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Protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

Explosive weapons use blast and fragmentation to kill and injure people in the area where they detonate, as well as to damage objects, buildings and infrastructure. Explosive weapons include mortars, rockets, artillery shells and aircraft bombs, well as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), as well as other weapons.

When used in populated areas these weapons tend to cause high levels of harm to individuals and communities. Destruction of infrastructure vital to the civilian population, including water and sanitation, housing, schools and hospitals, results in a pattern of wider, long-term suffering. Victims and survivors of explosive weapons can face long-term challenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic exclusion.

An urgent humanitarian problem

Whether from a bomb in a market in Pakistan or Iraq or shelling and bombing in Syria, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a major cause of death, injury and destroyed livelihoods.

INEW member Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) has recorded, through English-language wire reports, 34,758 people killed and injured from explosive weapons in 2012.¹ More than 27,000 (78%) were civilians. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 91% of victims were civilians.² This is but a fraction of the civilian harm caused by explosive weapons.

The worsening humanitarian situation in Syria, including the bombardment of Homs, Aleppo³ and other populated areas, led the President of the UN Security Council to call on the Syrian

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government to “end the use of heavy weapons in population centres.”⁴ A particular cause for concern has been the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects, such as multiple launch rocket systems, air-dropped bombs, high explosive artillery and mortar shells, as well as cluster munitions (which are prohibited outright under the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions).⁵

Last year, 58 countries were affected by the use of explosive weapons. The most severely affected countries were Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria.⁶

Stronger standards

Over the past few years the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community. Two types of explosive weapons – antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions – have been prohibited outright due to their devastating impact on civilian populations, but the broader problem of humanitarian harm from explosive weapons used in populated areas must also be addressed as a priority for the protection of civilians.

An increasing number of actors are calling for greater restraint in the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

- ✗ In May 2013, the Co-Chairs’ summary for an **international conference** “Reclaiming the Protection of Civilians Under International Humanitarian Law” stated which was attended by 94 states on that “the use of explosive force in military operations in densely populated areas has devastating humanitarian consequences for civilians. In particular, the use of explosive weapons with a wide area effect should be avoided.”⁷
- ✗ In September 2013, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Chatham House hosted an **experts meeting on the humanitarian impacts of explosive weapons**, bringing together individuals that have built up specific expertise on the issue from their work within government departments, the armed forces, and humanitarian and other relevant organisations. Further such discussions are expected next year with a view to developing stronger standards to protect civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- ✗ The 2012 **UN Secretary-General’s Report** on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict urged parties “to refrain from using explosive weapons with a wide-area impact in densely populated areas.”⁸
- ✗ The UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict has noted the devastating impact the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has on civilians, and especially children, and called on states to refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas in reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly in 2012.⁹ In July 2013, on her return from a trip to Syria and the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict said that “all parties must stop the shelling and use of explosive weapons in populated areas.”¹⁰

- ✗ In 2011, **the International Committee of the Red Cross** 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”.¹¹
- ✗ In the **UN Security Council’s Open Debates on the Protection of Civilians and other fora**, around 30 countries have expressed concern about the impact of explosive weapons including: Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Chile, Finland, Gabon, Germany, Guatemala, Holy See, Indonesia, Japan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Montenegro, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Qatar, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Togo, Tunisia, and the United States, as well as the Arab Group, the EU, the Nordic Countries, and the Human Security Network.
See: www.inew.org/acknowledgements

Advocacy points for governments

States should:

- ✗ Endorse the statement from the UN Secretary-General that the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area effects should be avoided. This can be done during the UN Security Council Open Debates on the Protection of Civilians, or any other relevant forum.
- ✗ Set out national policies on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including in response to the UN Secretary General’s call to states in his 2012 Protection of Civilians report, to issue policy statements outlining “which certain explosive weapons may and may not be used in populated areas” as well as in response to the letter sent by INEW to all states, via states’ Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York.
- ✗ Support the collection of data and make available information on harm to civilians from explosive weapons, as requested by the UN Secretary General in the UN 2012 Protection of Civilians report.
- ✗ Work with states, international organisations and civil society to identify concrete measures that can be taken to prevent humanitarian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including through the participation in meetings on this issue.

About INEW

INEW is a network of NGOs founded by Action on Armed Violence, Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, IKV Pax Christi, Medact, Norwegian People’s Aid, Oxfam International, and Save the Children UK, that calls for immediate action to prevent human suffering from explosive weapons in populated areas.

