

From Afghanistan to Iraq, Syria to Ukraine, Yemen and elsewhere, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a major cause of civilian deaths, injuries and displacement. In 2016, when explosive weapons were used in populated areas, **92% of people killed or injured were civilians.**

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas also has a **severe and long-term humanitarian impact**: it destroys housing and vital infrastructure such as hospitals, clinics, and water and electricity supply systems. In addition, explosive weapons can fail to detonate as intended and remain as “explosive remnants of war”, which can kill and injure civilians years after hostilities have ended.

Explosive weapons create a blast-and-fragmentation zone that can kill, injure or damage anyone or anything within that zone. The risks of death, injury and destruction increase when the effects of the weapon extend across a wide area. This makes their use in populated areas, such as towns, cities, markets and refugee camps, devastating for civilians. In other words, these weapons are likely to have indiscriminate effects when used in populated areas. Since the blast-and-fragmentation zone is based on the technical specification of the explosive weapon in question, its likely impact on civilians is often foreseeable. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas therefore raises serious moral and, in many cases, legal questions.

Explosive weapons and international humanitarian law

While the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is not prohibited under international humanitarian law (IHL), it must comply with the rules of distinction, proportionality and precautions. Parties to armed conflict must:

- distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives;
- not direct attacks against civilians or civilian objects, and they must not launch attacks that are indiscriminate; and
- take constant care in the conduct of military operations to spare civilians and civilian objects, and they must take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize incidental civilian death and injury, and damage to civilian objects.

Full compliance with IHL by all parties to armed conflict is essential to protect civilians from the effects of explosive weapons. Yet, even where the parties claim to be complying with IHL in the conduct of hostilities, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas commonly causes a widespread and predictable pattern of harm.

It is increasingly recognized that the development of operational policy and procedures to avoid or, at a minimum, limit the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects would significantly contribute to reducing the humanitarian impact of such use and support the application of IHL.



The city of Sa'ada in the Sa'ada Governorate of Yemen was heavily hit by airstrikes in the first four months of the escalation of conflict in Yemen. Credit: OCHA/Philippe Kropf.

The human cost

The vast majority of people affected by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas are civilians. In 2016, when explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 92% of people killed or injured were civilians.¹ 32,088 civilians were reported killed or injured by explosive weapons in 2016, a 48% increase on 2011. Beyond the death and injury of civilians, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas:

- is a major cause of displacement as people flee their homes due to the fear of, or as a result of, explosive weapon attacks;
- results in the partial or complete destruction of housing and essential infrastructure, such as water and electricity supply systems, which can also cause people to leave their homes;
- is a leading cause of damage to healthcare facilities,² making it difficult or impossible for those injured by explosive weapons and other conflict-affected people to access emergency and specialist medical treatment, rehabilitation and psychosocial support services;
- damages and destroys schools, interrupting or halting access to education;
- impacts livelihoods as factories, workshops and commercial property are damaged or destroyed;
- increases post-conflict reconstruction requirements and costs; and
- results in explosive remnants of war that pose a long-term threat to civilians until they are removed and can delay the return of refugees and displaced persons.

Types of explosive weapons

Many types of explosive weapons exist and are in use by national military forces and armed groups. They include aircraft bombs, artillery shells, missile and rocket warheads, mortar bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Some are launched from the air, others from the ground.

Different technical features dictate their precision and explosive effect, but these weapons generally create a blast and fragmentation zone that makes their use highly problematic in populated areas. Particular concern exists over the elevated risk to civilians posed by explosive weapons with wide-area effects. This is because of their blast radius, their inaccuracy, the use of multiple warheads across an area, or a combination thereof.

Air-launched explosive weapons

- In 2016, air-launched explosive weapons reportedly killed or injured 9,934 civilians, accounting for 31% of all recorded civilian deaths and injuries from explosive weapons.

- 5 in every 10 incidents involving air-launched explosive weapons occurred in populated areas.

- When air-launched explosive weapons were used in attacks on populated areas, civilians accounted for 95% per cent of recorded deaths and injuries, compared to 13% in other areas.

Ground-launched explosive weapons

- Ground-launched explosive weapons were responsible for 6,997 deaths and injuries in 2016, accounting for 22% of all recorded civilian deaths and injuries from explosive weapons.

- 6 in every 10 incidents involving ground launched explosive weapons occurred in populated areas.

- When ground launched explosive weapons were used in populated areas, civilians accounted for 96% of recorded deaths and injuries, compared to 46% in other areas.

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

- IEDs caused 14,301 civilian deaths and injuries in 2016, accounting for 46% of all recorded civilian deaths and injuries. This was a 12% reduction compared to 2015.

- 5 in every 10 incidents involving IEDs occurred in populated areas.

- When IEDs were used in populated areas, civilians accounted for 88% of recorded deaths and injuries, compared to 29% in other areas.³

Taking action

The United Nations Secretary-General has called on parties to armed conflicts—national military forces and non-State armed groups—to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas. There has been important progress on this.

Some military forces, such as the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and the African Union Mission in Somalia, have instituted policy and practice that limits the use of certain explosive weapons in certain contexts, and seeks to minimize the impact of military operations on civilians. Such policy and practice needs to be applied across other military forces.

To help with this, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has produced a compilation of military policy and practice on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This will be shared with States, national armed forces and other relevant actors to help promote and contribute to a change in practice.

Meanwhile, States, the United Nations and civil society are working together to promote the development and adoption of a political declaration by States that recognizes the humanitarian impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and embodies important commitments to reduce that impact in the future. These could include the development of operational policies and procedures that avoid or limit the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide-area effects, to help reduce the humanitarian impact of such use and support the effective application of international humanitarian law.

For more information, please contact:

Policy Development and Studies Branch
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
ochapolicy@un.org



17 February, 2016 - Syria. The Old City of Homs has been destroyed by years of conflict

¹ Action on Armed Violence, *Explosive Truths – Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2016 (2017)*

² ICRC, *Health Care in Danger: A Sixteen Country Study (2011)*.

³ Figures, Action on Armed Violence, note 1 above.