



HARVARD  
LAW SCHOOL

INTERNATIONAL  
HUMAN RIGHTS CLINIC

February 2025

# Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas: Questions and Answers

Human Rights Watch and  
Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic  
February 2025

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas causes immense civilian suffering during and after armed conflicts. The [Political Declaration on the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas](#), adopted in 2022, is the first formal international recognition of the devastating humanitarian consequences of this practice and the urgent need to address them. The Declaration commits its endorsing states to take specific steps to prevent and remediate that harm.<sup>1</sup> As of February 1, 2025, 88 states had endorsed it. This question-and-answer document provides an overview of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and their effects, examines the commitments and significance of the Declaration, and discusses measures to promote its universalization and implementation.

## 1) What is meant by the “use of explosive weapons in populated areas”?

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is one of the gravest threats to civilians in contemporary armed conflict. Explosive weapons encompass a range of conventional air-dropped and surface-fired weapons, including aircraft bombs, artillery projectiles, mortar shells, rockets, and missiles. Their use in populated areas – cities, towns, villages, and other concentrations of

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<sup>1</sup> “Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,” endorsed November 18, 2022, <https://ewipa.org/the-political-declaration>.

civilians – heightens risks to civilians and civilian objects. The wide-area effects and inherent inaccuracy of certain explosive weapons greatly exacerbate the humanitarian consequences. This method of warfare, also referred to as bombing and shelling populated areas, causes tens of thousands of civilian casualties around the world [each year](#) and leaves a legacy of serious, long-term harm.<sup>2</sup>

## **2) What specific types of harm do explosive weapons cause when used in populated areas?**

The immediate, or direct, effects include death, physical injury, and psychological harm, as well as damage to and destruction of homes, shops, schools, hospitals, and other civilian structures. The vast majority of people killed or injured when explosive weapons are used in populated areas are civilians.

Bombing and shelling populated areas has long-term indirect, or “reverberating,” effects on civilians years after conflicts end. For example, explosive weapons damage or destroy critical civilian infrastructure, such as power plants, healthcare facilities, and water and sanitation systems, interfering with basic services. The interruptions to services like health care and education in turn infringe on human rights.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas can also damage or destroy the environment and cultural heritage. Environmental damage causes a range of short- and long-term human health effects as well as harm to wildlife and ecosystems. Bombing and shelling [cultural heritage](#) leads to the loss of a valuable part of a community’s history, culture, and society.<sup>3</sup>

All of the above effects combined with the danger of unexploded ordnance and fear of additional explosive weapons attacks frequently lead to widespread displacement.

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<sup>2</sup> *Explosive Weapons Monitor 2023*, April 2024, [https://ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/ewm/ewm/EWM\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2023\\_3424abd34c.pdf](https://ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/ewm/ewm/EWM_Annual_Report_2023_3424abd34c.pdf) (accessed January 25, 2025), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the effects of the use of explosive weapons on cultural heritage, see Human Rights Watch and Harvard Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), *Destroying Cultural Heritage: Explosive Weapons’ Effects in Armed Conflict and Measures to Strengthen Protection*, April 2024, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2024/04/armso424web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/04/armso424web.pdf).

### 3) What are “wide-area effects,” and why are they problematic?

The humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons are foreseeable and exacerbated when those weapons spread their effects over a wide area. Explosive weapons can have such effects if they have a broad blast or fragmentation radius, are inaccurate, or deliver multiple munitions at once, or have a combination of these characteristics. Examples include certain air-delivered weapons, multi-barrel rocket launchers with unguided rockets, and mortars and large-caliber artillery that fire unguided munitions.

### 4) What is the history of the Declaration on the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, and who has participated in its process?

