Vienna Conference
“Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare”
Vienna, 1-2 October 2019

Opening Statement

Gilles Carbonnier
Vice-President, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), I thank the government of Austria for the invitation to attend this Conference, and warmly commend the initiative to bring together States, international organizations, civil society and survivors to discuss this pressing humanitarian issue.

Urban warfare rarely makes the headlines, and yet it is one of the main causes of civilian death and suffering today. There are many examples: Mosul, Aleppo, Aden, Raqqa, Taiz, Donetsk, Fallujah, Sana’a, Idlib, Tripoli – these names resonate, and are a living testament to the heavy toll civilians pay when war moves to cities.

The harrowing reality of a modern urban battlefield looks like this: heavy bombing and shelling leaves countless civilians dead, gravely injured or disabled for life, and facing severe psychological trauma. Cities in rubble, with infrastructure necessary for the functioning of basic services – water, sanitation, electricity, health care – damaged or destroyed, often beyond repair. Houses, schools, cultural monuments and places of worship in ruins. But this is not where it stops.

Cities are inherently vulnerable, dependent on a complex web of interconnected services. When critical infrastructure is damaged, these services are disrupted, or even collapse when the conflict is protracted. This triggers domino effects that cause yet more suffering. As an example, last August, in Aden, at least 200,000 people were left without clean water as a result of just three days of intense fighting.

Unable to cover their basic needs, and facing the direct threat of hostilities, those who survive are forced to flee. This past summer, in two months alone, around 100,000 people were displaced due to
heavy bombing and shelling in Tripoli, Libya. Displaced persons are often exposed to harsh living conditions and to heightened risks — including of disease and sexual violence. Displacement is often prolonged after active hostilities are over. In Iraq, 1.5 million internally displaced across the country are still unable to return to their former places of residence.

These numbers by no means give the full picture, but they tell a story — that of the grave suffering and destruction that results when war moves to cities. And one of the main causes of this suffering is the continuing use by conflict parties — be they State or non-State — of heavy explosive weapons. These include large air-delivered bombs, inaccurate weapons like artillery and mortars, multi-barrel rocket launchers, and large improvised explosive devices.

These weapons have, by design, destructive effects over a large area. When they are used in population centres, even against lawful targets, there is a high probability that civilians and civilian infrastructure will also be hit. Their lack of accuracy, their large explosive force, and their wide-area effects in general give rise to a significant risk of indiscriminate effects. The ICRC continues to witness these effects first-hand in urban conflicts, which is why we believe the use of these weapons should be avoided in populated areas.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

2019 marks the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The Conventions embody a basic principle: war must be waged within certain limits. These limits exist to preserve the lives and dignity of human beings, and protect those not taking part in the hostilities, notably civilians. Today, this principle remains as relevant as ever.

International humanitarian law (IHL) imposes limits on the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas. The fundamental rules prohibiting indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and requiring parties to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimise civilian harm fully apply when cities are bombed and shelled. The wide area effects of explosive weapons, when these are used in populated environments, make compliance with these rules very challenging.

Respect for IHL is all the more critical when war is waged in populated environments — where military targets and civilians and civilian structures are mixed together, and civilians are at great risk of harm. There is today a lack of clarity as to how States, and parties to armed conflict more generally, interpret and apply the rules of IHL when it comes to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The unacceptable levels of civilian harm we continue to witness in urban conflicts — be they in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine or Yemen — has led the ICRC to call on States and all parties to armed conflict to avoid the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in populated areas, due
to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects. This call was reiterated last month in a joint appeal by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, and the ICRC President, Peter Maurer. They urged States to take action in a number of areas – from data collection to training, civilian casualty mitigation, the development of limitations, common standards and operational policies. The overriding aim is to strengthen civilian protection, and to avoid the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas.

An avoidance policy suggests a presumption of non-use of such weapons, unless and until sufficient mitigation measures are taken to reduce, to an acceptable level, the risk they pose to civilians. What this really requires is a shift in mindsets. Instead of starting with the premise that heavy explosive weapons can be used unless such use would violate IHL, we are asking armed forces, as a matter of policy and good practice, not to use such weapons, unless measures can be taken to limit their wide area effects and the consequent risk of incidental civilian harm.

An avoidance policy should be coupled with practical measures and guidance. These should be taken well in advance of military operations and faithfully implemented when conducting hostilities in populated areas. Such good practices should also be taken into consideration when States export heavy explosive weapons, as well as when they provide support to a party to armed conflict.

As the ICRC President and the UN Secretary-General stressed in their joint appeal, with war in cities becoming more and more common, it is imperative that the protection of civilians is made a strategic priority central to the planning and conduct of military operations. There is an urgent need for States and all parties to conflict to reassess and adapt how urban warfare is conducted, including the choice of weapons and tactics when operating in populated areas, and to train and equip their armed forces specifically for urban operations. Some militaries are moving in this direction, but more needs to be done, and soon.

The ICRC warmly welcomes this Conference as an important effort aimed at strengthening civilian protection in urban warfare, and we once again commend Austria for its leadership role in this endeavour. A political declaration can be a powerful tool to bring about tangible progress, provided it contains strong and unequivocal commitments to change the status quo and to stop the tide of civilian deaths and suffering that is characteristic of urban warfare today. This Conference is an excellent opportunity to take the first decisive step towards achieving that.

I encourage all States present here today to engage actively with this in mind. Protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is not just a political goal, it is a humanitarian necessity.

Thank you.