



ICRC



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, 75 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. Unfortunately, technological improvements to cluster munitions have not provided an adequate solution. It is unlikely that any single technical improvement could adequately address the humanitarian problems caused by these weapons.

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

AP/Mohammed Zaatari

CLUSTER MUNITIONS

WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

WHAT ARE CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

- Cluster munitions are weapons consisting of a container that opens in the air and scatters explosive submunitions or "bomblets" over a wide area. Depending on the model, the number of submunitions can vary from several 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.



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 75 countries currently stockpile cluster munitions (Human Rights Watch). Current stocks amount to millions of cluster munitions, containing billions of individual submunitions.
- At least four countries that previously produced cluster munitions have enacted new national policies or laws in which they undertake not to produce any more of them (Human Rights Watch). This shows that the recent focus on the humanitarian consequences of these weapons has already brought about positive change at a national level.

HOW MANY COUNTRIES HAVE USED CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

- Out of the 75 countries that stockpile cluster munitions, fewer than 15 have actually used them during armed conflict (Human Rights Watch; Cluster Munition Coalition).
- Use by non-State armed groups has been documented in a few cases (Human Rights Watch).
- 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.
- Fortunately, if effective action is taken now, it is still possible to prevent an even more severe humanitarian problem in the future.

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 newer 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.
- Technical solutions to the reliability and accuracy of cluster munitions need to be examined not only on the basis of how munitions are designed to function or how they function under test conditions, but on how they will function under actual battlefield conditions.
- Governments will need to prove that new or existing models of cluster munition that feature technical improvements will not create the type of humanitarian problem that has arisen in past conflicts.
- It is unlikely that any single technical improvement could adequately address the humanitarian problems 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:

Mark Hiznay, *Survey of cluster munitions produced and stockpiled*, presentation at the ICRC Expert Meeting on the Humanitarian, Military, Technical and Legal Challenges of Cluster Munitions, Montreux, Switzerland, 18–20 April 2007.

Human Rights Watch, *At a Glance: Global Overview of Cluster Munition Policy and Practice*, Human Rights Watch, Washington D.C., USA, October 2007.

Cluster Munition Coalition, *User countries*, <http://www.stopclustermunitions.org/dokumenti/dokument.asp?id=28>