



Protection of Civilians, June 2012 - Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

The UN Secretary-General's 2012 Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict recognises the use of explosive weapons in populated areas as a major cause of civilian harm and makes four concrete recommendations to reduce this harm.¹ The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW)² calls on states to use the opportunity provided by the UN Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians on 26 June 2012 to:

- Acknowledge the severe impact on civilians caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas;
- Support the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General by:
 - Calling for an end to the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas;
 - Committing to focused discussions to consider the issue in depth;
 - Supporting casualty-recording, collection of data on the wider humanitarian problem, and review of policies regarding use of explosive weapons.

An urgent humanitarian issue

According to INEW member Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), in 2011 at least 21,499 civilians were reported killed or injured by explosive weapons and that 87% of these casualties occurred in populated areas. The problem of explosive weapons in populated areas was clearly illustrated in countries such as Libya, Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire (where the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator drew attention to this specific issue) as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2012, the bombardment of Homs and other urban areas in Syria has led to the UN Security Council calling for the Syrian government to "end the use of heavy weapons in population centres."³ Here, a particular cause for concern has been heavy explosive weapons that can have wide area effects, such as multiple launch rockets, high explosive artillery and mortars, as well as car bombs and other IEDs.

An opportunity for new standards

Recognition of the distinct problems associated with use of explosive weapons has grown stronger in recent years:

- The 2010 UN Secretary-General's Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict expressed increasing concern at this issue and urged Member States to support data collection on the humanitarian problem, and to make available information on national policies.
- The April 2011 UN Secretary-General's Report on Children in Armed Conflict noted with respect to Somalia that, "of particular concern was the recent increase in the number of civilians, among them many children, being killed and injured owing to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas."
- In 2011, the International Committee of the Red Cross stated that, "due to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects and despite the absence of an express legal prohibition for specific types of weapons, the ICRC considers that explosive weapons with a wide impact area should be avoided in densely populated areas."⁴
- In 2012, the UN Secretary-General makes four concrete recommendations to reduce harm, including that states "refrain from using explosive weapons with wide-area impact in densely populated areas."

Building on this clear direction, the June 2012 Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict presents an opportunity for states to express their support for concrete steps that will curb the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and provide stronger civilian protection in the future.

¹ Report of the UN Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, 22 May 2012, S/2012/376

² INEW is a network of NGOs established in 2011 by Action on Armed Violence, Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, IKV Pax Christi, Medact, Norwegian People's Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children UK.

³ Statement by the President of the Security Council, 21 March 2012, S/PRST/2012/6.

⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Humanitarian Law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts, October 2011, 31IC/11/5.1.2