For more information see:
www.inew.org

In 2012, explosive violence was reported in **58 countries and territories.**

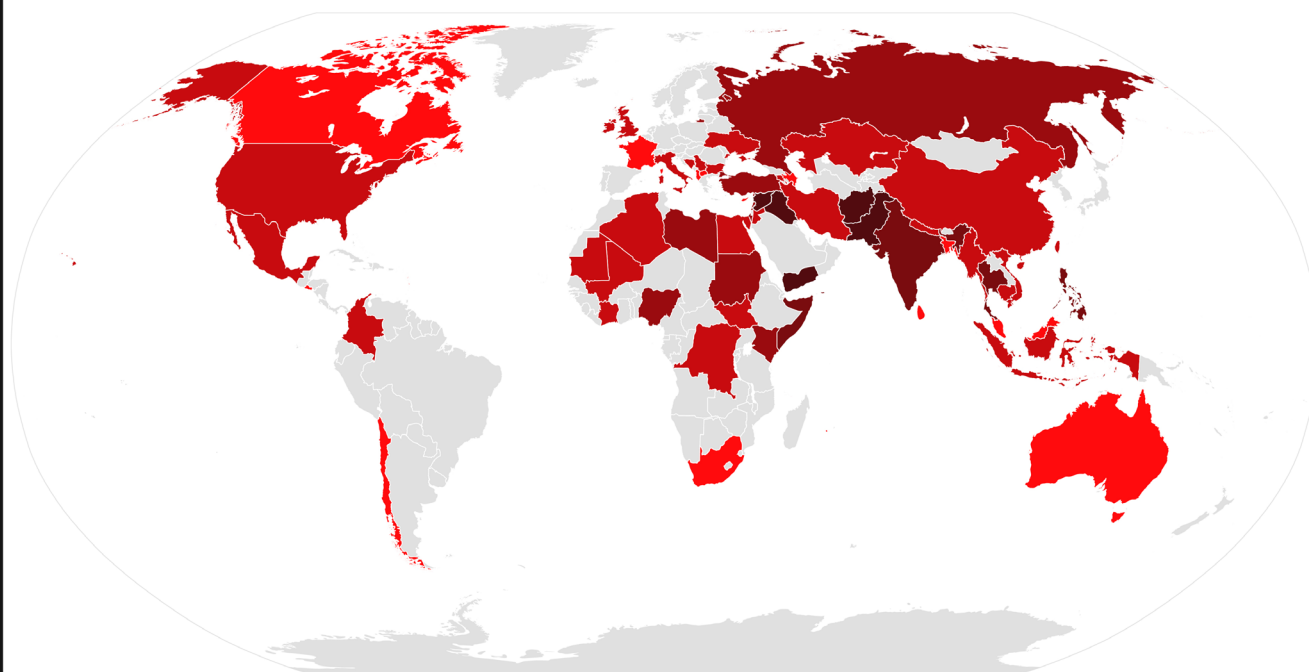
100-600 INCIDENTS

50-100 INCIDENTS

15-50 INCIDENTS

2-15 INCIDENTS

1 INCIDENT



Data based on English-language media reports

**AOAV WORKS TO REDUCE THE
WORLDWIDE HARM OF ARMED VIOLENCE**

**ACTION ON
ARMED VIOLENCE**

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ENDNOTES

1. Action on Armed Violence, "An Explosive Situation: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2012", April 2013, <http://aoav.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/an-explosive-situation-explosive-violence-in-2012.pdf>

2. Action on Armed Violence, "An Explosive Situation: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2012", April 2013, <http://aoav.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/an-explosive-situation-explosive-violence-in-2012.pdf>

3. Article 36, "The bombing of Aleppo: Heavy weapons and Civilian Protection", 10 August 2012, <http://www.article36.org/cat1-explosive-weapons/bombardment-of-aleppo-heavy-weapons-and-civilian-protection/>

4. Statement by the President of the Security Council, 21 March 2012, S/PRST/2012/6

5. Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), December 2012, "Wide of the Mark: Syria and the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects http://www.aoav.org.uk/uploads/changing_policy/The_Impact_of_Explosive_Weapons/Reports/2012_12_Wide_of_the_Mark.pdf

6. Action on Armed Violence, "An Explosive Situation: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2012", April 2013, <http://aoav.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/an-explosive-situation-explosive-violence-in-2012.pdf>

7. Co-Chairs Summary from the "Reclaiming the Protection of Civilians under International Humanitarian Law" conference, Oslo, Norway, 23-24 May 2013: http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Hum/reclaime_recommendations.pdf

8. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict," UN Security Council, S/2012/376, 22 May 2012, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_4150.pdf

9. See UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict," Human Rights Council, 28 June 2012, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-38_en.pdf and UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Leila Zerrougui, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, UN General Assembly A/67/256, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/256

10. <http://www.inew.org/news/stop-the-use-of-explosive-weapons-says-un-special-representative-on-children-and-armed-conflict>

11. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Humanitarian Law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts, October 2011, 31IC/11/5.1.2