



## Opening Statement on behalf of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW)

The first international follow-up conference to the adoption of the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*

Oslo, 23 April 2024

**Delivered by Radhya Al-Mutawakel**

*"There was not a single body or a complete corpse in one piece, whether among the adults or the children. There were no survivors or injured. Not even half of a body was found among the killed"*

*A witness from Yemen - June 2019*

*"The building was simply pulverized. There was almost nothing left, just part of a bathroom and part of a corridor; a man next to his dead mother was covered in blood. Another man was holding his lifeless child, speaking to him and asking him not to cry."*

*A witness from Ukraine - March 2022*

*"I found my child under concrete and twisted metal amidst the rubble. The back of his head was split open, one of his legs barely connected to his body, and his face was burned but he seemed alive. We pulled him out within seconds, but he died in the ambulance. The three children were killed in the attack."*

*A mother in Gaza - January 2024*

These harrowing testimonies illustrate the grim reality for civilians living under bombing.

They show a distinct and grave pattern of harm to civilians.

Yet atrocities caused by bombing and shelling - whether by airstrikes, rockets or artillery - are routinely experienced in population centres across the world, from Gaza and Ukraine, to Sudan and Syria, Iraq and Myanmar, as well as in my home country, Yemen.

The *Explosive Weapons Monitor* report was launched yesterday and shows unprecedented levels of civilian harm and suffering. Last year alone, civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons was recorded in at least 75 countries and territories.

But what we document and convey about the atrocities affecting the lives of millions of civilians living through conflict, and what media outlets and other institutions collectively report, is an extremely small part of the reality of what explosive weapons do to people.

At the *Protection Forum* convened by INEW and the Norwegian Red Cross yesterday, we placed a spotlight on the staggering scale of civilian suffering and devastation, deaths and injuries, people living with permanent disabilities, and the courageous work of first responders trying to reach them.

We listened to people describe the daily damage to critical infrastructure, hospitals, ambulances, people's homes, to electricity and water supplies, and the impact it has on civilian populations when these are damaged or destroyed.

And we heard about the psychological scars that are left from hearing the sounds of explosions, from witnessing scenes of bloodshed and destruction, and from the loss of loved ones. These are among the most profound impacts on civilians, and especially on children.

These testimonies and experiences demand our urgent attention and action. If we are serious about our attempts to reduce this harm in the future, it is vital that states remain attentive to responding to the experiences of civilians who are affected.

The Declaration should act as a lens that turns political attention to ongoing harm and drives humanitarian action in response.

States that have signed onto the Declaration and made a commitment to work to address this problem should be speaking out when civilians are harmed – irrespective of who has caused it. Harm must be investigated, efforts to establish accountability must be determined, and lessons should be learned.

More can and must be done. Signing this declaration is an important first step but its true worth to make civilian protection a tangible reality, not just a hopeful aspiration on paper or symbolic gesture, hinges on its effective implementation.

We recognise that implementation of the Declaration is an ongoing process. But this process begins with making changes in national policies. This should drive change in practice – which is the goal we all are committed to.

Work to make these changes needs to begin urgently if it has not already. All states that join this Declaration should do so with the expectation that they too will need to review their own policies and practices, placing limits on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and prioritising the protection of civilians - not with the view that their existing policies are sufficient.

Today we hope to hear from states what steps in implementation have been taken since they endorsed the Declaration, and what steps will be taken in the future.

Given the grim reality of urban conflicts today, we must compel fighting parties to take the necessary measures to safeguard civilians and spare them the devastating effects of conflicts. This entails, above all, a firm commitment rooted in genuine political will to prioritise civilian protection, including refraining from using explosive weapons in densely populated areas.

Despite all the terror, harm and suffering we see in the world today, I reiterate what I always say: this tragic reality is not inevitable - it is a situation that can be changed by women and men, like us, and their determination to bring about change.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To prevent the harm and suffering from the use of explosive weapons as we see in places like in Afghanistan, Gaza, Iraq, Myanmar, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, among other places around the world, is to embody courage, integrity, determination, and awareness and to see it as our responsibility to protect civilians from these weapons that cause devastation for so many people in the world today.