

Article36

Regional roundtable on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

27-28 February 2025

A roundtable meeting is being convened with state representatives from southern Africa and other key stakeholders including civil society and international organisations (UN and ICRC) on strengthening the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This includes building support for the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas* as a framework that can reduce harm to civilians (see www.ewipa.org).

This roundtable aims to:

- Enhance understanding of the humanitarian impact of explosive weapons in populated areas among government representatives in Southern African and awareness of the Political Declaration and the international policy agenda on this theme.
- Better understand perspectives and state positions on the issue in the sub-region, by providing space to explore views on the Declaration, considerations for joining and implementing it, and impact of geopolitical dynamics. This insight will help tailor approaches and inform contributions towards international meetings where relevant.
- Foster collaboration between states, civil society organisations and international organisations working on this issue, in order to provide information and support that aides endorsement and national level implementation of the Declaration.
- Highlight successful initiatives and policies that have been implemented in the region and globally to address challenges posed by EWIPA, or to mitigate the effects of weapons and armed conflict under other related humanitarian and disarmament frameworks.

This note provides some background information for participants to facilitate their preparation for the roundtable in the following ways:

- Accessing research on the humanitarian impacts arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, see also www.explosiveweaponsmonitor.org
- Accessing information on the Political Declaration on EWIPA, available in different languages at www.ewipa.org. See also the [INEW Implementation Framework](#)¹ here.
- Supporting internal discussions on state positions on the EWIPA issue and the Political Declaration. See state position profiles at: <https://explosiveweaponsmonitor.org/state-positions>

Background

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) poses a significant threat to civilians across the world, particularly in conflict-affected regions. This includes loss of life and injuries, trauma, displacement, and suffering caused by damage to critical infrastructure including hospitals and schools, power supplies and water and sanitation systems, which can have disastrous and long-term knock-on effects for communities.

We are bearing witness to this today in Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar Sudan, and Ukraine, where harm to civilians is at alarmingly high levels. This massive loss of civilian life, alongside other devastating impacts, demonstrates the need to prioritise humanitarian concerns is more important than ever

¹ INEW Implementation Framework (2024), <https://www.inew.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Implementation-Framework.pdf>

In response to this pattern of harm from bombing and shelling of cities, towns and other populated areas, states, in partnership with civil society organisations, the UN and ICRC developed the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*.² In July 2019 the African Union Peace and Security Council expressed support for an inclusive consultation process to develop a political declaration that would address the impact of explosive weapons in populated areas.³ The Declaration was formally adopted by states in Dublin, Ireland in November 2022 and at present 87 countries have joined.⁴

In the sub-region of southern Africa three states have so far endorsed the Declaration: Comoros, Madagascar and Malawi.

Thirteen states have yet to join: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The Declaration is aimed at strengthening the protection of civilians in armed conflict and reducing harm to civilians. This aspiration is in line with the views expressed by the African Union Peace and Security Council that efforts must be made to enhance the protection of civilians and mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians and civilian objects, including promoting adherence to international humanitarian law, the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians⁵ and the Safe Schools Declaration. While not legally binding, the EWIPA Declaration is an important statement of intent and a tool for driving long term change in the norms of armed conflict. Signatories have committed to develop policies and practices needed to place humanitarian concerns at the centre of global standards of conflict. The Declaration acknowledges the immediate and long-term harms that explosive weapons cause to civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Crucially, it commits states to develop policies to avoid civilian harm by restricting and refraining from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The Declaration is an important symbol of international cooperation, and a commitment to taking concrete action during and after conflict. Beyond military policies and practices, these concrete actions include facilitating humanitarian access and assistance to communities affected by conflict, protection measures for civilians, remedial measures for those affected.

Southern Africa, while not experiencing widespread armed conflict, is not immune to the repercussions of armed violence, which can lead to devastating humanitarian impacts. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas undermines the African Agenda 2063 and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, contributing to state fragility and insecurity and undermining development efforts. The African Union, many states, UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and civil society have all already expressed deep concern at the grave harm civilians are suffering from bombing and shelling in towns, cities and other populated areas – harm that is likely to increase as the world urbanises and as conflict increasingly takes place in urban centres, unless new standards are implemented to address this. The African Union Peace and Security Council has also expressed through communiqués and press statements, its commitment to the protection of civilians in armed conflict adopted by the 841st PSC meeting in April 2019, the 833rd PSC meeting in March 2019, and the 775th PSC meeting in May 2018.

At the Maputo regional conference⁶ as well as through the African Union⁷, African states have expressed concern over the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and have committed to support and engage in a process to develop a political declaration that addresses the impact of

² *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas* (2022), <https://ewipa.org/the-political-declaration>

³ African Union Press Statement (2019), <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/press-statement-of-the-859th-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-17-july-2019-dedicated-to-an-open-session-on-the-theme-protection-of-civilians-from-the-use-of-explosive-weapons-in-populated-areas-ewipa>

⁴ See current list of endorsing states: <https://ewipa.org/endorsement>

⁵ The Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians (2015): <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/the-kigali-principles-on-the-protection-of-civilians/>

⁶ Maputo Communiqué, Maputo Regional Conference (2017), <https://www.inew.org/maputo-regional-conference-on-the-protection-of-civilians-from-the-use-of-explosive-weapons-in-populated-areas/>

⁷ African Union Press Statement (2019), <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/press-statement-of-the-859th-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-17-july-2019-dedicated-to-an-open-session-on-the-theme-protection-of-civilians-from-the-use-of-explosive-weapons-in-populated-areas-ewipa>

explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas. This commitment was renewed again recently by many southern African states through the Commonwealth Pledge that was adopted in April 2024 in South Africa as an outcome from the 6th Commonwealth Conference on IHL. The pledge encouraged Commonwealth states to endorse and implement the Declaration.

On this basis, African states should play a fundamental role in joining the declaration and being part of the international community of states that help to move forward its implementation, to set new standards that can help to better protect civilians in armed conflict.

By joining the Declaration, African States will reiterate their commitment, within the framework of the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by the 2020 and intensify the efforts to prevent and end armed conflicts in Africa.

This roundtable aims to foster dialogue among states, civil society, and international organizations in Southern Africa to encourage the endorsement and implementation of this Declaration and enhance regional cooperation in addressing the issue.

Agenda outline

1. Opening Remarks: Overview of the roundtable's purpose and objectives.
2. Framing presentations: Insights from experts on the humanitarian impact of EWIPA and the significance of the Political Declaration.
3. Panel Discussions:
 - Current challenges and humanitarian impacts of explosive weapons.
 - Changes to military policies and practices.
 - Data collection and tracking civilian harm.
 - Assistance to conflict affected regions.
 - Understanding state positions in relation to the Declaration.
 - Strategies for states to endorse, implement and promote the Political Declaration.
4. Conclusion and Next Steps: Summary of discussions, commitments made, and plans for follow-up actions.

Expected outcomes

- A clear understanding of the humanitarian impacts from explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Increased understandings of the significance and relevance of the Declaration, and policy and practical changes that it is seeking to generate.
- Increased commitment from states within the subregion to endorse the Political Declaration.
- Strengthened networks with state representatives from the SADC region.
- A collective but informal plan of action outlining steps in support of the Political Declaration ahead of the international conference to review universalisation and implementation of the Declaration in Costa Rica in July 2025.

* * *

Contact

For further information, please contact:

Mr Joseph Dube, Disarmament and Arms Control, Director, South Africa. joseph@polka.co.za

Ms Laura Boillot, Article 36, Director. laura@article36.org

Ms Megan Wiseman-Searle, Operations Coordinator. megan@article36.org