Recognizing that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas during armed conflicts causes immense civilian suffering, states, civil society, and international organizations worked together to produce the Political Declaration on the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. Austria, Ireland, and other countries initiated a political process in 2019 that resulted in the adoption of the Declaration in June 2022. A total of 83 countries endorsed the Declaration in Dublin on November 18, 2022. An additional 5 states joined the Declaration by February 1, 2025.<sup>4</sup> The endorsers [include](#) 28 NATO member states and 6 of the top 8 arms exporters.<sup>5</sup>

The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW), a global civil society coalition cofounded by Human Rights Watch and other nongovernmental groups in 2011, was integral to the process

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<sup>4</sup> The endorsers are: Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cape Verde, Cambodia, Canada, the Central African Republic, Chile, Colombia, Comoros, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Guyana, the Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kosovo, Kuwait, Laos, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, the Maldives, Malta, Mexico, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Palau, Palestine, Peru, the Philippines, Portugal, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Somalia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Togo, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Uruguay.

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Docherty, “Over 80 Countries Committed to Curb Use of Explosive Weapons, Now Comes the Hard Part,” *Just Security*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/84240/80-countries-committed-to-curb-use-of-explosive-weapons/> (accessed January 25, 2025).

before and after adoption. The [network](#) secured support for the negotiation of the Declaration and has since urged states to join it and take steps to implement and interpret it.<sup>6</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations have also played a significant role in supporting the adoption and implementation of the Declaration.

### **5) What are the purposes and key elements of the Declaration?**

The Declaration spotlights the “devastating impact on civilians and civilian objects” of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and elaborates on the direct and indirect effects. It also recognizes that wide-area effects heighten the unacceptable risk to civilians. The Declaration enumerates specific commitments that countries should fulfill to reduce that impact, including through national policies and practices, data collection, victim assistance, and humanitarian access.

The introduction to the Declaration’s operative section (part B) lays out overarching commitments that reflect its multipronged purpose. The Declaration commits states to “strengthening compliance with and improving the implementation of applicable international humanitarian law.” It also makes clear that the Declaration, while nonbinding, goes beyond existing international law by committing endorsing states to take additional steps to advance humanitarian ends. It highlights both “strengthening the protection of civilians” and “addressing the humanitarian consequences arising from armed conflict.” Measures to achieve these goals [involve](#) preventing and remediating harm from explosive weapons in populated areas.<sup>7</sup>

### **6) Is the Declaration legally binding, and what is its significance?**

The Declaration is not a treaty and therefore not legally binding on the states that have endorsed it. Like [other political declarations](#), however, the Declaration [commits](#) endorsing countries to take

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<sup>6</sup> See “About INEW,” <https://www.inew.org/about-inew/> (accessed February 9, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch and IHRC, *Destroying Cultural Heritage*, pp. 6-7.

agreed-upon actions.<sup>8</sup> Such commitments carry significant weight because they can help clarify existing international law’s applicability to a specific situation and outline standards for conduct that go beyond existing law. International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, already prohibits attacks that target civilians, are indiscriminate because they fail to distinguish between civilians and military targets, or are expected to cause disproportionate harm to civilians compared to the anticipated military gain. The Declaration recognizes that bombing and shelling populated areas increases the risk of indiscriminate attacks. In addition to reiterating their duty to comply with international humanitarian law, countries that endorse the Declaration [pledge](#) to take extra steps to strengthen the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.<sup>9</sup>

### **7) Which of the Declaration’s commitments seek to prevent harm to civilians from the use of explosive weapons?**

The Declaration calls on countries to adopt “policies and practices to help avoid civilian harm, including by restricting or refraining as appropriate from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, when their use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects” (paragraph 3.3). To maximize the protection of civilians from bombing and shelling populated areas, states should understand this provision to mean that it is “appropriate” for them to “[refrain from](#)” the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, given that the harm of such weapons can always be expected. States should “restrict” the use of all other explosive weapons in populated areas.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the Declaration commits countries to “take into account the direct and indirect effects on civilians and civilian objects which can reasonably be foreseen in the planning of military

