



Stop bombing and shelling in towns and cities NGOs call for action to protect and assist civilians in urban conflicts

Vienna, October 1-2, 2019 - Governments, UN agencies, international organisations and civil society will meet at the *Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare* to address the changing face of war and its effects on civilians. Civil society organisations in the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) call on states to stop using the worst offending weapons in populated areas and to commit to better assisting civilians in conflict.

Every year tens of thousands of civilians are killed and injured by bombing and shelling in urban areas – many more suffer from destruction of homes, hospitals, schools and vital services.

"Explosive weapons intended for open battlefield continue to be used in populated towns and cities, so they kill and cause extensive life-changing injuries in children and destroy vital facilities like schools and hospitals. Steps must be taken to ensure children are protected from the devastating impact of explosive weapons," said Amanda Brydon of Save the Children

Directly attacking civilians is illegal under international law, but INEW warns that too many actors are using outdated weapons designed for use in open battlefields which, when used in cities and towns, indiscriminately injure or kill a far greater proportion of civilians even if aimed at a military target. By 2050 the UN estimates that two thirds of the planet will be living in urban areas. Unchecked, the proportion of civilians caught in the crossfire, deliberately targeted, or written off as "collateral damage" is likely to increase, reducing more cities and cultures to rubble.

In World War II, it is estimated that around 60% of casualties were civilian. Over the last decade, when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, the proportion of civilians killed or injured has been at 90%, e.g., in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine. In the last 8 years, UK-based charity Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) recorded more than 230,000 civilians killed and injured by explosive weapons.

In too many countries, survivors do not have access to vital medical care and rehabilitation. *"The explosion blew my childhood and body apart – I lost so much blood and spent a year in hospital, laughter and joy turned to pain and survival – but I was lucky, too many don't get the help they need, so states must act now to protect and help civilians caught in bombings."* Said Amina Azimi, Advocacy and Gender Manager for survivor rights organisation 'ALSO' in Kabul, who was injured in an attack that hit her family home.

Last month, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, created after WWII, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, and the President of the ICRC, Peter Maurer, issued a joint appeal for action on, urging the adoption of a political declaration and stating that *"the civilian devastation and suffering must stop."*

INEW calls on all states to work together to develop such a declaration but cautions that stronger standards must not be watered-down by states that reject the need for constraint.

"State and non-state actors need to turn their talk about civilian protection into action and stop using heavy explosive weapons like long range artillery and barrel bombs in towns and cities," said Richard Moyes, Director of Article 36, which coordinates the INEW coalition.

Some 100 governments are expected to attend the Vienna meeting. *"We hope this will launch a political process to adopt stronger rules on urban attacks, including a halt to the use of wide-area effect weapons, to share understandings on how to reduce civilian harm, and to recognise rights of victims and provide assistance,"* said Moyes.

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NOTES

What is the International Network on Explosive Weapons - INEW?

- The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) is an NGO partnership calling for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. It comprises more than 40 organizations from across 25 countries. The steering committee is comprised of AOAV, Article 36, CIVIC, Humanity and Inclusion (HI), Human Rights Watch, PAX, Norwegian People's Aid, Oxfam, Reaching Critical Will, Save the Children and SEHLAC www.inew.org

What is the Vienna Conference?

- The Vienna Conference on the Protection of Civilians in Urban Warfare will take place 1-2 Oct 2019 and is a free-standing meeting hosted by the Government of Austria. The conference website is: <http://www.bmeia.gv.at/POC19Vienna>
- The conference is open to all UN Member and Observer States and will also be attended by UN agencies, international organisations and civil society and other experts.
- It will take place from 1 to 2 October at the Austria Center Vienna (ACV). The sessions will take place from 09:00 to 17:15 on the first and from 09:00 to 16:30 on the second day. ACV is situated right next to the Vienna International Centre Bruno-Kreisky-Platz 1, 1220. Media is welcome to attend – see: <http://bit.ly/ViennaMedia>
- It will consider harms caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, the characteristics of weapons associated with harms, the legal context and examples of good military practice - and how states can respond to the UN Secretary-General's call for development of a political declaration on this issue.

What are explosive weapons?

- Explosive weapons are conventional weapons that detonate to affect an area with blast and fragmentation. There are many types, including grenades, mortar bombs, artillery shells, aircraft bombs and missiles, as well as improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Particular concerns are focused on **explosive weapons with wide area effects** which - due to their scale of explosive force, or because they are inaccurate, or use multiple warheads - cause widespread damage.

What is the pattern of civilian harm?

- In 2018 at least 22,000 civilians were reported **directly killed and injured** by the use of explosive weapons in 64 countries/territories, according to AOAV (www.aoav.org.uk). When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, 90% of casualties were likely to be civilians. Worst affected countries in 2018 were Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Pakistan
- This pattern of harm has been consistent over the last 8 years – tens of thousands of civilians killed and injured and civilians making up the vast majority of those harmed by attacks in populated areas.
- Significant wider harm is caused by the **destruction of infrastructure** such as houses, hospitals, schools, water and sanitation services etc. This also causes displacement and protracted challenges for reconstruction. In Aleppo, Syria, 60% of **healthcare** facilities and 75% of **educational** facilities have been damaged or destroyed, as well as 60% of **housing** units. It is estimated it will take **6 years and \$112m USD just to clear the rubble**.
- Survivors of explosive weapon use experience long term medical and psychological impacts, often in a context of inadequate support services.

What actors are using explosive weapons?

- Explosive weapons are used both by state forces and non-state armed groups. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been responsible for high levels of civilian harm and are often associated with non-state violence. Professionally trained militaries are among those causing this harm. For example, in **Yemen**, since March 2015 at least **8,441 civilians have been killed and 9,640 injured** in air raids by the Saudi-led coalition. Saudi Arabia receives significant **assistance from countries like the UK**. The Saudi-led campaign has been characterised by airstrikes in populated areas: at least **1,776 schools** have been rendered inoperable from airstrikes or shelling.

What is the legal position?

- Explosive weapons are not illegal *per se* in armed conflict. Direct attacks on civilians are illegal, and this continues to be a significant cause of harm. The primary concern at the Vienna Conference is use of weapons that, because of their wide area effects, cause significant civilian harm if used in a populated area - even if there is an intended military target.

Is change possible?

- Yes. Changes to military policy on the choice of weapons can reduce civilian harm. For example, between 2009 and 2014 in Afghanistan, civilian casualties from airstrikes progressively and significantly decreased year on year, because international forces (ISAF/NATO) adopted progressively stricter policies on when airstrikes could be used.

Who supports action on this issue?

- 109 states have expressed concern at harm caused by the use of explosive weapon in populated areas. (<http://bit.ly/EWIPAstates>). In September 2019, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres and ICRC President, Peter Maurer, issued a further joint appeal, urging that the civilian devastation and suffering from explosive weapons in cities must stop (<http://bit.ly/EWIPAJointAppeal>)