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# Urgent need to better protect children from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

- ✘ The use of explosive weapons in populated areas directly contributes to grave violations against children, including killing and maiming, attacks on schools and denial of humanitarian access.
- ✘ Children have unique vulnerabilities to the direct and reverberating effects of explosive weapons. For instance, they are more susceptible to burns and are more likely to die from blast injuries than adults.<sup>1</sup>
- ✘ At least 18,760 children were killed and injured by explosive weapons between 2013-2022. This is 7% of the total 251,833 civilian casualties reported globally. 89% (16,640) of children killed and injured by explosive weapons experienced harm in populated areas.<sup>2</sup>
- ✘ INEW calls on all states to endorse and implement the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*. States can join by contacting the government of the Republic of Ireland via its missions in Geneva or New York or by emailing: [ewipa@dfa.ie](mailto:ewipa@dfa.ie)
- ✘ States should fully implement the declaration's commitments, including taking concrete steps at the national level and designating government focal points for this work, including in the areas of military policy and practice, victim assistance, and data collection.

## CHILDREN AND EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

Civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has emerged as a top humanitarian priority following the increased incidence of armed conflict in urban and other populated areas which invariably results in high levels of civilian casualties. Data consistently shows that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, approximately 90% of those reported killed and injured are civilians.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas damages and destroys schools, hospitals, and essential infrastructure such as water and sanitation systems that are critical

for the survival, well-being, health and development of children. The use of explosive weapons is also a key driver of displacement, forcing children and families from their homes and rendering them vulnerable to further violence and other forms of exploitation and abuse.

## KILLING AND MAIMING OF CHILDREN

The killing and maiming of children is the most immediate and visceral form of harm caused by explosive weapons. Child casualties are poorly reported by media sources, and monitoring by national and international organisations often do not distinguish between adult and child casualties. Even so, at least 18,760 children were killed and injured by explosive weapons during 2013-2022. In the 6,075 incidents where children were reported among the civilian casualties, they accounted for 26% of the civilians killed and injured. The actual number is likely to be far higher.<sup>4</sup>

Medical authorities have described the ability of explosions to inflict "multi-system life-threatening injuries on many persons simultaneously".<sup>5</sup> The risk to children, whose smaller, younger bodies are more vulnerable and for whom treatment can prove more difficult, is especially acute. As their bones are more pliable, and their bodies still growing, physical injuries can be particularly difficult to treat and rehabilitate. Children are not small adults, but small human beings, with different anatomy and physiology to adults. This means, for example, that children can die from injuries adults would normally survive, and their treatment and recovery is significantly different. However, dedicated care such as paediatric blast specialists is not always available. Exposure to explosive weapons can also be particularly traumatic to children at a critical time in their psychological development, with long-term effects on their mental health as well as the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of their development. Children are at risk both during and after fighting. In 2020, there were at least 1872 child casualties from explosive remnants of war and land mines.<sup>6</sup>

## ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Conflict and violence deprive millions of children of an education. Schools are regularly damaged or destroyed in attacks involving explosive weapons. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) has documented a systematic pattern of attacks on education in 28 countries over the course of 2020-21. Further-

more, over 5000 attacks on education and cases of military use of schools and universities were recorded during that same period.<sup>7</sup>

## HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND VICTIM ASSISTANCE

States and parties to conflict have a duty to ensure the needs of children and other civilians affected by conflict are met, including by allowing and facilitating rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian organisations to populations in need, as well as by providing longer-term assistance to victims.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas not only causes significant civilian casualties but also damages and destroys infrastructure such as roads and bridges, thereby heightening the need for humanitarian aid while at the same time making its delivery more difficult. Access to vital services for people injured, families of people killed or injured, and affected communities is often compromised. Furthermore, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas can impede the ability of humanitarian organisations to reach populations in need due to insecurity and the risks posed by bombardment.<sup>8</sup> Bombing and shelling of towns, cities and other populated areas damages and destroys health-care facilities, hampering the provision and quality of medical care to children in need, whilst damage to water, sanitation, transport and energy infrastructure compounds such problems.<sup>9</sup>

Against this backdrop, the diversity of needs of conflict-affected populations requires both immediate and longer-term assistance for children and other civilians to recover from armed conflict and rebuild their lives, including by returning to school, receiving psychological, psychosocial and other support.

## STRONGER STANDARDS FOR PROTECTION FROM EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

The EWIPA Declaration endorsed by 83 states in Dublin November 2022 is a landmark achievement. If it is implemented effectively and fully by all states, it has the potential to significantly strengthen the protection of civilians, including children, from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The declaration sets an agenda for positive change and the progressive realisation of strengthened protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

These commitments should now be translated into action that delivers meaningful change.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Save the Children 2019 report, Blast Injuries: <https://shorturl.at/doAPX>
- 2 Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), 2023: [The Impact of Explosive Violence on Children: A Global Crisis - AOV](https://shorturl.at/bdGPU)
- 3 Action on Armed Violence (AOAV): A Decade of Harm, 2021: <https://shorturl.at/bdGPU>
- 4 Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), 2023: [The Impact of Explosive Violence on Children: A Global Crisis - AOV](https://shorturl.at/bdGPU)
- 5 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Explosions and Blast Injuries: A primer for clinicians.
- 6 Land Mine Monitor, The Impacts of Mines/ERW on children, 2022: <https://shorturl.at/emNU3>
- 7 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Education under attack, 2022: <https://shorturl.at/ikE01>
- 8 See Insecurity Insight, 'Aid in Danger': <https://insecurityinsight.org/projects/aid-in-danger>
- 9 See, for example, ICRC: 'Explosive weapons in populated areas: The consequences for civilians,' June 2015 <https://shorturl.at/fmrMO> and Harvard Law School and PAX, Operating under fire: The effects of explosive weapons on healthcare in the East of Ukraine', May 2017: <https://shorturl.at/rATU3>