



States voice serious concerns over explosive weapons at UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

Many states used the debate as an opportunity to express their concerns over the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and its devastating impact on civilians and civilian objects. The harm caused to civilians by explosive weapons was among the most frequently raised issues during the debate. This reflects the unprecedented levels of harm experienced by civilians from the use of explosive weapons in 2023, and the first half of 2024. The recently published [Explosive Weapons Monitor 2023](#) reported that: “in towns and cities across the world in 2023, civilians experienced an unprecedented level of harm from the use of explosive weapons.”

Over the course of the UN Security Council Open Debate, explosive weapons were mentioned by at least 24 speakers, representing 40 states, the European Union, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), an INEW member. States expressing concern with the use of explosive weapons included Argentina, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark on behalf of the Nordic countries, El Salvador, Estonia, the European Union, Germany, Guatemala, Italy, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Norway on behalf of the 27-state Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Philippines, Portugal, Sierra Leone and Spain.

The debate drew upon the [annual report](#) of the UN Secretary-General on civilians in armed conflict, which described the “state of the protection of civilians in 2023 as resoundingly grim.” The Secretary-General’s report noted that the “impact on civilians was particularly acute when fighting took place in populated areas and involved the use of explosive weapons.” It further explained that “in 2023, almost 30,000 civilians were killed and injured by the use of explosive weapons in just six conflicts: Gaza, Myanmar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine and Yemen.” ([Read the Secretary-General’s report here.](#))

Joyce Msuya, assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, in her testimony to the Security Council said that the “use of explosive weapons in populated areas had devastating impacts on civilians across numerous conflicts.” In Sudan and Ukraine, she explained that “United Nations sources indicate that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is the leading cause of civilian casualties.” Ms. Msunya said that “across all conflicts, civilians accounted for 90 per cent of those killed and injured when explosive weapons were used in populated areas.” She also emphasised that civilians were “severely affected by the widespread damage and destruction to critical infrastructure.” This, she said, “disrupted the provision of electricity, water and health care to millions of people.”

Gaza and Sudan, two conflicts in which explosive weapons have featured heavily, were highlighted by the assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. Whilst explosive weapons were not explicitly mentioned in the context of Gaza, the intervention stated that the “horrors of the 7 October attack by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on Israel and the intense Israeli military response in Gaza... resulted in death, destruction and suffering at

a pace and scale unprecedented in the recent past.” Existing data and analysis shows that the widespread use of explosive weapons significantly contributed to this (See for example [Explosive Weapons Monitor 2023](#); [UNOSAT Comprehensive Damage Assessment](#); [OCHA OPT, Unprecedented Harm to Civilians in Gaza](#); [Airwars](#)).

Champions of the Political Declaration at the UN Security Council’s Open Debate

The Political Declaration was referenced by several states during the debate, including by the ‘troika’; Ireland, Norway and Costa Rica, three states that have taken an official role in championing the Political Declaration on the international stage. At least 13 speakers urged more states to endorse the Political Declaration, including Australia, Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark on behalf of the Nordic countries, Holy See, Ireland, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Norway on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Uruguay, Ms. Joyce Msuya, assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Mr. Hichem Khadhraoui, Director of CIVIC.

Costa Rica, the host of the next international conference on the Political Declaration, called for more states to endorse and implement the Declaration, highlighting that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is among the greatest threats to civilians in armed conflict. In its statement, Costa Rica also underlined the importance of collecting disaggregated data on the use and impact of explosive weapons - a key commitment in the Political Declaration. Costa Rica also raised concerns about the long-term risk to civilians posed by mines and other explosive devices decades after the end of conflict. ([Costa Rica, UN WebTV from 12.30 mins.](#))

Norway, host of the [recent international conference on the Political Declaration](#), and speaking on behalf of the 27-State members of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, emphasised the severe harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in multiple ongoing armed conflicts. This, it stated, has reduced “schools, hospitals, homes, and places of worship and cultural heritage...to rubble.” The statement called on militaries to make effective protection of civilians and civilian objects a ‘strategic priority’ in planning and conduct of military operations, and identified the Political Declaration as an important tool herein. (*The Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict are: Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Dominican Republic, France, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Ivory Coast, Japan, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Ukraine, Uruguay and Switzerland*) ([Statement published by Norway](#))