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, “Safe Schools Declaration,” opened for endorsement May 29, 2015, <https://ssd.protectingeducation.org/> (accessed February 3, 2025). To learn more about the Safe Schools Declaration and other political declarations, see Human Rights Watch and IHRC, “A Commitment to Civilians: Precedent for a Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,” November 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/18/commitment-civilians>.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Declaration, its provisions, and an interpretation that would maximize civilian protection, see Human Rights Watch and IHRC, “Safeguarding Civilians: A Humanitarian Interpretation of the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,” October 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/26/safeguarding-civilians>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

operations and the execution of attacks in populated areas” (paragraph 3.4). The effects of using explosive weapons in populated areas are [foreseeable](#) given that they have been extensively documented in many recent armed conflicts and recognized in the Declaration itself.<sup>11</sup> Other steps that endorsing states commit to take include ensuring “comprehensive training” for their armed forces and promoting the Declaration by urging other states to endorse the document and follow its norms (paragraphs 3.2, 4.8).

### **8) What are other important provisions of the Declaration?**

The Declaration contains remedial provisions that focus on addressing the humanitarian consequences from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. A victim assistance provision calls on states to assist affected individuals, families, and communities using a “holistic, integrated, gender-sensitive, and non-discriminatory” approach (paragraph 4.5). Another provision establishes a commitment to “[f]acilitate rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to those in need” (paragraph 4.4).

The Declaration encourages collecting and sharing data (paragraphs 1.8, 3.4, 4.2, and 4.3). These provisions call for assessing the damage of attacks in populated areas, exchanging humanitarian impact surveys with other states and stakeholders, and collecting, sharing, and making publicly available “disaggregated data” on the “direct and indirect effects” of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Another provision sets out the importance of “efforts to record and track civilian casualties” (paragraph 1.8), and the Declaration moves toward making collecting data a fundamental part of state policy and practice. Data collection [should encompass](#) operational data as well as information on direct and indirect civilian harm and should be shared, except in very narrow situations, to facilitate learning, monitoring, and accountability.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-17.

### **9) Does the Declaration prohibit explosive weapons altogether or seek to end urban warfare?**

International treaties have prohibited outright two types of explosive weapons – antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions – due to their inherently indiscriminate nature and devastating long-term effects. States parties to the Mine Ban Treaty of 1997 and the Convention on Cluster Munitions of 2008 are obligated never to use, produce, stockpile, or transfer these weapons under any circumstances.

The Declaration is not legally binding, however, and its key provision does not ban the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Rather, it calls for states to commit to limit their use by “restricting or refraining as appropriate” from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas “when their use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects” (paragraph 3.3). This commitment does not aim to prevent all urban warfare but would limit a specific practice if there was a foreseeable risk of harm to civilians or civilian objects, as is often the case.

Restrictions could [include](#) measures such as identifying “no-strike entities” for certain civilian sites, requiring a higher level of approval, and setting aside additional time to consider alternative weapon choices.<sup>13</sup>

### **10) How is the Declaration being promoted to other countries, and how can countries endorse it?**

Paragraph 4.8 commits states to actively promote the Declaration, distribute it to all relevant stakeholders, and pursue its adoption by the greatest possible number of states. Joining the Declaration does not, however, give rise to formal financial requirements, such as assessed contributions towards the cost of meetings and other institutional costs.

