



# PROTECTING CIVILIANS FROM THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

October 2019

**The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW)<sup>1</sup> calls for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA).**

**INEW calls on states to join the UNGA First Committee joint statement on EWIPA coordinated by Ireland and, in their national statements to:**

- X Acknowledge** that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas frequently causes severe harm to individuals and communities and furthers suffering by damaging vital infrastructure.
- X Endorse** the UN Secretary-General's and ICRC's recommendation that states should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.<sup>2</sup>
- X Indicate** support for the development of an international political declaration on explosive weapons;
- X Elaborate** on elements for a political declaration including: avoiding the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas; developing national operational policies and practice, and providing assistance to survivors and affected communities.
- X Participate** in the informal open consultations on a political declaration in Geneva on 18 November 2019.

## Humanitarian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

Civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has been highlighted as a top humanitarian priority<sup>3</sup> following the increase in recent years of conflicts taking place in urban settings resulting in high levels of civilian casualties. According to AOV, over 230,000 civilians have been killed or injured by explosive weapons in the last eight years, with casualties recorded in 119 countries. More than 90% of civilian casualties from explosive weapons occurred in population areas.

### Long-term harm and suffering

Beyond those killed and injured, an even greater number of civilians are affected as a result of damage to essential infrastructure and services. The bombing and bombardment of towns and cities destroys homes leaving people without shelter. Hospital buildings are damaged hampering the provision and quality of medical care to civilian populations, making it additionally difficult to manage treatable injuries and diseases at a time when the civilian population is in desperate need of medical care.<sup>4</sup> Damage to sanitation systems create additional problems around maintaining basic levels of hygiene, which can cause further onset of illness and diseases. In Yemen, the conflict has facilitated the onset of a severe cholera epidemic.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of commercial buildings and transport infrastructure impedes access to, and availability of, vital provisions including food.<sup>6</sup> Humanitarian access can be hampered, or stopped entirely, as humanitarian and relief organisations struggle to access particularly violent areas.<sup>7</sup> Damage to electricity, energy, power further compound such problems, and in some instances prevents the civilian population from fleeing the area.<sup>8</sup> The use of explosive weapons in populated areas represents one of the main causes of forced displacement. Countless civilians are driven from their homes and displaced, and suffer from psychological distress and trauma.<sup>9</sup>

### Explosive weapons with wide area effects

Most types of explosive weapons – which include, among others, aircraft bombs, artillery shells, rockets, grenades, missiles as well as improvised explosive devices – are designed for use in open battlefields, and not towns and cities where there is a concentration of civilians. Whilst there is a pattern of harm associated with explosive weapons in populated areas in general, the risk to civilians is most severe when the weapons have wide area effects. Wide area effects may result where an individual weapon has a large blast or fragmentation radius (for example heavy aircraft bombs), where multiple explosive munitions are launched at an area (for example multi-barrel rocket systems), where a weapon is not delivered accurately to the target (such as indirect fire mortars), or a combination of these factors. Use of such weapons puts civilians at a heightened risk of harm and is likely to result in the destruction of, or damage to buildings and infrastructure.

### Explosive weapons and international law

International humanitarian law (IHL) sets out legal standards of behaviour for parties to armed conflict which must be applied even in the most desperate circumstances. Under IHL, direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects are prohibited, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks are prohibited, and parties to an armed conflict are required to take feasible precautions in attack in order to avoid or minimize civilian harm.

There are, however, limitations to the extent that IHL can provide sufficient protection to civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. IHL guides states towards preventing direct death and injury to civilians in specific attacks, but it does not address the long-term, and indirect effects that the use of explosive weapons in populations has on the civilian population, including from the impact to buildings, infrastructure and services, which is both foreseeable and a cause of widespread harm to civilians. It is also focused on rules over individual attacks. As such, it is incumbent on states to assess the risk

of harm to civilians on a case-by-case basis, rather than providing an explicit standard of behaviour, and subject to varying interpretation by states. IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities do not reflect detailed agreement on how the risk of harm from blast and fragmentation effects can be effectively addresses and reduced.<sup>10</sup>

## Military policy and practice

Clearer guidance to states on this matter, could be developed in the form of national-level operational policies and procedures, which would not only help to reduce humanitarian harm and civilian suffering, but would also help to avoid non-compliance of IHL. The area effects of certain explosive weapons are already recognised in some military policy and practice as having a direct link to the risk presented to civilians.<sup>11</sup> However, this recognition is often dispersed across various policy and operational frameworks and differs amongst states. Such a recognition could be consolidated and addressed through the development of an international political declaration containing clear commitments to reduce harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This would include enacting a commitment against the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects through national level operational policy, including military procedures and rules of engagement. There are already good examples of policy and practice that have been effectively developed and implemented to curtail the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in order to provide greater protection to civilians.<sup>12</sup>

