FACT SHEET

EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

Armed conflicts are increasingly fought in population centres, and this urbanization of armed conflict has resulted in devastating and well-documented impacts on civilians. This is often due to the use of weapons systems that are designed for traditional open battlefields.

A leading concern is the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area impacts. These include weapon systems, munitions and tactics used by States and non-State actors, which can be expected to result in a high proportion of incidental civilian harm if employed in areas where there is a concentration of civilians.

Problematic types of weapons include indirect fire weapons, such as artillery, rockets and mortars, weapons that fire in salvos, such as multi-launch rocket systems, large air-dropped bombs and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles. Such systems variously involve munitions with a large destructive radius, weapons with inaccurate delivery systems or weapon systems that deliver multiple munitions over a wide area.

Many of these weapons are inherently indiscriminate when used in populated areas and therefore result in increased civilian casualties and devastating humanitarian impacts. According to data collected by non-governmental organizations, in recent years more than 90% of those killed and injured in such situations are civilians. Many more are affected when social, commercial, infrastructural, cultural, educational, religious, and health-care facilities are shattered. Parties to armed conflict must always give due weight to the reasonably foreseeable reverberating effects of using bombs, missiles, mortars, rockets, artillery and other explosive weaponry – certainly also in populated areas. The collection of data on civilian casualties is another important practical step that parties to conflict, the United Nations, humanitarian entities and other interested actors should take to effectively address concerns raised by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Where is this being addressed?

Since 2009, the Secretary-General, in his reports to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict,1 has consistently highlighted the indiscriminate and severe humanitarian impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The Secretary-General has called for parties to conflict to avoid locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas; to ratify or accede to core international instruments aimed at protecting civilians, including the Arms Trade Treaty and similar regional instruments; and to engage constructively in efforts to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas and to develop a political declaration that would, inter alia, commit States to develop operational policies based on a presumption against such use. In his Agenda for Disarmament Securing Our Common Future, the

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Secretary-General placed special emphasis on addressing the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and committed to support States in developing a political declaration as well as limitations, common standards and operational policies in conformity with international humanitarian law.

**Humanitarian actors**, including in civil society, have led efforts to increase attention to the issue since 2010. In 2013, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement’s Council of Delegates adopted resolution CD/13/R7, which called upon States to “strengthen the protection of civilians from the indiscriminate use and effects of explosive weapons.” In October 2017, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued a compilation of military policy and practice, on the basis of information received from Member States and open sources pertaining to good practice and policy that either expressly governs, or otherwise places limits on, the use by armed forces of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

Following from a series of expert meetings convened by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, since 2015 Austria has led efforts to develop an international **political declaration** on the prevention of civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, with the support of non-governmental organizations led by the International Network on Explosive Weapons. In December 2019 Austria convened the “Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare” with participation of more than 133 delegations from States, United Nations entities, international organizations and civil society. Following the Conference, Ireland initiated a process to elaborate a declaration beginning with informal consultations in Geneva.

In 2016, at the Fifth Review Conference of the **Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons**, the High Contracting Parties expressed their determination to “address, in the context and objectives of the Convention and its annexed Protocols, the challenges presented by the use of conventional weapons during armed conflict and their impact on civilians, particularly in areas where there are concentrations of civilians.” In 2017 and 2018, Germany and the International Committee of the Red Cross convened a series of consultations in Geneva on the matter as a contribution to discussions in the context of the Convention.

For a second consecutive year, Ireland delivered a joint statement to the 2019 session of the **General Assembly First Committee**, which was endorsed by more than 70 delegations. The statement called for strengthened compliance with international humanitarian law, notably through the elaboration of a political declaration as well as the application and development of operational policies more responsive to the challenges of protecting civilians and civilian objects during urban conflict. The statement also recognized the value of sharing good policies and practice.

For more information: [https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/explosive-weapons/](https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/explosive-weapons/)

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**Data collection and the Sustainable Development Goals**

Target 16.1 of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** includes a commitment to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere. Indicator 16.1.2 includes collection of data on conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population, disaggregated by age group, sex, and cause. The collection of disaggregated data on the category of arms used in conflict-related deaths can contribute to evidence-based dialogue to support the development of practice, policies and norms at the global, regional and national levels aimed at protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.