

Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

Part A: Preamble

Section 1

- 1.1 As armed conflicts become more protracted, complex, and urbanised, the risks to civilians have increased. These risks are a source of major concern and they must be addressed. The causes of these risks involve a range of factors, including the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and pose complex challenges for the protection of civilians.
- 1.2 The use of explosive weapons in populated areas can have a devastating impact on civilians and civilian objects. The risks increase depending on a range of factors, including the weapon's explosive power, its level of accuracy, and the number of munitions used.
- 1.3 Blast and fragmentation effects, and resulting debris, cause deaths and injuries, including lifelong disabilities. Beyond these direct effects, civilian populations, particularly children, are exposed to severe and long-lasting indirect effects – often referred to as reverberating effects. Many of these effects stem from damage to or destruction of critical civilian infrastructure.
- 1.4 When critical civilian infrastructure, such as energy, food, water and sanitation systems, are damaged or destroyed the provision of basic needs and essential services, such as healthcare and education are disrupted. These services are often interconnected and, as a result, damage to one component or service can negatively affect services elsewhere, causing harm to civilians that can extend far beyond a weapon's impact area.
- 1.5 The damage and destruction of housing, schools, hospitals, places of worship and cultural heritage sites further aggravates civilian suffering. The environment can also be impacted by the use of explosive weapons, through the contamination of air, soil, water, and other resources.
- 1.6 The use of explosive weapons in populated areas can also result in psychological and psychosocial harm to civilians. The direct and indirect effects often result in the displacement of people within and across borders, and have a severe impact on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Unexploded ordnance impedes humanitarian access, the return of displaced persons and reconstruction efforts, and causes casualties long after hostilities have ended.
- 1.7 Many armed forces already implement policies and practices designed to avoid, and in any event minimise, civilian harm during hostilities. These can help armed forces to better understand the anticipated effects of explosive weapons on a military target and its surrounding areas, as well as the associated risk to civilians in populated areas. However, there is scope for practical improvements to achieve the full and universal implementation of, and compliance with, obligations under International Humanitarian Law, and the application and sharing of good policies and practices. Broadening and strengthening initiatives designed to share policies and practices on protecting civilians can support the promotion and better implementation of International Humanitarian Law.
- 1.8 We recognise the importance of efforts to record and track civilian casualties, and the use of all practicable measures to ensure appropriate data collection. This includes, where feasible, data disaggregated by sex and age. When possible, this data should be shared and made publicly available. Improved data on civilian harm would help to inform policies designed to avoid, and in any event minimise, civilian harm; aid efforts to investigate harm to civilians; support efforts to determine or establish accountability, and enhance lessons learned processes in armed forces.
- 1.9 We stress the imperative of addressing the short and long-term humanitarian consequences resulting from armed conflict involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. We welcome the on-going work of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and civil society on the impacts and humanitarian consequences arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

1.10 We also welcome work to empower, amplify, and integrate the voices of all those affected, including women and girls, and we encourage further research into the gendered impacts of the use of explosive weapons.

Section 2

- 2.1 We reaffirm our obligations under applicable international law, including International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, and related commitments. These include our obligations to hold accountable those responsible for violations, and our commitment to end impunity.
- 2.2 Existing International Humanitarian Law provides the legal framework to regulate the conduct of armed conflict. It is applicable to the use of explosive weapons in all situations of armed conflict, and to all parties to an armed conflict, including both State and non-State armed groups. We stress the importance of full compliance with International Humanitarian Law as a means to protect civilians and civilian objects and to avoid, and in any event minimise, civilian harm when conducting military operations, in particular within populated areas.
- 2.3 We recall the obligations on all parties to armed conflict to comply with International Humanitarian Law under all circumstances, including when conducting military operations in populated areas. We recall in particular the obligation to distinguish between combatants and civilians as well as between civilian objects and military objectives at all times in the conduct of military operations, and to direct attacks only against military objectives. We recall further the prohibitions against indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, and the obligation to take all feasible precautions in attack and against the effects of attacks. We also recall the obligations under International Humanitarian Law related to the general protection of civilians against dangers arising from military operations, and allowing and facilitating rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need.
- 2.4 We condemn tactics designed to exploit the proximity of civilians or civilian objects to military objectives in populated areas, as well as the use of improvised explosive devices directed against civilians or civilian objects, and other violations of International Humanitarian Law, including by non-State armed groups, which further exacerbate the risks to civilians and are of grave concern.
- 2.5 While there is no general prohibition against the use of explosive weapons, any use of explosive weapons must comply with International Humanitarian Law.
- 2.6 We strongly condemn any attacks directed against civilians, other protected persons and civilian objects, including civilian evacuation convoys, as well as indiscriminate shelling and the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons.
- 2.7 We welcome the work of the United Nations Security Council and the General Assembly to strengthen the protection of civilians during armed conflict and to strengthen compliance with International Humanitarian Law. In this regard, we recall UNSC and UNGA Resolutions dealing with the protection of civilians in armed conflicts.

