

A Global Call for Action: Ending Civilian Suffering from the Bombardment of Cities

Rami* was only seven when he was injured after a bomb hit the house he and his family were staying in inside the Gaza Strip. According to his mother, Rami went from a little boy who comforted those around him, to a child now afraid of loud noises, the dark and being left alone. His sisters were also tormented by what they saw and now go to bed every night believing it would be their last. None of the children have been back to school since 7 October 2023. For them, all sense of normality has been shattered.

It is a scene that is replayed in conflict zones around the world – in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Buildings pulverized by bombs and shells that jolt the ground. Families scrambling for their lives. Children haunted by what they have experienced. After bombardment, the agonizing search for loved ones that can be retrieved from beneath the rubble. Then, the slow and painful journey to rebuild lives, communities and neighbourhoods.

*Rami is not his real name. Interviews with his family were carried out by Save the Children.



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A long-lasting legacy of harm

The suffering and destruction caused by the use of explosive weapons in towns and cities is causing devastation and suffering on an unimaginable scale. Yet, despite the staggering toll on civilians, their homes, schools and hospitals, the use of explosive weapons continues. In fact, research shows that civilian death and injury, as well as attacks with explosive weapons on civilian infrastructure and essential services, have increased sharply in recent years.

Artillery, mortars, aerial bombs and rockets remain the weapons of choice in far too many conflicts – flattening neighbourhoods, shattering lives, and killing and injuring tens of thousands of civilians each year. Even after the fighting stops, unexploded remnants of war continue to claim lives and impede recovery.

These weapons not only kill and maim –they also destroy the essential infrastructure people depend upon, including schools, hospitals, power lines and water supplies. Repairing the damage can take decades, slowing down reconstruction efforts, preventing return and setting back development.

A call for urgent global action

States must refuse to accept the bombardment of cities as 'normal', or inevitable. Now is the time for global leadership – not silence, not complacency.

Since November 2022, 89 countries have endorsed the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*. Yet, too few have followed through to place limits on using explosive weapons in cities, towns and other populated areas. Some continue to use explosive weapons in ways that harm civilians. Others deliver explosive weapons to states that continue to use them on a massive scale in towns and cities, and others refrain from promoting the norms in the Declaration or condemning the harm when it occurs.

Endorsements are empty gestures without action. Every state that joins the Declaration must take real steps to strengthen the protection of civilians in armed conflict from the harmful effects of explosive weapons. The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) calls on states to sign and operationalise the Political Declaration – and to turn commitment into concrete action.

Weapons that destroy cities

Many explosive weapons are designed for open battlefields, not city streets. Their wide-area blast, inaccuracy and sheer explosive power make their use in populated areas deadly for the civilians that live there. These include:

Unguided air-dropped bombs ("dumb bombs")

These bombs are dropped without guidance systems and fall where gravity and air current take them, making them dangerously unpredictable. Not only can they miss their intended target by hundreds of metres, a large explosive load can also flatten entire buildings and project lethal fragments well beyond the site of impact. In crowded areas, they are almost guaranteed to take civilian

lives. Large, air-dropped bombs with advanced guiding systems provide better accuracy, but if their explosive force is large, the area effect of the explosion will inevitably lead to civilian harm in populated areas.

Multi-barrel rocket launchers

Firing dozens of rockets in rapid succession, these systems strike wide areas and not precise targets, saturating entire neighbourhoods with explosions. Their overlapping blast and fragmentation effects make them a deadly choice in populated areas.

Indirect-fire weapons (artillery, mortars, rockets)

These weapons are fired without direct sight to the target, relying on calculations instead of visual confirmation. When used in cities, they almost certainly hit civilians and civilian infrastructure.

A proven path forward

History has shown us that change is possible – even in times of deep insecurity. Some of the world's most significant humanitarian achievements were forged when conflict and mistrust between states were at their height and the worst of humanity was on display.

The bans on landmines and cluster munitions were born from devastation and outrage, yet they have saved countless lives and reshaped military norms. These successes prove that determined, collective action can overcome division and fear.

Today, as security tensions rise and international rules and norms are tested, states must reaffirm the humanitarian values that underpin our international system. Above all is the conviction that human suffering must be addressed wherever it occurs, no matter the geopolitical context.

It is our moral imperative to choose cooperation over complacency, and to recognise that protecting civilians is not optional but essential. This imperative must guide us in addressing the catastrophic harm caused by explosive weapons in populated civilian areas.

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STOP BOMBING CIVILIANS