Ireland, host of the 2022 Dublin conference where the Political Declaration was first endorsed, underlined the continued importance of the Declaration. Ireland noted the deterioration of the protection of civilians since its introduction to the annual UN Security Council agenda 25 years ago, but also drew attention to “the progress we have made with the development of our toolkit for protecting civilians” and suggested that this “provides some hope.” The Political Declaration is a “vital tool” herein, Ireland explained. ([Statement](#))

The Political Declaration: a tool to strengthen adherence to international law and civilian protection

Many speakers underlined the importance and urgency of States fully complying with international law, the international community effectively responding to violations, and the need for greater accountability. Yet concerns about impunity and the selective application of international law was raised by multiple states.

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Joyce Msuya, in her testimony said that “the harm and suffering caused to civilians in 2023 signals an alarming lack of compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law. It also indicates that the

Council's protection of civilians resolutions of the last 25 years remain largely unheeded. We must redouble efforts to strengthen compliance by parties to conflict with these obligations."

The Political Declaration provides a framework and tools upon which States can draw on both to strengthen their compliance with international humanitarian law and improve civilian protection. This was highlighted during the debate by multiple states, including Austria, Costa Rica, Denmark on behalf of the Nordic countries, EU, Germany, Holy See, Ireland, Liberia and Norway on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

Reflecting on the large-scale civilian harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in ongoing conflicts, speakers said there was an urgent need to do "much more" to address the severe immediate and long-term harm. For example, Austria described the Political Declaration as "a concrete toolbox" to address harm to civilians and civilian objects from explosive weapons and encouraged all states to endorse and effectively implement the Declaration. It also underlined its commitment to "further engage on all aspects of implementation, including military policy and practice, data collection and analysis, humanitarian access and victim assistance," referencing central commitments in the Declaration. ([Austria Statement](#))

Costa Rica said that it is "essential to collect data on explosive weapons use and impact, as well as [collecting] records of victims, disaggregated by age, gender and disability, and [collecting] information on types and effects of munitions deployed in urban areas, including on critical infrastructure and essential services." This aligns with a key commitment in the Political Declaration pertaining to the collection and sharing of data on explosive weapons use and civilian harm. ([Costa Rica, UN WebTV from 12.30 mins.](#))

Denmark, speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, and Norway, speaking on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, called for the effective protection of civilians and civilian objects to be made a 'strategic priority' in planning and conduct of military operations. This aligns with commitments in the Declaration on strengthening civilian protection from harm caused by explosive weapons through military policy, practice and training. Denmark's statement also called for an urgent recommitment to international law, and highlighted practices that align with commitments in the Political Declaration as means to improve compliance, including adapting military manuals, adopting civilian harm mitigation policies, conducting weapons reviews, and taking measures that facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access during conflict. Denmark also emphasised that a broader understanding of harm, in particular indirect harm, was necessary, and welcomed initiatives that provide a more nuanced understanding of patterns and types of harm, and how these impact different groups, explicitly referencing the Political Declaration. (*The Nordic countries are: Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden.*) ([Denmark, on behalf of Nordic countries, UN WebTV, from 1h 33 mins.](#))

Liberia stated that the Political Declaration plays an instrumental role in mitigating harm against civilians. Its statement expressed support for the Secretary General's report that "emphasises the urgent need to curtail the use of explosive weapons in populated areas." This relates to the Political Declaration's call on states to develop policies on restricting and refraining from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. ([Liberia, UN WebTV, 1hr 40 mins.](#))

The frustrations expressed by many speakers at the dire status of civilian protection in armed conflict today, in particular the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, emphasises the importance of continued universalisation and implementation of the Political Declaration. As highlighted by multiple speakers, including Costa Rica, Austria and Denmark on behalf of the Nordic countries, the Political Declaration offers practical and effective steps to improve civilian protection, and prevent and mitigate harm. To be effective, however, these have to be

meaningfully implemented and applied. As set out in the Secretary General's report all states should endorse the Political Declaration. Furthermore, "States should review and revise existing, or develop new, military policy that is in line with the Declaration and the principle of avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas owing to the high likelihood of civilian harm." Here, there is still a lot of work to be done. This was further discussed at a side event on Protecting Civilians from Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, convened to coincide with the debate.