



## The use of heavy explosive weapons in Gaza and Israel must stop

May 2021

The use of heavy explosive weapons in the Gaza strip and Israel is killing and injuring civilians and must stop.

Violence sharply escalated after Israeli forces attempted to quell protestors in East Jerusalem after planned forced expulsions of people from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, and raids on the Al-Aqsa compound and mosque. Rockets were fired into populated areas in Israel in retaliation by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups. This was followed by Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza strip, exacting a heavy toll on the civilian population.<sup>1</sup>

As violence and casualties rise, INEW calls on all parties to stop the use of heavy explosive weapons in towns, cities and other populated areas due to the high risk of harm to civilians.

Dozens of civilians, including at least 14 children, have reportedly been killed in airstrikes in Gaza in just the past two days, with over 300 injured and hundreds more made homeless.<sup>2</sup> Israel has conducted dozens of airstrikes, including on a 13-storey residential building causing its complete collapse.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, rocket fire over Israel reportedly killed three civilians and injured many others. The [International Committee of the Red Cross has issued an urgent call](#) for restraint and de-escalation: “Every minute that this cycle of violence continues is a danger to people's lives, their homes and the services and infrastructure they rely on like hospitals and schools.”

Gaza has been the ninth worst-affected state by explosive violence over the past decade. From 2011-2020, AOAV recorded 5,700 deaths and injuries from explosive violence in Gaza – of these, 5,107 (90%) were civilians. As a consequence of previous military assaults and blockades, much of the Gaza strip’s infrastructure and housing has also been severely degraded: a recent [Human Rights Watch report](#) documented the long term effects of explosive weapons use in Gaza, which has “destroyed tens of thousands of structures and critical infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, schools, and Gaza’s only power plant, causing considerable harm to civilian life that has lasted for years afterward”. The use of explosive weapons is also one of the main catalysts of forced displacement globally, as

---

<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see OCHA’s latest sitrep: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-opt-flash-update-1-escalation>

<sup>2</sup> ["Israel-Gaza violence: death toll rises as UN envoy warns over escalation"](#), The Guardian, 11 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> ["Dozens dead as Israel and Hamas escalate aerial bombardments"](#), Reuters, 12 May 2021.

civilians flee for safety, but for Palestinians in Gaza such flight is often impossible due to longstanding tight movement restrictions.

Every year tens of thousands of civilians are killed and injured around the world by bombing and shelling in urban and other populated areas using weapons designed for use in open battlefields. Many more civilians experience life-changing injuries, and suffer from destruction of homes, hospitals, schools and vital services. Unexploded ordnance pose an ongoing threat to civilians during and after hostilities have ended and impedes the safe return of refugees and displaced persons.

The widespread bombing and shelling in the Gaza strip and Israel highlights the needs for new international standards against the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas. Heavy explosive weapons are those with wide area effects, and include weapons that produce a large blast area or spread fragments widely, weapons that deliver multiple munitions that saturate a large area, such as multiple-launch rocket systems, and inaccurate weapons, such as mortars, that may land anywhere within a wide area of the intended target. When used in cities and towns where there are concentrations of civilians, the risk of harm to civilians is greatest.

[Over 100 countries have recognised the harm caused to civilians](#) from the use of explosive weapons in cities, towns and other populated areas. States [are in the process of negotiating a political declaration that would contain new international standards](#) on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, under the leadership of Ireland. [INEW calls upon states](#) to include a commitment to avoid use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas in the future political declaration.