

Weapon Contamination and Victim Assistance



The devastating impact of weapon contamination

Both during war and long after the guns have fallen silent, people are at risk from the effects of weapons. It is a problem in many parts of the world, where civilians risk coming across unexploded bombs, abandoned stocks of munitions, landmines and other hazardous materials, including those of a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) nature. Their presence, and the dangers they represent, is known as **weapon contamination**.

In recent years, protracted armed conflicts and the escalation of new ones have caused grave consequences for civilians affected by the weapons used in these conflicts. The way these conflicts are being fought – for instance, even in city centres and other urban areas – have brought in new waves and patterns of contamination, which are debilitating and deadly as ever. Currently, civilians in contexts such as **Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Israel and the occupied territories, Myanmar, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine** are exposed to risks stemming both from the **ongoing use of weapons** and from **explosive remnants of past and recent hostilities**. These risks arise from mines and unexploded ordnance, as well as from shelling, shooting and other forms of active hostilities, particularly in densely populated areas. Similar patterns are observed in many other contexts affected by weapon contamination.

The intensifying conflicts and the scale at which they are fought have only worsened the state of weapon contamination. The increased use of improvised explosive devices, the proliferation of combat operations in densely populated areas and the introduction of new technologies in warfare all contribute to a hazardous environment for civilians caught in the throes of conflict. In many contexts, civilians are also exposed to immediate risks from ongoing use of weapons, requiring rapid, context-specific risk mitigation measures alongside longer-term contamination responses. There is also increased danger regarding the unintended release of toxic industrial chemicals and/or radiological materials because of damage to industrial facilities. Clearance efforts led by humanitarian mine actors face various challenges, given the scale of contamination and the constraints in operating in conflict-affected areas. These all point to the urgency of dealing with weapon contamination – which, if left unaddressed, will continue to leave a trail of human suffering in its wake.

The human toll of weapons

In many contexts affected by armed conflict, civilians are at risk both from the ongoing use of weapons and from the explosive hazards they leave behind. Shelling, shooting, mines, explosive remnants of war (ERW) and other hazardous materials, including CBRN-related dangers, can injure or kill people carrying out every day activities such as moving through their communities, farming, grazing animals, collecting water or playing outdoors.

These risks have wider humanitarian consequences for entire communities. Weapon contamination and other weapon-related hazards destroy land and property, displace or confine civilians, restrict access to food, water and essential services, damage livelihoods and hinder reconstruction and humanitarian action. Their presence also generates fear and psychological distress, often long after the immediate violence has subsided.

Mines and ERW, by themselves, **indiscriminately cause deaths and injuries** to thousands of people yearly. In 2024, per the *Landmine Monitor*, at least 6,279 people were killed or injured, which was a 9% increase from the previous year and the highest recorded total since 2020. At least 1,701 of these casualties were children. Casualty figures have risen steadily since 2022, reflecting the increasing scale and intensity of armed conflicts and the growing human cost of explosive hazards.

**A growing number of casualties
– mines and ERW cause
indiscriminate harm to thousands
of civilians every year.**

4,709	5,757	6,279
2022	2023	2024

Victims of mines, ERW and other hazards face **life-changing injuries**, such as the loss of a limb, severe burns, psychological trauma or other afflictions, which can significantly restrict their mobility. These people – including those who sustained permanent physical disabilities – often have difficulties meeting their daily needs. People with disabilities, in particular, are among the most vulnerable and worst affected in situations of conflict and other humanitarian emergencies – as many as three out of four persons with disabilities in areas with active conflict report major obstacles in accessing food, water, shelter and other services. Medical treatment and services are not always available and sometimes inadequate. There are fewer economic opportunities open to them, forcing many into poverty and excluding them from day-to-day social or economic activities. Families of victims also suffer through emotional and psychological trauma and socio-economic hardships.

Though the consequences of weapon contamination on human lives are often severe, they are not wholly inevitable. Various efforts at mine action – with its pillars of mine clearance, risk education, victim assistance, advocacy and the destruction of stockpiles – attempt to alleviate the various impacts of mines and other explosive ordnance. Amid varying challenges with access and acceptance, mine-action organizations and humanitarian mine actors help affected communities not only to recover, but also to avoid future incidents. The recent casualty trends underscore the importance of the presence of such actors, for instance, where improved preparedness and rapid technical interventions to mitigate mine-risks and other weapon-contamination risks help make a significant difference in people's safety.

