Explosive weapons in populated areas

International Network on Explosive Weapons

Background

Armed conflicts are being conducted in populated areas with weapon systems designed for open battlefields, presenting serious challenges to the effective protection of civilians. The harm caused to civilians and civilian infrastructure by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has been repeatedly highlighted as a major humanitarian priority over the past decade. Each year, tens of thousands of people are killed and injured by the use of explosive weapons in neighbourhoods where people live and work. Data consistently shows that when these weapons are used in populated areas, approximately 91 per cent of those reported killed and injured are civilians.¹

The damage explosive weapons cause to vital infrastructure also means their impacts reverberate to affect a wider population and over time. Damage to hospitals limits the provision of medical care, making even easily treatable injuries life threatening.² Damage to sanitation systems leaves civilian populations susceptible to the spread of disease.³ Destruction, and the presence of explosive remnants in populated areas, causes and entrenches displacement—but where transport infrastructure is destroyed, civilians can also be prevented from fleeing to safety.⁴ Affected areas can become inaccessible to humanitarian aid⁵ as well clean food and water,⁶ with damage to energy infrastructure compounding these challenges. Severe psychological harm is experienced by many.⁷

Current context

Recent years have seen distinct positive movement towards a multilateral policy response to the harms caused by explosive weapons. In 2017, 19 African states endorsed the Maputo Communiqué,⁸ and in late 2018 23 states from Latin America and the Caribbean supported a Santiago Communiqué.⁹ These regional initiatives support work towards an international political declaration to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas. At the 2018 First Committee, a group of 50 states supported a joint statement¹⁰ that commits to further work on this issue, including through a future political declaration. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN Secretary-General have continued to call on states to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas “owing to the immediate and cumulative, complex and long-term harm resulting from such use.”¹¹

These initiatives show that a growing number of states are committed to developing an international policy response that will include strengthening military policy and practice.
to better protect civilians. In early October, states will gather at the Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare, convened by Austria,¹ to discuss the harms caused by explosive weapons and how they can be effectively addressed. The meeting will start a process towards a political declaration that will provide a key tool for mobilising action on this issue and building stronger civilian protection norms.

Recommendations

**During First Committee, delegations should:**

- Acknowledge that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas causes severe harm to individuals and communities, including through both direct and reverberating effects;
- Endorse the UN Secretary-General’s recommendation that states should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas;
- Support the development of an international political instrument on explosive weapons to protect civilians; and
- Support the development of a joint statement designed to maintain a focus on the challenges posed by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

**Beyond First Committee, states should:**

- Commit to developing, adopting, and implementing an international commitment to address this clear and documented pattern of harm by stopping the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas and assisting affected people and communities;
- Review and make available national policies and practices related to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and make changes that will strengthen the protection of civilians;
- Support and make publicly available data-gathering on the use of and impact of explosive weapons in populated areas including age, sex, and disability-disaggregated recording of casualties; and
- Recognise the rights of survivors, families of those killed or injured, and affected communities and respond to their short and long-term needs.

*Author: Elizabeth Minor*

---


Photo: UN High Commissioner for Refugees/Susan Schulam