Jordan, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia endorsed the Declaration in 2024, while Thailand endorsed it in January 2025. Information about how additional states can endorse the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

Declaration is available on [its website](#) hosted by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).<sup>14</sup>

The Declaration’s endorsers together with the UN, ICRC, and INEW have held regional workshops to promote greater understanding of the Declaration and how to join and implement it. Humanity & Inclusion and Human Rights Watch have initiated popular campaigns under the hashtag [#StopBombingCivilians](#) to encourage countries to endorse and implement the Declaration.<sup>15</sup>

### 11) What role has the United Nations played in supporting the Declaration?

UN offices, officials, and agencies have played a central role in the Declaration’s adoption, universalization, and implementation. More than 70 countries met at the United Nations in Geneva in 2019 and 2020 to develop the Declaration text, and countries concluded the text there at a diplomatic conference on June 17, 2022. The United Nations hosts the Declaration’s website, created in 2024 by the Office of Disarmament Affairs. The [site](#) contains the Declaration, its translations, the list of endorsers, and documents from past meetings, in addition to the instructions for endorsing it.<sup>16</sup>

High-level UN officials have long warned parties to armed conflicts to avoid using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas due to the likelihood of causing civilian harm. UN Secretary-General António Guterres [frequently calls](#) for all states that have not yet done so to endorse the Declaration as soon as possible.<sup>17</sup> The secretary-general’s high representative for disarmament affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, [addressed](#) the meeting held to adopt the Declaration in Ireland and has vigorously promoted its universalization and implementation.<sup>18</sup> UN agencies

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<sup>14</sup> “Endorsement,” <https://ewipa.org/endorsement> (accessed January 28, 2025). The site lists the government of Ireland as the depositary of endorsements and provides a template Note Verbal for endorsement.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, “#StopBombingCivilians: Protect Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons,” September 19, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/StopBombingCivilians>.

<sup>16</sup> “Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,” <https://ewipa.org/> (accessed February 14, 2025).

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” S/2024/385, May 14, 2024, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/s-2024-385.php> (accessed February 14, 2025), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> “Bring Declaration on Protecting Civilians from Explosive Weapons to Life through Broad, Meaningful Implementation, Says Secretary-General at Adoption Ceremony,” statement delivered by High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu on behalf of UN



working to prevent and remediate harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas include the Office of Disarmament Affairs, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the UN Office for Mine Action.

## 12) How have states followed-up their endorsement of the Declaration?

To ensure the Declaration remains a living instrument, endorsing states commit to hold regular, inclusive meetings to discuss implementation, share best policies and practices, and “identify any relevant additional measures that may need to be taken” (paragraph 4.7). More than 80 countries and 50 organizations participated in the first follow-up meeting of the Declaration hosted by Norway in Oslo in April 2024. At the one-day meeting, many states expressed concern about civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and other conflicts.

A few states [elaborated](#) national steps they had taken to implement the Declaration.<sup>19</sup> Costa Rica, Ireland, and Norway – the “troika” of future conference host, endorsing ceremony host, and current host – [issued](#) an outcome statement that called for more work on universalization and implementation.<sup>20</sup> A civil society Protection Forum, held the day before the Oslo government meeting, [examined](#) the range of threats posed by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and highlighted the voices of survivors and witnesses.<sup>21</sup>

The second follow-up meeting will be held in San José, Costa Rica, from November 19-20, 2025, and it will be accompanied by another civil society forum on November 18.

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Secretary-General, adoption ceremony of Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, Dublin, November 18, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21590.doc.htm> (accessed February 9, 2025).

<sup>19</sup> “Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas: Oslo Conference 2024,” <https://ewipa.org/calendar/oslo-conference-2024> (accessed January 25, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Costa Rica, Ireland, and Norway, “Outcome Statement and Recommendations for the Way Forward,” First International Follow-Up Conference to the Adoption of the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA Declaration), April 23, 2024, [https://cms.ewipa.org/uploads/EWIPA\\_Troika\\_Outcome\\_Statement\\_8cc0c54c94.pdf](https://cms.ewipa.org/uploads/EWIPA_Troika_Outcome_Statement_8cc0c54c94.pdf) (accessed January 25, 2025).

<sup>21</sup> International Network on Explosive Weapons and Norwegian Red Cross, “Protection Forum,” Oslo, April 22, 2024, <https://www.inew.org/events/osloprotectionforum/> (accessed January 25, 2025).