## Developing clear standards: an international political declaration on explosive weapons

The UN Secretary-General has called on states to engage constructively in efforts to develop a political declaration to address harm caused by EWIPA.<sup>13</sup> Discussions towards an international political declaration are ongoing, including most recently the international Vienna Conference on the Protection of Civilians in Urban Warfare, and already over 100 states have spoken out on the issue of EWIPA.<sup>14</sup> The issue has also been highlighted most recently in a joint appeal by the UN Secretary-General and the ICRC President, who have called for an end to the civilian devastation and suffering from the use of EWIPA.<sup>15</sup>

The development of an international political declaration must promote actions that will reduce humanitarian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and increase the protection of civilians living through conflict. A political declaration can help to set a stronger international standard of behaviour, serving as a tool to drive forward positive policies and practice at a national level and building a community of positive practice.

A declaration should include a description of the different impacts, including: civilian deaths and physical injury; physical impairment, psychological trauma (and social discrimination and economic deprivation often faced by victims and survivors); destruction of housing, water and sanitation, health, energy, education, transport infrastructure, and interruption of associated services; displacement and denial of return; environmental degradation; denial of humanitarian access; contamination of territory with explosive remnants of war; and costs for reconstruction and recovery.

A political declaration should commit States to:

- x Develop operational policies and procedures that will stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas;
- x Share positive practice and experiences;
- x Recognise the rights of victims and affected communities and provide assistance;
- x Support and undertake data gathering;
- x Enable humanitarian and protection measures;
- x Build a community of practice, including through regular meetings to discuss the issue and progress towards reducing harm.

A clear collective commitment on this vital humanitarian question is urgently needed.

## END NOTES

1. The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) is a global network of civil society organisations that calls for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. It was founded in 2009 and is governed by a Steering Committee whose members are Action on Armed Violence, Article 36, Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, Norwegian People's Aid, Oxfam, PAX, Save the Children, SEHLAC and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
2. The UN Secretary General has repeatedly called on all state and non-state parties since 2009 to "avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas", including most recently in the 'Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict' (S/2017/414). Since 2011, the ICRC has stated that "due to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects and despite the absence of an express legal prohibition for specific types of weapons, the ICRC considers that explosive weapons with a wide impact area should be avoided in densely populated areas", see <http://bit.ly/2uLSSjm>
3. See for example UN Office in Geneva, 'World at a turning point: Heads of UN and Red Cross issue joint warning,' October 2015, <https://bit.ly/20Y0HO>
4. See for example ICRC, 'Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians,' June 2015 <https://bit.ly/1BfcidM>, and Harvard Law School and PAX, 'Operating under fire: The effects of explosive weapons on healthcare in the East of Ukraine', May 2017, <https://bit.ly/2vuYX0T>
5. ICRC, 'Yemen: Health system at breaking point as cholera epidemic spreads at unprecedented rate', June 2017, <http://bit.ly/2uLZWfx>
6. Landmine Action, 'Explosive violence: The problem of explosive weapons,' August 2009, <https://bit.ly/2GXobf2>, and Handicap International, 'The use of explosive weapons in populated areas – it's time to act', 2016, <https://bit.ly/2IU85FX>
7. See Insecurity Insight, 'Aid in Danger' <http://www.insecurityinsight.org/aidindanger/explosives/>
8. See for example ICRC, 'Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians,' June 2015 <https://bit.ly/1BfcidM> and Landmine Action, 'Explosive violence: The problem of explosive weapons,' August 2009, <https://bit.ly/2GXobf2>
9. Article 36, 'The impact of explosive weapons on mental health and psycho-social wellbeing', September 2013, <http://bit.ly/1ATCBSo>
10. Maya Brehm, UNIDIR, "Protecting Civilians from the Effects of Explosive Weapons: An Analysis of International Legal and Policy Standards" (2012)
11. Article 36 and PAX, 'Areas of harm: Understanding explosive weapons with wide area effects', October 2016, <http://bit.ly/2dGaVLx>
12. OCHA, 'Compilation of Military Policy and Practice: Reducing the humanitarian impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2ANCyhf> and Sahr Muhammedally, Minimizing Civilian Harm in Populated Areas: Examination of ISAF and AMISOM Policies and Practices, in International Review of the Red Cross, March 2017 <https://bit.ly/2vyGfIS>
13. Report of the UN Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2017/414)
14. See: [www.inew.org/political-response/](http://www.inew.org/political-response/)
15. Explosive weapons in populated areas: civilian devastation and suffering must stop, Joint Appeal from the UN Secretary-General and ICRC President, September 2019, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/explosive-weapons-cities-civilian-devastation-and-suffering-must-stop>

