



DRAFT INEW statement

Geneva consultation

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Thank you Ambassador, dear colleagues,

We are pleased to be here today on this milestone occasion and to see so many other states and organisations here too. This is testament to your leadership of this process, for which we thank the government of Ireland and express our sincere appreciation to you Ambassador Gaffey and to Jamie Walsh, and the team in Geneva and your colleagues in Dublin, who have driven this work forward so productively and in such a constructive and inclusive spirit. Your leadership has been fundamental to this initiative and in enabling us to reach this critical stage in the process where we now have a Political Declaration that provides a solid basis for action to strengthen the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

This is an issue that INEW, and other partners in the UN, the ICRC and states, have been concerned about and engaged in for well over a decade now. INEW's primary concern and motivation from the outset has been the pressing need to address and prevent the human suffering and widespread humanitarian impacts of bombing and shelling in towns and cities and other populated areas.

When we began our work on this theme, we wanted to challenge the notion that widespread civilian harm and damage and destruction of civilians objects from the use of explosive weapons is an inevitable and acceptable impact of conflict. We wanted to reframe attitudes, to focus on limiting the use of heavy explosive weapons to reduce civilian harm, to set new policy standards, and build a stronger sense of accountability and responsibility for the protection of civilians.

With these aims in mind, the adoption of this Political Declaration is a major step forward and a significant contribution to the protection of civilians. Despite the fact that bombing and shelling in cities, towns and other populated areas has long been established as the leading cause of harm to civilians in armed conflict, the political declaration is the first formal recognition of this grave humanitarian problem, and of the widespread pattern of civilian suffering and devastation it encompasses.

Recognition of this pattern of harm is critically important because it is by identifying and recognising the consequences that arise from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas that allows us to identify and take the first steps towards tackling them.

There is of course a lot more that needs to be done to ensure the broad adoption and implementation of new policy standards to strengthen the protection of civilians in practice. But we see this Declaration as an important platform for future work on this issue, that can bring together states, organisations, militaries and humanitarian practitioners to work together to achieve these ends.

We had hoped the text would contain an explicit commitment to avoid the use of explosive weapons when they have wide area effects in populated areas. However, this text still provides a platform for us to continue to encourage and work with states towards such a change in practice through implementation of the declaration at the national level.

The text adopted commits states to establish policies that place limitations on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in order to avoid civilian harm and damage to civilian objects. The next phase of implementation at the national level is therefore critically important. Operationalising this commitment will require the adoption of new national standards that lead to meaningful changes in practice. As such, how this commitment is interpreted and implemented is going to be fundamental to preventing civilian harm.

The description in the preamble of key risk factors produced by certain types of weapon systems – namely the explosive power of a munition, its accuracy and the number of munitions that are projected across an area – are important factors for militaries to consider when deciding on the use – or not – of certain types of explosive weapons in populated areas and for avoiding harm to civilians. This explicit recognition of key risk factors provides useful guidance for implementation of the declaration. The development of new national policies and practices, as required by the declaration, must address these risk factors by imposing a clear requirement to refrain from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas when they have wide area effects, that is when the effects may be expected to extend beyond or occur outside of the military objective.

The recognition of the severe and widespread impacts of the use of explosive weapons on individuals, on towns and cities, and on society, is another important element of this declaration. Building greater understanding of the impacts on civilian infrastructure from military operations, and specifically from use of explosive weapons use in populated areas, and the knock-on effects this has on the provision of services that are essential to the survival and well-being of the civilian population is an important area of work for the future. Building knowledge and understandings in this area will help militaries anticipate and avoid these long-term reverberating or indirect effects.

We also welcome the particular focus on other humanitarian considerations in this declaration to prevent and to address civilian harm and to assist victims, including their families and affected communities. This includes the commitment to provide, facilitate and assist victims, and to facilitate rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, as well as to collect and share data to better understand humanitarian impacts. We welcome the recognition of gendered harms caused by explosive weapon use and the call for further research in this area. We encourage states to also consider differential impacts based on disability, race, and to take these impacts into account during the provision of assistance.

We see this Political Declaration as a starting point for a process of work that will now begin, not an end point. We recognise that changing military practice to further curb bombing and shelling in towns and cities is going to be a long-term undertaking.

The key thing now is that states join the political declaration, and we encourage all states to do so at the adoption conference later this year and to implement the declaration in good faith and in ways that will prevent harm to civilians and make a tangible difference on the ground.

The states that join this declaration will be committing to work together to set new policy standards for the protection of civilians. This will require committed work over time, and in partnership with each other, and we look forward to working with those that choose to be part of this community.

INEW is ready to play a key role in continuing collaboration between states and international and civil society organisations, and looks forward to the work ahead.