The bombing and shelling of towns and cities continues to be a major cause of humanitarian harm to civilians living in conflict situations around the world. Heavy civilian casualties in Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen and elsewhere provide clear illustrations of this persistent pattern of unacceptable harm.

Over the past few years in a variety of contexts, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has caused high levels of civilian deaths and injuries, psychological distress, damage and destruction to essential infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, housing, and water and sanitation systems, and been a key driver of population displacement. It is clear that this practice has very severe immediate and long-term effects on individuals and communities. Two months ago, for the research purposes, I had a privilege to spend 10 days with Syrian families displaced in refugee camps and communities in Amman. I was surrounded with people that have lost what was most valuable to them: the lives of their family members, their friends and their neighbors. They lost their houses, their loving homes that they build for their families. Their children lost part of their childhood and years of education. Generations of Syrian people will be marked by the consequences of continuous bombing and shelling of populated areas. Aisha’s 3-year old son, who was born under the rain of shelling, as she explained, will feel the consequences of those shells for his whole life. Ahmad, 23 years old former student was paralyzed from his waist below with one tiny 2-gram piece of metal from a mortar that exploded near him. Now he has frequent memory loss and a speaking disorder, he doesn’t think he is going to finish his last year of high school education and graduate. Maher, 14 years old child, has gray hair. He spent far too many days and too many nights hiding under stairs, in basements from bombing and shelling praying the next one will not hit his home and kill his family. He still shivers when he hears sounds of airplanes and then he can’t sleep for night.

All too often, the impacts of explosive weapons are considered as an foreseeable result of conflict. Yet experience shows that at an operational level, militaries can, and have, curbed or halted the use of certain weapons in populated areas, and in doing so can strengthen civilian protection.

International Network on Explosive Weapons is particularly concerned about the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, such as multiple-launch rockets, heavy artillery, and large aircraft bombs, which stand out as particularly harmful for use in populated areas.

To start to address this problem, International Network on Explosive Weapons is calling for immediate action by states and other actors to develop stronger international standards to end the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.

Over the past several years, this issue has been identified as a top priority for states concerned with the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The UN Secretary-General has repeatedly called on states to refrain from using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, and to engage constructively in efforts towards developing a political declaration committing to that. Around 70 states have also recognized this harm, through statements in public fora.

Led by states, discussions are now starting towards developing a political instrument to address this humanitarian problem, and to set a political and operational direction against the use in populated areas of those explosive weapons that expose civilians to the gravest risks.

International Network on Explosive Weapons believes that a political declaration should be a practical tool that promotes actions that will reduce humanitarian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and increases the protection of civilians living through conflict. It would build on the basis provided by existing international law, including human rights and international humanitarian law.

The centerpiece of a declaration should be a commitment by states to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas as this would be the most tangible and effective action states can take that will make a difference to civilians living through armed conflict, and in reducing the long term harm caused by conflict. Such a commitment should be fulfilled by the development and implementation of operational guidelines and policies at the national level.
Another key pillar in the declaration should be a recognition of the rights of victims, and a commitment to provide assistance to affected communities. Ensuring that the people most affected by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas are at the core of this work. This should include provision of healthcare, including emergency and long-term care, rehabilitation, psychological and psychosocial support, and inclusion.

A political declaration, not a legally binding instrument is not an end in itself however, but a tool for future work on this issue, and a means for improving operational practice to provide greater protection to civilians.

International Network on Explosive Weapons is encouraging all states to recognize the humanitarian harm resulting from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and to actively support the development of an international declaration to prevent such harm.

Thank you Mr Chair.