



# Protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

## Background

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas has been a key cause of harm to civilians in conflicts around the world in 2014. The bombardment of towns and cities in Syria, Gaza, and Ukraine has resulted in a large number of civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. These and other situations of conflict around the world are pressing examples of this humanitarian problem.

Explosive weapons use blast and fragmentation to kill and injure people in the area where they detonate, as well as to damage to homes and infrastructure. When used in populated areas explosive 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. Survivors of explosive weapons can face long-term challenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic exclusion.

Where explosive weapons were used in populated areas in 2013, 93% of the casualties were civilians, according to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a founding member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). AOAV's sampling of English language news media found that more than 31,076 civilians were reported as killed or injured by explosive weapons in 2013.

Gaza - © INEW 2009



## Current context

Over the past few years the civilian harm and widespread destruction caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community.

In 2011 a group of NGOs set up the International Network on Explosive Weapons to respond to the impact of the bombing and bombardment of populated areas. So far around 40 countries have expressed concern about this humanitarian issue, mostly in the context of the UN Security Council debates on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The UN Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross have called on states to avoid the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.

This acknowledgement has taken place against the background of grave civilian harm from the bombardment of populated areas in Côte d'Ivoire, Gaza, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine. The use of explosive weapons with wide area effects such as multiple-barrel rocket launchers, heavy artillery, and large aircraft bombs in such populated areas has stood out as particularly harmful in these contexts. In addition, civilians have been killed and injured in towns and cities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, where car bombs and 'suicide' bombs have been detonated amongst crowds of people in public places.

Over the course of 2013–2014 there has been a growing international discussion on how this humanitarian harm can be prevented. The Co-Chairs' Summary of an international conference on the protection of civilians held in Oslo in May 2013 and attended by 90 countries suggested that the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects should be avoided. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has co-hosted two expert meetings on this topic: the first with Chatham House in London in September 2013 and the second with Norway in Oslo in June 2014. These meetings have identified practices by armed forces that have helped reduce harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons.

Further discussions are expected next year with a view to compiling existing good practices and developing an international commitment to prevent the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.

Building on existing international law, such a commitment would serve to articulate a clearer standard of practice. Under international humanitarian law (IHL), certain types of attacks are prohibited (attacks that are "indiscriminate" or that deliberately target civilians, for example), but there is no clear boundary that specifically prevents the use of wide area effect explosive weapons in populated areas. By developing and endorsing an international commitment to this effect, states would significantly enhance the protection of civilians.

## Recommendations for governments

### During the opening of the UN General Assembly:

- × Heads of State and Ministers should **endorse the UN Secretary-General's recommendation** that the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects should be avoided, and **indicate support for the development of an international commitment** to prevent the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.

### During First Committee:

- × **Delegations should endorse the UN Secretary-General's recommendation** that the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects should be avoided.
- × **States should set out their national policies and practices** related to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas via their Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York.
- × **Delegations should indicate support for the development of an international commitment** to prevent the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.

### Beyond First Committee:

- × States should contribute to the compilation of good practices for preventing the use of explosive weapons in populated areas that OCHA is undertaking.
- × States and other relevant actors should support efforts to strengthen documentation of the humanitarian impact of explosive weapons, and provide a basis for assistance to victims, by ensuring that every casualty from the use of explosive weapons is recorded.
- × In efforts aimed at ensuring respect for IHL and international human rights law in specific conflict situations, such as commissions of inquiry, states should acknowledge the harm caused to civilians by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- × In arms transfer decisions and weapons review processes, states should consider the risk of harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- × States should participate constructively in the development of an international commitment to prevent the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effect.

For more information see:  
[www.inew.org](http://www.inew.org)