At the ICRC, we are committed to help mitigate the risks and alleviate the consequences posed by mines, ERW and other hazards to people living in areas affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. We aim to reduce risks before accidents occur and help communities live as safely as possible, including where ongoing hostilities prevent large-scale clearance. We especially recognize the precarious situation of victims especially those who are left with physical disabilities, and their families. Despite the barriers they face, we believe in their right to recover, rebuild their lives and participate fully in their communities with renewed dignity.

What sets us apart

The ICRC has a unique and historic mandate enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL) to protect and assist people affected by **armed conflict and other situations of violence**, including those exposed to weapon contamination and its consequences. We fulfil our duty by conducting **neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action** that reaches people on all sides of a conflict – this allows us to be present in active conflict zones and help communities that few or no other organizations can reach.

We draw from over a century and a half of experience in humanitarian operations when carrying out emergency response and resilience-building efforts that enhance people's safety and ensure a long-term, sustainable impact. In over a hundred countries where we are present, we work closely with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other local partners, leveraging community networks to implement effective, culturally appropriate solutions.

Operationally, this means that we are already present in areas affected by active hostilities, where civilians face risks both from the ongoing use of weapons and the explosive hazards left behind. We work to reduce those risks as early as possible, including where large-scale clearance is not yet feasible. At the same time, we invest in strengthening the capacities of national authorities, National Societies and local actors to sustain and scale these efforts over time.

Syrian Arab Republic, Lattakia. Alongside the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, we carried out a field trip to conduct non-technical surveys of areas suspected to be contaminated by weapons. According to the *Landmine Monitor*, Syria had the second highest number of new recorded casualties caused by mines or explosive remnants of war in 2024, with casualties rising every year since 2022.





Colombia, Antioquia. Teachers from rural areas participated in a training session we organized on promoting safer behaviour in the event of encounters with suspected explosive devices. These also included guidance on institutional care routes in the context of armed conflicts.



A mandate enshrined in IHL and a commitment to reducing suffering

Under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, we are mandated to promote and ensure respect for IHL in all circumstances, and to safeguard the life and dignity of civilians caught in armed conflict. We **remind states of their obligations under IHL**, and **support them in their efforts to fulfill these obligations**. Our work related to weapon contamination and victim assistance is also informed by key international agreements, including the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We promote adherence to these frameworks and support their implementation in practice.



A dynamic and comprehensive set of activities

The needs of people affected by weapon contamination and other weapon-related hazards are complex and long-term. They require sustained support to recover physically, emotionally, economically and to reintegrate themselves into their communities. In response, we combine **direct support** with sustained **capacity-building efforts** – led by our Weapon Contamination unit and Physical Rehabilitation Programme – to both address immediate needs and strengthen local systems to respond appropriately. These efforts are complemented by our activities in Economic Security, Health, Water and Habitat and others, allowing for a multidisciplinary response that supports protection, safety and dignity over time.



A worldwide network of partnerships

As part of the **International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement** (hereafter, the Movement), we belong to a **network of humanitarian partners that are active on the ground and operate in various contexts globally**. Working with these Movement partners, mainly the National Societies, is a crucial element of our humanitarian action, as they have knowledge of the local languages, customs and context, they have humanitarian access to certain areas that are difficult to reach, and they have earned trust from their communities. Specifically, in our efforts against weapon contamination, their presence allows us to anticipate, adapt and deliver risk-mitigation and victim assistance interventions in a timely and locally grounded manner. In partnership with the National Societies, we can facilitate **early-response mechanisms** to dangers posed by contamination, through actors who are already rooted in the country.

A multidisciplinary, protection-centred approach

The **protection of the lives, well-being and dignity of civilians** – who should be spared from violations of IHL and the consequences of armed conflict and violence – is at the core of the ICRC's work and is the driving force behind all our programmes. We conduct activities for people affected directly or indirectly by conflict and violence, and for influential actors that are in a position to help advance respect for IHL and address humanitarian issues. In addressing people's needs, we take **an integrated approach** wherein our various programmes and activities are closely interlinked: work done in any one of these areas informs, enables, reinforces and complements actions taken in the others.

The same framework applies to our efforts to protect and assist **victims of mines, ERW and other hazards**, and other people in peril from the risks posed by weapon contamination. We recognize that the effects on victims' and their families' lives are complex – for instance, fatalities can lead to dire economic situations where children are forced to become breadwinners, or children living with lasting weapon-related injuries will need long-term, sustained support. A single incident can have far-reaching consequences.

As such, our approach prioritizes **preventing the occurrence of harm, responding to consequences, and advocating for systemic changes** – it considers the different phases of conflict's effects, the multifaceted needs and concerns of victims, and the mitigating factors that can help minimize human suffering and future casualties.

