Thank you for the opportunity to address the First Committee today on behalf of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). I will lay out our concerns over the widespread humanitarian harm that results from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and action required to respond to harm from such weapons.

INEW is an international network of civil society organisations calling for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. We call on states and other actors to recognise the pattern of harm to individuals and communities by explosive weapons, to strive to avoid such harm by reviewing and strengthening national policies and practices including through gathering data, to work for the full realisation of rights of victims and survivors, and to develop stronger international standards – including restrictions on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The bombing and shelling of towns and cities and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) continues to be a major cause of harm to civilians living in conflict situations around the world. High numbers of deaths and injuries have been recorded in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Ukraine, and Pakistan. Data gathered over the past five years consistently shows that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, around 92% of the casualties are civilian.

In addition to high levels of civilian deaths, injuries and trauma, the use of such weapons causes damage and destruction to essential infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, housing, and water and sanitation systems, and is a key driver of population displacement.

INEW is particularly concerned about the use of explosive weapons, such as multiple-launch rockets, heavy artillery, and large bombs and missiles, and IEDs, which are prone to indiscriminate effects when used in populated areas owing to their wide area effects.

I have witnessed first-hand the devastation these weapons have on civilians in places like West Mosul, especially for the tens of thousands of civilians who were trapped in the city during military operations this past summer.

All too often, the impacts of explosive weapons are considered as a foreseeable result of conflict. Yet there is evidence that militaries can, and have, refrained from the use of certain weapons in populated areas, and in doing so have strengthened civilian protection.

For example, some militaries have undertaken policies limiting the use of artillery and other indirect fire weapons in populated areas, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. The Afghan government in September approved a national policy that recognizes the impact of heavy weapons in populated areas and is working on guidance for its forces and improved trainings to reduce civilian harm from such weapons.
For nine years, UN Secretary Generals have expressed concern over the protection of civilians in conflict, identifying the use of explosive weapons in populated areas as a significant cause of concern in this regard. Around 80 states have also recognised EWIPA as a key humanitarian issue of concern. Increasingly calls have been made by states, the UN Secretary-General and the ICRC on states and other actors, to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas. UN Secretary General Guterres in particular in 2017 urged states to develop and implement policies and strategies to avoid civilian harm in military operations and better protect civilians.

INEW has been working with Austria and other interested states on the development of an international political declaration on explosive weapons. We see a political declaration could accomplish three crucial objectives:

First, it could set an important political and operational direction for parties to armed conflict to avoid using explosive weapons in populated areas.

Second, it could provide a framework for states to develop national measures and guidance, and a forum to discuss results and assess effectiveness of such measures.

Third, it could contribute to assisting communities and addressing civilian harm from the effects of explosive weapons.

This would ultimately contribute to strengthening the framework of international law to protect civilians from harm during armed conflict.

We encourage all states to support the development of a political declaration, as a tool for future work on this issue, and a means to improve ways to protect civilians.

Thank you Chair.