



# 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 2015. The bombardment of towns and cities has continued to cause widespread civilian casualties, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. Conflict in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere provide clear illustrations of the persistent pattern of harm. Against this background, discussions are now starting towards a political response to this humanitarian problem.

Explosive weapons use blast and fragmentation to kill and injure people in the areas where they detonate, as well as to damage objects, buildings, and infrastructure. When used in populated areas they tend to cause high levels of harm to individuals and communities. This problem is particularly severe where the explosive weapons used have wide area effects.

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.

In 2014, more than 32,000 civilians were reported as killed or injured by explosive weapons according to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a founding member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). AOAV found that where explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 92% of the casualties were civilians.

Burned-out cars lined up by the Jarman petrol station, Saada City, Yemen, which was struck in an aerial attack on April 15, 2015. © 2015 Ole Solvang/Human Rights Watch



## Current context

Over recent years the harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community, and 2015 sees the start of discussions towards a political response to this problem.

In 2011 a group of NGOs set up the International Network on Explosive Weapons to respond to this problem. 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 a wide impact area.

Recognition of this problem has grown against the background of heavy casualties from the bombardment of populated areas in Côte d'Ivoire, Gaza, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and many other contexts. The use of explosive weapons with wide area effects such as rockets, heavy artillery, and large aircraft bombs in such populated areas has stood out as particularly harmful in these contexts. In Syria and Iraq, the use of so-called "barrel bombs" has attracted attention because of their wide area effects. In addition, civilians have been killed and injured in towns and cities where other improvised explosive devices such as car bombs and "suicide" bombs have been detonated amongst crowds of people in public places.

Over the course of 2013–2015 there has been a growing international discussion on how this humanitarian harm can be prevented. At an international conference on the protection of civilians in Oslo attended by 90 countries in May 2013, the Co-Chairs' Summary 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 can be undertaken to reduce harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons.

On 21–22 September the government of Austria and UN OCHA hosted a meeting for states that have recognised this problem and are interested in working together to address it. In particular Austria invited states to discuss how an international political commitment could be developed in response to the predictable pattern of humanitarian harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This meeting was the first step to act upon the Secretary General's call for a political commitment, and other calls for action from states, UN agencies, the ICRC and civil society. During that meeting several states discussed ideas of potential key elements of a political declaration to address the harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

INEW urges governments to join these efforts to develop a political commitment that can help reduce harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. In such an instrument, states should commit to:

- x Stop the use in populated areas of explosive weapons that have wide area effects;

- x Review national policy and practice and make changes that will strengthen the protection of civilians;
- x Support stronger data-gathering on the use and impact of explosive weapons, including age-, sex- and disability-disaggregated recording of casualties, and information on disabilities amongst survivors; and
- x Recognise the rights of survivors, families of those killed or injured, and affected communities and to ensure a response to their short- and long-term needs.

## Recommendations for governments

### During First Committee:

- x Recognise that civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a humanitarian problem that must be addressed.
- x Endorse the UN Secretary-General's recommendation that the use in densely populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects should be avoided.
- x Set out national policies and practices related to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including in response to the Note Verbale sent by the UN Secretary-General to all states, via their Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York.
- x Indicate support for the development of an international commitment to reduce harm from the use of explosive weapons, including by stopping the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.

### Beyond First Committee:

- x States should participate constructively in discussions to develop an international commitment to address this humanitarian priority.

For more information see:

[www.inew.org](http://www.inew.org)