1. We prevent and mitigate harm

We work with National Societies, mine-action authorities and other local actors to prevent and mitigate the risks posed by weapon contamination and reduce the suffering caused by weapon-related incidents. Our activities include:

- **Holding dialogue with authorities and armed actors** – We engage in confidential and bilateral dialogue with authorities and actors to discuss weapon contamination and other protection-related concerns, and advocate for people's protection from these hazards and their right to access essential services.
- **Engaging with conflict-affected communities** – We meet directly with communities to discuss their situation and their specific protection-related concerns, understand more fully their needs, and gather their feedback on our activities and programmes.
- **Collecting data, mapping incidents and conducting risk assessments** – We identify existing hazards and map the affected areas, gather and analyze casualty and incident data, help identify high-risk areas and vulnerable populations, evaluate the severity and likelihood of present risks, and plan the appropriate interventions.
- **Promoting risk awareness and facilitating safer behaviour** – We conduct community-based interventions such as sharing key safety messages on weapon contamination (e.g. information regarding hazards, precautions to take, suggestions for safer behaviour) or work alongside community members to devise ways to access basic services while taking protective measures to reduce the likelihood and severity of incidents.
- **Engaging with national authorities on explosive ordnance disposal and other efforts** – We share and consolidate information with authorities on incidents and casualties, and provide them with technical support in surveying, marking, detecting, identifying, evaluating, and disposing of hazardous materials, as well as assessing and managing CBRN threats.
- **Removal of explosive hazards/ordnance in exceptional circumstances** – In areas where we have exclusive access to the areas affected by weapon contamination, and the humanitarian risks to vulnerable populations are high, we undertake the removal and disposal of explosive ordnance.
- **Ensuring availability of blast trauma care** – We engage with local mine actors on the importance of equipping their explosive ordnance disposal teams with essential skills to deliver immediate medical assistance in the event of accidents during their operations.
- **Strengthening preparedness for physical rehabilitation in emergencies** – We actively engage in preparedness activities to ensure effective physical rehabilitation support during emergencies, including trainings on early rehabilitation interventions, contingency plans for assistive technology needs, and building partnerships with local and international stakeholders.



Iraq, Erbil. We organized training on blast trauma care for medics from the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency, to help them in the delivery of emergency medical response during their operations. The two-week session also included simulations on bleeding, evacuation, triage and first aid.

2. We respond to the consequences

We enable victims and people with disabilities to obtain the health care services that they need to fully recover, and we help them and their families cope with the socio-economic and psychological consequences brought about by their circumstances. Our activities include:

- **Reinforcing the continuum of care for victims of mines/ERW** – We enable victims to have access to first aid, pre-hospital care, early rehabilitation, surgical care for the weapon-wounded, trauma surgery and other life-saving medical care through direct support and capacity-building of health facilities and staff involved in the medical mission.
- **Enabling people's access to physical rehabilitation services** – We offer comprehensive support to help rehabilitation centres in carrying out treatment, fitting of prostheses and orthoses, providing wheelchairs and other assistive devices, conducting physiotherapy sessions, and improving the quality and sustainability of their services.¹
- **Providing mental-health and psychosocial support** – We offer psychological care and counselling to help victims and their families cope with the trauma caused by weapons-related incidents, disability and other consequences of conflict, and we carry out information sessions to help raise communities' awareness on mental health issues.
- **Offering financial assistance** – We provide cash grants to victims of weapons-related incidents and their families to help them cover urgent and daily expenses (e.g. food, medical costs, funeral costs), and we refer them to the pertinent authorities or service providers who can aid them.
- **Ensuring social and economic inclusion** – We offer vocational training, cash grants to start small businesses, microcredit initiatives, educational support, and employment opportunities to victims and other people with disabilities, and we carry out disability sports programmes to help improve their physical and psychological well-being.

1. Although the ICRC cannot ensure the provision of lifelong physical rehabilitation services after the conclusion of a conflict, we make every possible effort to collaborate with relevant stakeholders to ensure the continuity of care.

