

# **Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas**

## **First Follow-up Conference**

*Oslo, Norway, 23 April 2024*

*Statement delivered by Ms. Mélanie Régimbal, Chief of Service, Office for Disarmament Affairs Geneva Branch, on behalf of 10 United Nations entities.*

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the following United Nations entities: OCHA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNHCR, UNEP, UNICEF, UNIDIR, UNMAS, UNOPS, and UNODA.

At the outset, let me express our sincere appreciation to Norway for having taken on this crucial process and for your stewardship in organizing the Declaration's first follow up conference.

In November 2022 the international community came together for the adoption of the EWIPA Declaration, a milestone achievement that sets new international norms for protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in situations of armed conflict.

The Declaration was endorsed by 83 States, and more followed since. I wish to congratulate the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Montenegro for having joined this important process, and for reaffirming your commitment to strengthening the protection of civilians amidst the increasing urbanization of armed conflict.

As conflicts around the world continues to be waged in populated areas, now, more than ever, a collective and coherent response is needed.

We see this in Gaza, where thousands of tonnes of munitions have been dropped, including repeated use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects; in Ukraine, where one third of the country is now estimated to be affected by explosive ordnance; and in many other countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Syria, all of which have been seriously affected by this practice and have pushed this issue further into the limelight.

Over the past decade, the use of explosive weapons in cities, towns, villages and other populated areas has shown a consistent pattern of harm with a devastating average of a 90% civilian casualty rate.

Today, over 50 million people suffering the horrific consequences of urban warfare. A number that is not only ungraspable, but one with an upward trajectory.

In today's conflicts the use of explosive weapons in populated areas remains one of the most significant threats to civilian life, resulting in devastating casualties, psychological trauma, displacement, and long-term suffering, affecting women, men, and children differently.

And in addition to devastating numbers of civilian deaths and injuries, the destruction of infrastructure critical to the survival and well-being of civilians, such as schools and hospitals, electrical grids and water sanitation systems, and the pollution and waste it creates, all of which exacerbate the humanitarian situation and reverberates long after the cessation of hostilities.

It makes the achievement of sustainable development and the respect and protection of human rights an impossibility.

Excellencies, colleagues,

We cannot always stop conflicts from happening.

But we can take steps to protect the people caught in the midst of these crises. Moreover, we have a moral and legal obligation to do so.

This Declaration is not merely a statement of principles; it is a call to action for all stakeholders to undertake concrete measures to prevent and avoid civilian harm, and to ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach those in need.

The declaration recognizes the substantial and foreseeable harm resulting from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including in situations, in which the parties assert that such use, complies with international humanitarian law.

It serves as a powerful reminder of the international community's responsibility to uphold international law and reinforces our collective obligation to ensure that the conduct of hostilities respects the laws designed to protect civilian populations.

But let me be clear, the humanitarian impact of the use of EWIPA is not limited to its indiscriminate use.

To assert this would imply that "incidental harm" to civilians from lawful attacks is acceptable.

Civilians have, and will, continue to bear the brunt of these actions, with children, youth and people with disabilities facing disproportionate impacts.

International humanitarian law represents a fundamental baseline, but more is needed to fully address the civilian toll of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

It must be complemented by the operationalization of additional measures, set out in this Declaration. It provides us with the political and practical support for the development and implementation of policies and practices that parties to conflict can take to avoid harm to civilians.

It falls on endorsing States to bring this declaration to life through meaningful and ambitious implementation.

As recognized by the United Nations Secretary-General in his New Agenda for Peace, and long called for by the United Nations system, strengthening the protection of civilians amidst escalating levels of civilian harm remains an urgent priority that requires enhanced efforts towards the full and meaningful implementation of the Declaration.

The application of its commitments at all times, and the establishment of mechanisms to mitigate and investigate harm to civilians and ensure accountability of perpetrators.

The effectiveness and relevance of the declaration, in particular, in the context of ongoing wars, ultimately depends on national ownership and the international community's willingness and courage to uphold and enforce its principles at all times.

Military policies and practices must aim to avoid civilian harm by restricting or refraining from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, when such use is expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects.

Direct and indirect effects of explosive weapons use should be better understood through data collection and sharing, and foreseeable harm must form part of the military's calculation of proportionality when targeting military objectives located in populated areas, as well as the assessment and adoption of precautionary measures.

But just like the negotiation of this declaration was a truly collective effort counting on the quintessential support of international organizations and civil society, so too should be the way ahead. For this, you can count on the continued support of the United Nations system at large, which is committed, to work as one, and utilize its varied mandates and expertise to support this process going forward.

This includes aiding the development and compilation of good practice, policies and norms, aimed at protecting civilians at the global, regional and national levels,

Engaging and bringing all relevant actors to the table, the provision of technical assistance to develop standards and policies, clearance efforts, explosive ordnance and risk education, as well as the collection of disaggregated data to contribute to evidence-based dialogue.

Today, working as one, the UN system, wishes to send a message of unity and determination to resolve one of the most pressing humanitarian issues of our time. This coordinated approach is not just beneficial—it is essential for the complex and multifaceted challenge posed by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas worldwide.

The United Nations are ready, able and determined to act with conviction.

I thank you and wish you a productive meeting.