



## Opening Speech by

### State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Norway, Andreas Kravik

[Ladies and gentlemen]

This Conference comes at a critical time. We are witnessing a significant increase in the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. We need only open the newspaper or turn on the TV to see the destruction and harm caused by explosive weapons when cities become battlegrounds. The situation in Gaza is one bleak example of the human suffering arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Sadly it is just one of many examples of this. In far too many places cities have turned into battlefields causing widespread harm to civilians. Whether in Gaza or Ukraine, in Syria or Yemen, or in Sudan or Myanmar. The amount of suffering and destruction is staggering.

When wars move into urban areas, civilians have few places to hide or seek protection. When critical infrastructure is destroyed, entire communities are affected. Explosive remnants of war are left behind and prevent people from moving freely, posing great risk, especially to children. This risk persists even long after conflict has ended. The physical and mental trauma too can last for decades. Or for some, a lifetime.

But even in wars, there are rules. International humanitarian law is the most important instrument to ensure that civilians are protected during conflict. But it is challenged by a lack of compliance. It is precisely in moments like these we must be principled about the rules governing warfare. There can be no double standards. Together we must stand up for the norms and rules that regulate the conduct of hostilities – and we must ensure that they are complied with and implemented in practice,

**In this context, the EWIPA declaration is absolutely key.** The Declaration commits us to do more to protect and assist civilians in armed conflict. It calls on us to assess our own policies and practices to ensure that we have the necessary precautionary measures in place. If fully implemented, it can improve the way we conduct military operations and ensure compliance with IHL. It can save lives and it can prevent enormous civilian suffering.

To reach these goals, we must translate commitments into actions. The future success of the Declaration rests largely on us. This is what this conference is really about.

Since the adoption of the declaration in Dublin in 2022, progress has been made. In some countries, armed forces are reviewing and developing their operative policies to



comply with the Declaration. Militaries and the civilian sector alike are becoming increasingly familiar with the Declaration's principles. More data is gathered about the effects of explosive weapons use in populated areas. This means that we have a better evidence-base than ever before to help shape our policies and practices.

These efforts are complemented by more frequent exchanges between states, the UN, the Red Cross Movement, international organisations and civil society. The open, inclusive and collaborative spirit of the Declaration should be celebrated and promoted. It is our ambition that this conference will build on that spirit.

While some communities find themselves in the middle of war as we speak, others are living through the aftermath of armed conflict. Some are dealing with lifelong injuries while others are trying to rebuild their homes and bring a sense of normalcy to their lives. In many places, children have had to put their education on hold. The long-term consequences of explosive weapons use in populated areas are complex.

As the number of victims and conflict-affected communities grows, more assistance is needed. Humanitarian organisations working in areas affected by explosive weapons are often the only lifeline for local communities. To do their work, they need financial stability and predictability from donors. And they need safe, rapid and unhindered access to those in need. Lately we have seen too many examples of obstruction to humanitarian aid. This must stop. Norway will continue to prioritise the protection of civilians in our humanitarian response. We will continue to be a strong advocate for principled humanitarian action and keep stressing that warring parties have an obligation to ensure that the civilian population has access to humanitarian aid.

The aim of this Conference is to take stock of implementation and draw attention to ongoing and past use of explosive weapons in populated areas. I am confident that today's discussions will help us better understand the issue and learn from one another. Norway will continue to highlight the principles of the Declaration in relevant forums, and support efforts to attract more endorsing states. The commitments are firmly rooted in IHL and should be made universal. Let us all work together to reach that goal.

I wish everyone a productive day. Thank you!