seek refuge abroad.

The everyday reality of this humanitarian impact requires an immediate response. The decisions we take to address this now will testify to the strength of our collective humanity.

Thank you Mr / Mme President.