



PROTECTING CIVILIANS FROM THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES FROM THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREA: WHY THE POLITICAL DECLARATION MATTERS

Executive Summary

We call on states to sign – and begin implementing – The [Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas](#).

When towns and cities are bombed, it is always civilians who suffer most. Already signed by 83 states, the Declaration was adopted in Dublin, Ireland in 2022. Developed in partnership with civil society groups, the ICRC, states, UN agencies and survivors of armed conflict, it is the first formal agreement that there is an urgent, humanitarian need to protect civilians from the immediate and long-term effects of explosive weapons in populated areas. The United Nations Secretary-General, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and civil society organisations have been calling for action to address this harm to civilians for more than a decade

While many of these weapons are not new, the last century has seen warfare move away from battlefields and into cities, refugee camps and villages. While the carpet-bombing of World War II is no longer the norm, the use of explosive weapons in urban warfare still brings an unacceptable pattern of civilian suffering. This shift leads to disastrous, widespread harm to civilians and the infrastructure they depend on – electricity, homes, hospitals, roads, sanitation, schools, shops and water supplies. It is one of the greatest threats of harm to civilians in armed conflict.

This issue has been strongly contested, with some states refusing to acknowledge that explosive weapons present distinct concerns – however, for many, the pattern of humanitarian harm cannot be ignored.

It is therefore vital that states put the protection of civilians at the centre of their military policy and practice. This requires a commitment to refraining from and restricting the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, as this poses specific challenges for civilians. The Declaration will benefit from a broad and diverse group of states joining it, including users of explosive weapons, countries that have been affected by conflict, and cross regional support. While not legally binding, signing the Declaration is an agreement to change the norms governing conflict.

How does the Declaration help protect civilians?

Political declarations change practice through changing policy. While change on the ground can take a long time, signing a political declaration is an important statement of intent.

"Political declarations are documents in which states commit to achieving political goals through individual and coordinated actions. Although not legally binding, these commitments carry significant weight." - [Human Rights Watch, 2020](#)

This Declaration sets out a long-term, humanitarian agenda for protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons. Critically, it requires that states impose limits on the use of explosive weapons in towns, cities, and other populated areas in order to avoid civilian harm.

Beyond this, the Declaration calls for signatories to collect and share data (where feasible) about both the direct and long-term effects of explosive weapons in populated areas.

It is, in itself, an example of multilateral, international cooperation around a highly complex and contentious topic. We will continue to interpret and implement the declaration in ways that produce the strongest protection for civilians. Declarations that have been developed in this way, such as the Safe Schools Declaration, have a history of creating lasting change.

The Declaration is a starting point—not an endpoint. We know that changing military practice, to move away from using explosive weapons in populated areas, will be a long-term undertaking. States that sign the Declaration recognise that this is a major humanitarian problem and are committing to act accordingly.

Why does the Declaration matter?

Civilians pay the price when explosive weapons are used in populated areas. They account for more than 90% of casualties, a figure which fails to include the psychological distress and trauma from living under bombing — especially for children.

There was an 83% increase in this use of weapons between 2021 and 2022. This increase stems both from new wars – like Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and from the escalation of ongoing conflicts, including in Ethiopia, Gaza and Myanmar.

The Declaration emphasises that protecting civilians from harm also requires protecting the infrastructure they depend on. Such infrastructure is often deeply interconnected. Damaging one element swiftly affects another, triggering complex, interwoven patterns of harm.

These harms persist long after ceasefires are called:

- Attacking water supplies leads to disease, flooding, and water Last month in Aden, Yemen, 200,000 people were left without water after intense fighting.
- Bombing hospitals kills and wounds patients and staff on impact, and influences healthcare systems for years – spreading fear in affected communities and exacerbating both chronic and communicable illnesses.
- Rebuilding can take years. As a result, generations of children in the area miss out on vital years of education after schools are attacked, people remain displaced when their homes are destroyed.

Using heavy explosive weapons that impact a wide area exacerbates the harm to civilians. Many of these weapons systems are outdated and inaccurate, have a large blast or fragmentation radius, and deliver multiple explosives at the same time. Weapons with wide area effects therefore present a significant and heightened humanitarian concern and are therefore not appropriate for use in populated areas.

Wide area effects are not confined to specific weapons systems. Instead, these effects are closely related to where weapons are used. Tall buildings and narrow streets exacerbate blast pressure. Building materials, like glass, cement and metals, add to the fragmentation effects of weapons – and hence the risks to civilians.

What have signatory states committed to?

The Declaration provides an agenda for further action. States have committed to reducing harm to civilians and the infrastructure they depend on, by reviewing and reforming their national policies and practices. This includes:

- Changing military policy and practices to avoid civilian harm, by placing restrictions on how states use explosive weapons in populated areas
- Understanding and improving they conduct military operations, with the aim of reducing the impact on civilians and civilian infrastructure
- Providing assistance to victims and affected communities, acknowledging that all victims deserve equal treatment, and that effects can be both direct and long-term
- Collecting and sharing data, where feasible, about the impact on civilians and infrastructure

Signatories have also committed to continue working in partnership with civil society groups, UN agencies, the ICRC, states, and survivors of armed conflict.