Part B: Operative Section

Committed to strengthening the protection of civilians and civilian objects during and after armed conflict, addressing the humanitarian consequences arising from armed conflict involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and strengthening compliance with and improving the implementation of applicable International Humanitarian Law, we will:

Section 3

- 3.1 Implement, and, where necessary, review, develop or improve national policy and practice with regard to the protection of civilians during armed conflict involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

- 3.2 Ensure comprehensive training of our armed forces on the application of International Humanitarian Law and on the policies and good practices to be applied during the conduct of hostilities in populated areas to protect civilians and civilian objects.
- 3.3 Ensure that our armed forces adopt and implement a range of 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.
- 3.4 Ensure that our armed forces, including in their policies and practices, take into account the direct and indirect effects on civilians and civilian objects which can reasonably be foreseen in the planning of military operations and the execution of attacks in populated areas, and conduct damage assessments, to the degree feasible, and identify lessons learned.
- 3.5 Ensure the marking, clearance, and removal or destruction of explosive remnants of war as soon as feasible after the end of active hostilities in accordance with our obligations under applicable international law, and support the provision of risk education.
- 3.6 Facilitate the dissemination and understanding of International Humanitarian Law and promote its respect and implementation by all parties to armed conflict, including by non-State armed groups.

Section 4

- 4.1 Strengthen international cooperation and assistance among armed forces, and other relevant stakeholders, including in the context of partnered military operations, with respect to exchanges of technical and tactical expertise, and humanitarian impact assessments, in order to develop good policies and practices to enhance the protection of civilians, particularly with regard to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- 4.2 Collect, share, and make publicly available disaggregated data on the direct and indirect effects on civilians and civilian objects of military operations involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, where feasible and appropriate.
- 4.3 Facilitate the work of the United Nations, the ICRC and relevant civil society organisations collecting data on the impact on civilians of military operations involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, as appropriate.
- 4.4 Facilitate rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to those in need in situations of armed conflict in accordance with applicable international law, including International Humanitarian Law.
- 4.5 Provide, facilitate, or support assistance to victims - people injured, survivors, families of people killed or injured - as well as communities affected by armed conflict. Adopt a holistic, integrated, gender-sensitive, and non-discriminatory approach to such assistance, taking into account the rights of persons with disabilities, and supporting post-conflict recovery and durable solutions.
- 4.6 Facilitate the work of the United Nations, the ICRC, other relevant international organisations and civil society organisations aimed at protecting and assisting civilian populations and addressing the direct and indirect humanitarian impact arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, as appropriate.
- 4.7 Meet on a regular basis to review in a collaborative spirit the implementation of this Declaration and identify any relevant additional measures that may need to be taken. These meetings could include the exchange and compilation of good policies and practices and an exchange of views on emerging concepts and terminology. The United Nations, the ICRC, other relevant international organisations and civil society organisations may participate in these meetings. We encourage further work, including structured intergovernmental and military-to-military exchanges, which may help to inform meetings on this Declaration.
- 4.8 Actively promote this Declaration, distribute it to all relevant stakeholders, pursue its adoption and effective implementation by the greatest possible number of States, and seek adherence to its commitments by all parties to armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.

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