

# EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS



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## **THEMATIC WORKSHOP SUMMARIES**

The Oslo conference was followed by implementation focused workshops on 24 April, aimed at building deeper understandings and approaches to operationalise the Declaration in policy and practice. The workshops focused on a) humanitarian access and assistance; and b) military policies and practices.

### **WORKSHOP ON HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND ASSISTANCE**

This workshop was organized by Humanity & Inclusion (HI) and focused on addressing healthcare needs and access in the context where explosive weapons are used in populated areas.

The first part of the workshop underscored the crucial importance of ensuring both physical and psychological safety for patients seeking medical assistance in conflict zones, who face numerous barriers to accessing healthcare in ongoing conflicts, including disruptions to critical infrastructure and transportation networks, which severely impede the delivery of medical services. Cascading effects and indirect impacts on healthcare systems were a major focus of discussion and it was further noted that increased casualties from explosive incidents also strain healthcare facilities, leading to reduced care space for chronic illnesses and other non-trauma-related conditions.

Participants stressed the importance of providing adequate resources and training to local medical staff, ensuring they are well-equipped to handle the unique challenges posed by explosive weapons in populated areas scenarios. The session thus explored innovative approaches to mitigate the risks faced by healthcare providers and patients. Ideas and already existing practices such as mobile clinics, which can move to safer locations as needed, and remote medical support through telemedicine were discussed as practical solutions to the constraints imposed by conflict environments.

The workshop also turned its attention to the direct and indirect effects of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas on various specific and vulnerable groups, such as children, women, the elderly and persons with disabilities or with chronic illnesses, emphasizing the need for tailored responses. Participants emphasized the importance of adapting humanitarian responses to meet these diverse needs, including promoting inclusivity in service delivery and ensuring that aid efforts consider the specific requirements of different demographic groups.

Addressing the long-term impacts of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas was another critical topic. Ensuring flexible and sustained funding to support humanitarian activities in protracted conflict situations was also highlighted as a key priority as this funding is necessary to maintain ongoing support for affected populations and to adapt to evolving circumstances in areas affected by the use of explosive weapons. Participants furthermore discussed the importance of encouraging a multi-stakeholder approach to improve coordination among humanitarian actors, military forces, and civil society.

The workshop concluded on the critical need for States to take a more active role in the implementation of the Political Declaration and promote the protection of healthcare in conflict settings. There was a strong call for promoting compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and enhanced accountability mechanisms for attacks on medical services and staff.

In closing the multi-stakeholder process, initiated by HI, which aims to support the effective implementation of the Declaration by bringing together key actors from relevant sectors and states that have endorsed the Declaration, was presented.

## **WORKSHOP ON MILITARY POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

The workshop looked at policy and practical measures that should form part of national implementation and that can be taken by armed forces to help avoid civilian harm from use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Participants deplored the ongoing extensive use of explosive weapons globally, and in particular instances where civilians and civilian infrastructure were likely directly targeted or where indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks took place in disrespect of international humanitarian law. Participants, however, also underlined that explosive weapons can cause harm to civilians even when directed against a military objective, noting that the Declaration was developed in this recognition, and with a view to promoting better practices to strengthen the protection of civilians.

Existing practices which can be utilized to better understand and limit harm to civilians include: targeting cycles and processes, pattern of life assessments, collateral damage estimation methodologies as well as information and training resources on the protection of civilians.

Technical factors that can have a bearing on the likelihood of harm:

- Munition choice such as choosing munitions with a more limited impact area,
- Refraining from using certain type of munitions in populated areas such as those that affect a wider area such as aerial bombs, or unguided munitions,
- Using GPS, / laser guided / precision guided munitions, while noting that precision guided munitions are only part of the solution as they can be wrongly used with resultant civilian harm, or used extensively to cause harm,
- Changing the timing or angle of attack,
- The application of sleeves to minimize fragmentation was also suggested.
- Concrete areas of required action that were raised included:
- Ensuring political will, leadership and directions and that political authorities provide concrete directions to armed forces to ensure the commitments of the Declaration are included in directives at the operational level.
- Building better collaboration between militaries and civilian authorities and humanitarian organizations.
- Ensuring relevant understandings are built at various command and control levels.
- Awareness raising within militaries to conceptualize key terms contained in the Declaration which are not usual legal language, such as “restrict and refrain”.
- Better understanding and assessing the effects of the weapon in relation to the target.
- Better understanding urban environments and structures to ensure that direct and indirect effects are factored into policies, practices and decision-making in order to reduce harm to civilians.
- Developing or revising policy and practice to ensure commanders understand second and third order effects to ensure evaluations are conducted beyond the immediate vicinity of a target by taking into account i.e. roads and infrastructure that connect civilians to hospitals, or water and sanitation systems.
- Further discussing practical differences between deliberate and dynamic targeting and measures that can be taken when operating in compressed timeframes,

- Assessing alternative means and methods of warfare that curb explosive weapon use on either side.
- Building further understandings on the commitment to restrict or refrain, as appropriate, and on the potential need to apply full restrictions to explosive weapons when they have wide area effects.
- Further considering how civilian harm tracking at scale can be done in a timely and collaborative manner that is useful to armed forces.
- Establishing minimum standards for civilian casualty tracking in coalition forces, noting that variations between different types of operations may be required.