



Protecting children from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

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At the United Nations Security Council open debate on children in armed conflict on 2 August 2016, the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW)¹ calls on states to recognise the humanitarian harm resulting from the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area effects, and to support efforts to develop an international political commitment to prevent this harm.

In his latest report on children and armed conflict, to be discussed at the open debate, the UN Secretary-General made his strongest reference yet to this issue, urging all parties to conflict to “refrain from using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, and to consider making a commitment to this effect.” He also notes “attacks on schools and hospitals were prevalent in 2015 and were linked to the increasing use of airstrikes and explosive weapons in populated areas.”

INEW encourages states to use the debate to:

- Acknowledge the severe impact on children, and civilians more broadly, from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including as a key driver of displacement;
- Endorse the UN Secretary-General’s recommendation and that of the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, that states should refrain from using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas and to make a commitment to this effect.²
- Indicate support for the development of an international political instrument to reduce harm from the use of explosive weapons, including stopping the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects.
- Collect and make available to the UN and other relevant actors information on civilian harm resulting from the use of explosive weapons including age and gender disaggregated data, to better understand the impacts of such use.

An urgent humanitarian issue

In recent years, the use of explosive weapons³ in populated areas has been a key cause of harm to civilians and one that requires urgent international attention. Over 33,000 civilians were reported killed or injured in 2015 by explosive weapons, according to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV). Where explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 92% of the casualties were civilian.⁴

The bombardment of towns and cities is directly linked with all six grave violations against children. This practice not only kills and maims children, but causes damage to schools and hospitals, hinders delivery of humanitarian aid, and leaves children vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse. In addition, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a key driver of displacement and causes severe psychological harm to children and their

¹ INEW is a network of NGOs established in 2011 by Action on Armed Violence, Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, PAX, Medact, Norwegian People’s Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children.

² Annual report of the UN Secretary Children on Children and Armed Conflict, 20 April 2016, A/70/836-S/2016/360

³ Explosive weapons include improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as well as explosive ordnance such as mortars, rockets, artillery shells and aircraft bombs. These weapons use blast and fragmentation, and kill and injure people in the area around the point of detonation. When these weapons have been used in public places such as markets and residential areas, people that should be protected have often been severely affected, both directly, from the blast and fragment projection, and through damage to vital infrastructure such as to hospitals, housing and water and sanitation systems.

⁴ Action on Armed Violence, Unacceptable harm: monitoring explosive violence in 2015, April 2016, <http://bit.ly/2allvHg>

families. Conflict in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere provide clear illustrations of the persistent pattern of harm.

Child casualties are poorly reported in media sources that AOA uses for its data. However, in incidents where the age of at least one casualty was reported, AOA reported that children made up 14% of the casualties from explosive weapons.

- In 2015, AOA recorded 985 child casualties (dead and injured) reported from the use of explosive weapons.
- 82% of child casualties took place in populated areas.
- Child casualties were reported in 26 countries and territories in 2015. Of the total reported child casualties, 42% were killed or injured by explosive violence in Syria.

Current context

The civilian harm and widespread destruction caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community. 2015 saw the start of discussions towards a political response to this problem.

In 2011 a group of civil society organisations set up the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) to respond to this issue. So far around 70 countries have publicly expressed concern about this humanitarian issue, mostly in the context of the UN Security Council debates on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.⁵

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

Since 2013, 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 recommended 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: with Chatham House in London in September 2013 and 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. The issue was also raised as a key concern at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016.

On 21-22 September 2015 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. 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. Several states discussed ideas of potential key elements of a political declaration to address civilian harm from explosive weapons.

Building on this, the August 2016 Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict presents another opportunity for states to express their support for concrete steps that will help to prevent the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and to provide stronger protection to children in the future.

⁵ See INEW: See <http://www.inew.org/acknowledgements>