3. We advocate for systemic changes

We work with the authorities and pertinent actors to strengthen their respective sectors so they are better equipped to mitigate the risks and address victims' needs, and we promote the life-saving humanitarian norms set out in key international agreements and foster increased commitment and accountability among states and parties. Our activities include:

- **Strengthening capacities in mine action and physical rehabilitation** – We support the continued development of local actors by facilitating staff training or educational opportunities (e.g. for humanitarian deminers, aspiring prosthetists/orthotists), sharing technical expertise and other support where needed, and helping these actors meet pertinent international standards.
- **Advocating for mine victims and people with disabilities** – We actively engage with authorities and influential stakeholders through seminars, round tables, workshops and similar events on addressing the plight of victims and people with disabilities, and carry out public-awareness initiatives (e.g. campaigns, exhibits) on these topics.
- **Improving adherence to international standards and building knowledge** – We advocate for efficiency in mine action through our participation in the review board of the International Mine Action Standards and through promoting these standards, and we host technical discussions on pressing topics related to mine action (e.g. new technologies, urgent issues), drawing from our operational experience.
- **Promoting key international treaties** – We encourage states to ratify or accede to key treaties and to utilize relevant legal and non-legal instruments and implement their provisions, particularly those related to dangerous weapons and disability inclusion, and offer to share our institutional expertise with them in their efforts to comply with the norms set out in these agreements.

Myanmar, Sagaing region. Daw Lwin, a farmer and mother of two, was taking her cows to graze when she accidentally stepped on a landmine. "There was a loud noise, and my body was thrown into the air. I didn't know what had happened until I saw blood on my leg and realized I had been struck by a landmine," she says. Daw Lwin has been receiving care at the ICRC rehabilitation center in Myitkyina for months, and she knows her victimhood will not define her: "I believe that once I finish my treatment and receive my prosthetic leg, I will be able to go back to helping my family, like before."



2026 at a glance

Amid a dangerous convergence of escalating armed conflicts, significant cuts to aid funding and growing challenges to respect for IHL, the ICRC will prioritize its unique mandate to protect and assist conflict-affected people and to promote protective interpretations of IHL. We will focus our efforts where our help and operational expertise is most needed – in areas where active armed conflicts continue to generate significant humanitarian consequences for civilians.

The ICRC will continue addressing the risks posed by weapon contamination and providing much-needed assistance to victims of mines, ERW and other hazards in various countries or territories. Notably, we will:

- carry out risk-management and other interventions in critical areas affected by active hostilities, including those that few or no other humanitarian organizations can reach, and where clearance efforts are hindered by access constraints and ongoing hostilities,
- leverage our technical expertise in managing risks from mines, ERW and CBRN hazards to help build the capacities of our Movement partners to undertake risk-mitigation projects in their respective contexts, and
- promote the universalization and implementation of treaties such as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons especially Protocols II and V, and ensure support to the Conventions and the adherence of States Parties to these.

The ICRC will continue meeting the various physical rehabilitation needs of victims and other people with disabilities in conflict-affected areas by ensuring their access to rehabilitative services, ensuring the quality and sustainability of such services, and facilitating their social integration. Notably, we will:

- prioritize early rehabilitation services in emergency situations, with the understanding that prompt rehabilitative care lessens complications, accelerates recovery, and leads to a better quality of life for victims,
- leverage our partnerships with local actors and other organizations to ensure that critical rehabilitative services remain accessible to victims, and develop their capacities to provide high-quality services in a sustainable and independent manner, and
- help ensure that victims have access to a comprehensive continuum of care that addresses their health-related needs throughout their entire recovery process up to societal integration.

Targets



Weapon contamination

- **Around 2.9 million people** to benefit from risk awareness and safer behaviour interventions
- **More than 2,000 National Society staff** have strengthened their capacity to engage in activities to reduce the risk from weapon contamination



Physical rehabilitation

(in countries with weapon contamination activities)

- **90 physical rehabilitation projects** supported
- **Around 188,400 people** to benefit from rehabilitation and social integration initiatives

Yemen. Life became very hard for Labiba when she lost her leg and her right eye at nine years old, after accidentally stepping on a mine on her way to school. Though she was able to get a prosthetic leg from the ICRC-supported physical rehabilitation centre in Sanaa, she continued to feel the consequences of the injury as she struggled to fit in with her community: **“I couldn’t escape people’s comments. They would ask how I could raise my children. My life and raising my children felt normal and very natural to me. But their words hurt me deeply, much more than even the physical pain.”**

Labiba, however, was not one to be deterred – she joined the Landmine Survivors’ Association, and participated in campaigns to raise mine-awareness in schools, camps, homes, and other places across Yemen. **“I began to feel a great sense of relief,”** Labiba says, **“as I regained my integration into society.”**






W. Almagtari/ICRC

Weapon contamination and other weapon-related hazards have a devastating effect on those affected, many of whom face long-term challenges in rebuilding their lives and living with dignity.

We have the expertise and the operational capacity to respond, but sustained support is essential to reduce risks, assist victims and strengthen local systems. **Your continued support is vital** for our shared vision – a future where communities can live free from the dangers of these weapons, a future where communities are safer and survivors and other people with disabilities can fully participate in society.

Work with us to turn commitment into meaningful, lasting change.

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