ICRC

CLUSTER MUNITIONS

WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

REUTERS/Damir Sagoli

OVERVIEW

Cluster munitions have been a persistent problem for decades. The wide area effects of these weapons and the large numbers of submunitions that fail to explode as intended have caused large numbers of civilian casualties. Although only a limited number of countries have actually used cluster munitions, many have these weapons in their stockpiles. If even a fraction of the cluster munitions in current stocks are used or transferred to other countries or non-State armed groups, the consequences could far exceed those of anti-personnel mines. Technological improvements to cluster munitions have not provided an adequate solution and a growing number of States are joining the Convention on Cluster Munitions to address the humanitarian problems caused by these weapons.

WHAT ARE CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

- Cluster munitions are weapons consisting of a container that opens in the air and scatters large numbers of explosive submunitions or "bomblets" over a wide area. Depending on the model, the number of submunitions can vary from several dozen to more than 600. Cluster munitions can be delivered by aircraft, artillery and missiles.

- Most submunitions are intended to explode on impact. The vast majority are free-falling, meaning that they are not individually guided towards a target.

- Cluster munitions were first used in World War II and a large proportion of currently stockpiled cluster munitions were designed for the context of the Cold War. Their main purpose was to destroy multiple military targets dispersed over a wide area, such as tank or infantry formations, and to kill or injure combatants.

WHY ARE CLUSTER MUNITIONS OF SUCH CONCERN FROM A HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVE?

- History has shown that large numbers of submunitions fail to explode on impact as intended. Credible estimates of the failure rates of these weapons in recent conflicts have varied from 10% to 40%. Large-scale use of these weapons has resulted in countries and regions being infested with tens of thousands, and sometimes millions, of unexploded and highly unstable submunitions.

- Unexploded submunitions often explode when handled or disturbed, posing a serious danger to civilians. The presence of these weapons poses a threat to displaced civilians returning to their homes, obstructs relief and reconstruction efforts and makes vital subsistence activities like farming hazardous for years or even decades after the conflict has ended.

- Because they are "area weapons," which can release vast numbers of submunitions over an area of up to tens of thousands of square metres, the impact of cluster munitions on civilians during conflicts is also a serious concern, in particular when they are used in populated areas.

- As most submunitions are not precision-guided, their accuracy can be affected by weather and other environmental factors. They may therefore hit areas outside the military objective targeted. When such weapons are used in or near populated areas, they can pose a significant danger to civilians both during the attack and in the immediate post-strike period when people resume their normal activities.

A cluster munition can contain several hundred individual "bomblets."

AP/Mohammed Zaatari

HOW MANY COUNTRIES PRODUCE AND STOCKPILE CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

- 34 countries are known to have produced over 210 different types of cluster munition. These include projectiles, bombs, rockets, missiles and dispensers (Hiznay).
- At least 87 countries currently stockpile cluster munitions or have done so in the past (HRW, Information Chart). Current stocks amount to millions of cluster munitions, containing billions of individual submunitions.

HOW MANY COUNTRIES HAVE USED CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

- Out of the 87 countries that have or have had stockpiles of cluster munitions, 16 have actually used them during armed conflict (HRW, Information Chart; Cluster Munition Coalition).
- Use by non-State armed groups has been documented in a few cases (HRW, Overview).
- If even a fraction of the cluster munitions in current stocks are used or transferred to other countries or non-State armed groups, the consequences could far exceed those of anti-personnel mines in the 1990s.

CAN SELF-DESTRUCT MECHANISMS AND OTHER TECHNICAL IMPROVEMENTS SOLVE THE CLUSTER MUNITION PROBLEM?

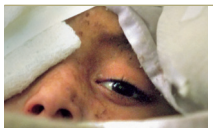
- The majority of cluster munitions in current stocks are old models (20 years old or more). These are becoming increasingly unreliable and should not be used.
- Some later models have self-destruct features to ensure that submunitions destroy themselves if they fail to explode as intended. However, this technology has not provided an adequate solution to the reliability problem. Self-destruct features have decreased the number of unexploded submunitions in controlled tests, but the actual failure rate in battle remains high. Even these weapons have been shown to leave a significant number of unexploded submunitions on the ground.
- Fortunately, a growing number of States have or are in the process of adhering to the Convention on Cluster Munitions. This Convention was negotiated and adopted by 107 States at a diplomatic conference in Dublin, Ireland in May 2008. The Convention establishes new rules to ensure that cluster munitions are no longer used and that the existing humanitarian problems associated with these weapons are addressed. (See fact sheet, *The Convention on Cluster Munitions: a new treaty to end the suffering caused by cluster munitions*).

An unexploded "bomblet" from a cluster munition found only 100 metres from a hospital.

AP/Ben Curtis

Cluster munitions dropped from aircraft can quickly cover tens of thousands of square metres with explosive submunitions.

Associated Press



SOURCES

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