INEW

Addressing the impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

Impact of explosive weapons

Explosive weapons use blast and fragmentation to kill and injure people in the area where they detonate, as well as to damage objects, buildings and infrastructure.

When used in populated areas these weapons tend to cause high levels of harm to individuals and communities. Destruction of infrastructure vital to the civilian population, including water and sanitation, housing, schools and hospitals, results in a pattern of wider, long-term suffering. Victims and survivors of explosive weapons can face long-term challenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic exclusion.

INEW member Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) has recorded, through English-language wire reports, 37,809 people killed and injured from explosive weapons in 2013.[1] More than 31,000 (82%) were civilians. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 93%of victims were civilians.[2] This is but a fraction of the civilian harm caused by explosive weapons.

In 2013, 58 countries were affected by the use of explosive weapons. The most severely affected countries were Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.

Types of explosive weapons

Explosive weapons include weapons such as grenades, mortar rounds, artillery shells, rockets and aircraft bombs as well as improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Certain types of military explosive weapons (explosive ordnance) pose a particularly high risk of harm to civilians. Where the weapons affect a wide area it is difficult to control the harm that they will cause to civilians if used in towns or cities. Some large aircraft bombs, such as the OFAB 250-270 have a casualty-producing radius of 155m around the point of detonation. GRAD rockets can scatter multiple warheads over an area of 100,000m². Inaccuracy can mean that the user does not know exactly where an individual warhead will land. Using these types of weapons in areas where civilians are concentrated puts them at grave risk. Even if the attack is aimed at a

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specific military target, the effects are likely to cause excessive harm to people living in the surrounding area.

IEDs are essentially homemade bombs, generally manufactured and used by non-state actors. Such devices may use military explosives, conventional ammunition, or homemade explosives for their main charge. IEDs containing large quantities of explosives can affect a wide area with blast and fragments. IEDs are often used in attacks that deliberately target the civilian population. Regardless of political perspectives on these attacks they constitute a humanitarian problem.

Concern over the impact of explosive weapons

Over the past few years the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has attracted increasing concern within the international community and a growing number of actors are calling for greater restraint in the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The 2012 and 2013 UN Secretary-General's Reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict urged parties "to refrain from the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with a wide-area effect" and called on states to address this issue.[3] 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 the UN Security Council's Open Debates on the Protection of Civilians and other fora, around 40 countries and territories have expressed concern about the impact of explosive weapons.[5]

Adopting greater restraint in the use of explosive weapons

In certain contexts military forces have already adopted policies of greater restraint on the use of particular types of explosive weapons in an effort to reduce civilian harm. For example, in Afghanistan the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) issued tactical directives to its commanders limiting the use of airdropped explosive weapons in populated areas. Similarly, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) revised its indirect fire policy, limiting the use of mortars and other indirect fire explosive weapons in populated areas. Such approaches illustrate that where civilian protection is prioritised stronger standards can be adopted that more effectively protect civilians from harm.

Setting stronger standards

The International Network on Explosive Weapons calls for immediate action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. States and other actors should:

1. Acknowledge that use of explosive weapons in populated areas tends to cause severe harm to individuals and communities and furthers suffering by damaging vital infrastructure;
2. Strive to avoid such harm and suffering in any situation, review

and strengthen national policies and practices on use of explosive weapons and gather and make available relevant data;
3. Work for full realisation of the rights of victims and survivors;
4. Develop stronger international standards, including certain prohibitions and restrictions on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

A particular focus for the development of stronger standards should be on stopping the use in populated areas of explosive weapons that have wide area effects.

Where can states engage?

States need to take action at a national level to review their policies and practices, but there are a number of forums where they can speak out on this issue at the international level, including:

× Security Council open debates on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
× UN debates on Children in Armed Conflict
× The High Level Segment and First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly

In addition to these general discussions there have been informal expert meetings hosted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Chatham House. Further such discussions are expected in 2014 and 2015.

ENDNOTES

1 For information on how AOAV records data on casualties of explosive violence go to; Action on Armed Violence, "An Explosive Situation: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2012", April 2013, http://aoav.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/an-explosive-situation-explosive-violence-in-2012.pdf

2 Action on Armed Violence, "An Explosive Situation: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2012", April 2013, http://aoav.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/an-explosive-situation-explosive-violence-in-2012.pdf

3 United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict," UN Security Council, S/2013/689, 22 November 2013, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/689

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

5 Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Botswana, Canada, Chile, Finland, Gabon, Germany, Guatemala, Holy See, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Montenegro, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United States, as well as the Arab Group, the EU, the Nordic Countries, and the Human Security Network. See: www.inew.org/acknowledgements

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