

Global Civil Society Forum

17 November 2022

On Thursday 17 November, survivors of armed conflict, activists, and civil society organizations, alongside representatives of governments, UN agencies, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, met in Dublin at a Global Civil Society Forum on limiting the suffering caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The Forum, hosted by the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) and Dóchas, the Irish network for international development and humanitarian organisations, gave voice to survivors of armed conflict and other experts to lay out the multitude of humanitarian impacts of explosive weapons on cities, towns, and other populated areas. It also explored the elements needed for full and effective implementation the International Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, to be signed at the Dublin Castle on 18 November.

Humanity and Inclusion set the stage for a constructive and collaborative meeting by presenting the first ever 'Protection of Civilians Award' to Irish civil servants Ambassador Michael Gaffey and Deputy Permanent Representative in Geneva Jamie Walsh for their extraordinary efforts and tireless commitment to reaching a political declaration. They responded with a tribute to the contribution made by INEW and other civil society actors, who consistently pushed Ireland and other states to "set the bar high" and create the strongest possible declaration.

During the first panel, speakers from Palestine, Syria, the ICRC, and Mines Action Group described in detail the many ways that explosive weapons affect people's lives, from direct physical injury to long-lasting psychological harm. Dr. Hamza Al-Kateab from Syria, speaking by video about his experience managing a hospital in Aleppo, described what happens when hospitals or the infrastructure on which they depend, are targeted. Nada Tarbush from the foreign ministry of Palestine laid out some of the explosive weapons' reverberating effects – including damage to hospitals, housing, food supply, water and sanitation, electricity, education, and economic development – and the horrific impact such destruction has on civilians. Eirini Giorgou from ICRC also noted that in cities in particular, systems of critical infrastructure, which are not usually built to withstand explosions, are "too big to fail" and cause disastrous results when they do. Alma Taslidžan Al-Osta from Humanity and Inclusion and Myriam Rabbath from MAG presented the psychological effects experienced by civilians, especially children, both during and after conflict.

The second panel focused on what steps need to be taken – by a broad group of actors across multiple sectors in a variety of fora - to ensure full implementation of the declaration and the highest possible protection of civilians. Orlaith Minogue from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) described the steps stakeholders have taken to help produce meaningful progress on the Safe Schools Declaration, including regular review meetings where states can make announcements and build a community of implementation. Thomas Hajnoczi from the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized the critical role of civil society will have in speaking frankly about militaries' respect for the Declaration and its norms, noting the need for states to support the Explosive Weapons Monitor in this oversight role. Sahr Muhammedally from CIVIC spoke about how essential it is for governments to work with civil society at the global and national levels to get their input on revisions to military policy and practice, as well as to collect comprehensive data on the impact of bombing on civilians. Panel Chair

Laura Boillot from INEW and several panelists echoed this sentiment that real progress will rely on continued close collaboration among all stakeholders to share experiences and build a community of practice. Aurelien Buffler from OCHA noted that EWIPA will remain a high priority for the UN and will use its convening power to promote universalization and implementation.

Richard Moyes of Article 36 closed the meeting with a stark reminder that protecting civilians from explosive weapons is an enormously difficult task that must be fought tirelessly and consistently over the very long term. Overall the event was a powerful reminder of why the declaration was so urgently needed and the potential for it to make a real difference.

In addition to the panel sessions, a uniquely constructed replica of a 'Bombed out School' installation by Save the Children and INEW was also presented at the forum, as well as films "For Sama" and "Investigating a massacre: The Afrin hospital attack."