



## Protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

March 2019

**Bombing and shelling in towns and cities has a devastating impact on civilians. Data shows that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, approximately 91% of those reported killed and injured are likely to be civilians.<sup>1</sup> As urbanization continues, the current tendency for conflict to be fought in population centres – which puts civilians at significant immediate and longer-term risk – is unlikely to change in the near future.**

Over the last ten years, the harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has become a central humanitarian policy concern.<sup>2</sup> Relentless bombardment of towns and cities, and the resulting humanitarian crisis, has highlighted the need for action at all levels – from the operational to the international – to better protect civilian populations from the deadly and destructive effects of explosive weapons. While there is a pattern of harm associated with explosive weapons in populated areas in general, the risk to civilians is most severe when the weapons have wide area effects.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond those killed and injured, an even greater number of civilians are affected as a result of damage to essential infrastructure and services such as hospitals, schools, water and sanitation systems.<sup>4</sup> Hospital buildings are damaged, hampering the provision and quality of medical care to civilian populations.<sup>5</sup> Damage to sanitation systems creates additional problems around maintaining basic levels of hygiene, resulting in further illness and disease. As well as physical injury, countless civilians suffer from psychological distress and trauma.<sup>6</sup> Humanitarian access can be hampered, or stopped entirely, as humanitarian and relief organisations struggle to access areas because explosive weapons continue to be used, or where roads and bridges have been destroyed and areas are contaminated by explosive remnants.<sup>7</sup> The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is also one of the main causes of displacement as people are forced to flee, homes and other infrastructure are destroyed, and the presence of unexploded remnants of war prevents civilians from returning to a normal life.



Views of Beit Hanoun, one of the neighbourhoods most affected by the bombings in Northern Gaza.  
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## A policy response: developing stronger standards to protect civilians

The UN Secretary-General has called on states to engage constructively in efforts to develop a political declaration to address the harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.<sup>8</sup> Discussions towards developing an international political instrument to address this humanitarian problem are ongoing, and, alongside the UN Secretary-General and the ICRC, some 90 states have already spoken out on the issue.<sup>9</sup>

A political declaration with a commitment to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas at its heart would build on the basis provided by existing international law, and provide practical commitments to provide better protection to civilians from explosive weapons.

### INEW's International Parliamentary Appeal

Parliamentarians have a vital role to play in enhancing the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and supporting efforts both internationally and nationally to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.

This appeal is coordinated by the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW), an international NGO partnership calling for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. It draws on the repeated calls of the UN Secretary-General to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, and for states to start discussions on a political response to address this harm by urgently developing an international political declaration.

INEW is calling on all members of parliament and congress to endorse this appeal.

More information is at: [www.inew.org/parliamentary-appeal](http://www.inew.org/parliamentary-appeal)



#### “A rocket blew up not far from me”

Twelve-year-old Zakarya is the eighth child of a family who lives in a small village in northern Yemen. His life changed dramatically when he was injured in a rocket attack and doctors had to amputate his left leg.

The violent attack has left its mark on him: “I was outside playing with my friends when a rocket fell into the street and blew up not far from me. The explosion went right through me. I was riddled with shrapnel. I was alone and injured, so I started to scream and cry. You don't know what it's like until you've been through it.”

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#### END NOTES

- 1 Action on Armed Violence, ‘Patterns of Harm: Five years of explosive violence 2011 – 2015’ (June 2016)
- 2 See ICRC, ‘World at a turning point: Heads of UN and Red Cross issue joint warning’ (October 2015), <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/conflict-disaster-crisis-UN-red-cross-issue-warning>
- 3 Wide area effects may result where an individual weapon has a large blast or fragmentation radius (e.g. heavy aircraft bombs), where multiple explosive munitions are launched at an area (e.g. multi-barrel rocket systems), where a weapon is not delivered accurately to the target (e.g. indirect fire mortars), or a combination of these factors.
- 4 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), ‘Explosive weapons in populated areas’, see: <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/explosive-weapons-populated-areas>
- 5 See: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ‘Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians’ (June 2015), <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/explosive-weapons-populated-areas-consequences-civilians>, and Harvard Law School and PAX, ‘Operating under fire: The effects of explosive weapons on healthcare in the East of Ukraine’ (May 2017).
- 6 See: Article 36, ‘The impact of explosive weapons on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing’ (September 2013); Humanity and Inclusion, ‘Qasef : Escaping the bombing’ (September 2016).
- 7 Insecurity Insight, ‘Aid in Danger: The impact of explosive weapons on the delivery of humanitarian aid’, <http://www.insecurityinsight.org/aidindanger/explosives/>
- 8 UN Security Council, ‘Report of the UN Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2018/462) (May 2018)
- 9 INEW, ‘A Political Response’, <http://www.inew.org/political-response/>