

# EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS



Armed conflicts are increasingly taking place in urban and other populated areas, leading to immense civilian suffering. Scores of civilians are killed or injured, and entire neighbourhoods are reduced to rubble. A major driver of this widespread devastation is the use of explosive weapons, many of which are designed to deliver large explosive force from a distance and over a wide area.

## WHAT ARE THE WEAPONS OF CONCERN AND WHO USES THEM?

Explosive weapons are munitions activated by the detonation of a high-explosive substance, creating primarily blast and fragmentation effects, and their delivery systems. The explosive weapons that raise concerns when used in populated areas are those with wide area effects (or wide impact area), owing to the large destructive radius of the individual munition used, the inaccuracy of the delivery system and/or the simultaneous delivery of multiple munitions over a wide area. Such weapons include large bombs and missiles, indirect fire weapon systems, such as most mortars, rockets and artillery, multi-barrel rocket launchers and certain types of improvised explosive devices.

Most armed forces and many non-state armed groups possess explosive weapons with wide area effects. When these weapons are used against military objectives located in populated areas, there is a significant likelihood that their effects will extend well beyond the target and impact civilians and civilian objects indiscriminately. This risk is lower when such weapons are used on open battlefields, where civilian presence and structures are limited.

While the typical effects of these weapons – when used in populated areas – are increasingly well known and foreseeable, parties to armed conflicts rarely adapt their means and methods of warfare sufficiently for use in urban environments.

## WHAT IS A POPULATED AREA?

A “populated area” is any concentration of civilians or of civilians and civilian objects, be it in a city, town or village, or in a non-built-up area, and be it permanent or temporary.

## WHAT ARE THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS WITH WIDE AREA EFFECTS IN POPULATED AREAS?

Recent and ongoing armed conflicts have shown that the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in populated areas is a major cause of civilian harm. Even when these weapons are used against military objectives, civilians located within the impact area are often killed, wounded, or left with permanent disabilities or severe mental trauma. Entire neighbourhoods are flattened, with houses, infrastructure, schools, means of livelihood and cultural sites destroyed. Hospitals and other health-care facilities and services are no longer able to cope with the massive influx of wounded people and complex injuries, and to provide adequate care.

As explosive weapons with a wide impact area damage the critical infrastructure on which essential services rely, these collapse. As a result, entire populations lose access to water, sanitation, electricity, market systems providing food and other household necessities, telecommunications, financial systems, transportation for people and food, education – in short, all of the interrelated systems that people need to live safely in cities. This leads to more deaths, increases the risk of disease and forces more people to flee their homes and become displaced, often for long periods of time. Although conflicts have an impact on everyone, they often deepen pre-existing inequalities and place groups with specific vulnerabilities at even greater risk. Streets are littered with unexploded ordnance, which continue to kill long after hostilities have ended. Moreover, the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area may release hazardous substances that harm the natural environment and human health. Development gains are also undermined.

*“In the middle of the afternoon, I was sitting in the front yard of our house, talking with members of my family, when we heard a shell hit the garden located next to the building. Within seconds, the house was hit by another artillery shell. This was the one that killed ten members of my family, including five children and three women, and injured three others, including a woman who died of her wounds three weeks later.”*

*– First-hand account from a victim, as recorded by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*





## WHAT DOES INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW SAY ABOUT THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS WITH WIDE AREA EFFECTS IN POPULATED AREAS?

Although international humanitarian law does not expressly prohibit the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area, the high risk of such weapons having effects that go well beyond the targeted military objective makes it very difficult to use them in populated areas in compliance with important rules of humanitarian law, such as the prohibition against indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and the duty to take all feasible precautions to avoid – or at least minimize – incidental civilian harm.

Indiscriminate attacks are those that strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, in particular because they employ a weapon that cannot be directed at a specific military objective or the effects of which cannot be limited as required by humanitarian law. Disproportionate attacks are those that may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. When assessing the proportionality of an attack, all reasonably foreseeable indirect or reverberating effects of the attack must be considered.

The extensive civilian harm arising from the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas raises serious questions about how the parties using them are interpreting and applying rules of humanitarian law governing the conduct of hostilities.

## WHAT IS THE POLITICAL DECLARATION ON EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS?

The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas was adopted in November 2022. As at June 2025, 88 countries had endorsed the declaration.

The declaration recognizes the devastating impact on civilians and civilian objects of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and their wide area effects as a factor increasing risk to civilians. It strongly reaffirms key legal obligations, while acknowledging that further efforts are needed to achieve full and universal implementation of, and compliance with, humanitarian law. It also includes a commitment to adopt and implement a range of policies and practices to avoid civilian harm. When properly implemented, the declaration can contribute significantly to alleviating civilian suffering and strengthening respect for international humanitarian law.

## WHAT IS THE ICRC'S POSITION ON EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS?

Given the specific vulnerabilities of civilians in populated areas, states and parties to armed conflicts must reassess and adapt their choice of means and methods of warfare when fighting in such environments. A change in mindset and behaviour is urgently needed.

The ICRC encourages all states that have not yet done so to endorse the declaration without delay and urges all endorsing states to implement it – in both letter and spirit. The ICRC also encourages all parties to armed conflict, including non-state armed groups, to fully adhere to its commitments.

The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas is the first instrument to commit states to restrict or refrain – as appropriate – from using explosive weapons in populated areas, where such use may cause civilian harm. This should include avoiding, as a matter of policy, the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in populated areas, due to the significant likelihood of their indiscriminate effects, something that the ICRC and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole have been urging all states and parties to armed conflict to do for over a decade. Explosive weapons with a wide impact area should not be used in populated areas unless sufficient mitigation measures can be taken to reduce the weapons' wide area effects and the consequent risk of civilian harm.

The ICRC report entitled *Explosive weapons with wide area effects: A deadly choice in populated areas* (published in January 2022, available [here](#)) provides detailed practical recommendations to political authorities and armed forces on how to put into effect such an avoidance policy, which can help to implement this crucial commitment in the declaration.

More resources are available on the ICRC website:

<https://www.icrc.org/en/explosive-weapons-populated-areas>.

### MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.