

UN Secretary-General's report on protection of civilians: explosive weapons

Landmine Action, 18 June 2009

The [Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict \(S/2009/277, 29 May 2009, paragraphs 35-36\)](#) welcomes progress on the elimination of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions through the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty (MBT) and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) but expresses growing concern at the indiscriminate and severe humanitarian impact from explosive weapons in general, in particular when used in densely populated areas. Furthermore while urging all states to sign and ratify both the MBT and CCM without delay, the Secretary General also urges "Member States, in consultation with relevant United Nations and other actors, to consider this issue [of explosive weapons] further."

By highlighting explosive weapons as a broad category of concern at the time of use as well as after conflict (in the form of landmines, unexploded cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war), this section of the Secretary General's report presents an important and progressive framework for engaging with a key humanitarian issue within the international phenomenon of armed violence.

The report notes that the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas of Sri Lanka and Gaza has been a particular cause of concern in 2009 (see also, Landmine Action [policy paper on explosive violence in Gaza](#).¹) The report also states that in addition to civilian casualties caught in the area of explosive blast, and the ongoing threat of explosive remnants of war, explosive weapons also cause damage to infrastructure vital to the civilian population.

While implicit in the concern over use of explosive weapons in populated areas, what the Secretary General's report does not note is the extent to which the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), often by non-state armed groups and individuals is also a major cause of death, injury and impoverishment to civilians (see, Landmine Action [presentation on IEDs to the Group of Governmental Experts to the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, Amended Protocol II](#).²)

In 2006, Landmine Action, in partnership with the medical charity Medact,³ compiled a database of incidents involving the use of explosive weapons based on English-language media reports over a period of just 6 months.⁴

- A total of 1,836 incidents were documented in some 58 countries or territories resulting in a total minimum reported killed of 6,115 and a total minimum reported wounded of 12,670.
- Civilians⁵ were involved in 64% of incidents (1,180), comprising 69% of the total reported killed (4,237), and 83% of the total reported wounded (10,556).
- Incidents in populated areas presented significant higher average numbers of killed and wounded per incident.⁶ The average number reported killed in attacks in populated areas was almost twice as high as in unpopulated areas; the average number reported wounded was more than three times higher.
- 83% of those killed and 90% of those injured in attacks in populated areas were civilians.

This data forms part of a more comprehensive report that Landmine Action will publish shortly entitled *Explosive violence: the problem of explosive weapons*. Analysis in UNIDIR's journal [Disarmament Forum 2009, no.2](#) also discusses the "stigmatisation" of explosive force in populated areas.⁷

Landmine Action welcomes the clear expression of concern from the UN Secretary-General regarding the humanitarian problems caused by explosive weapons. Landmine Action urges States, international organisations and civil society to further document the civilian harm caused by explosive weapons, work to prevent the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and support all efforts to minimise the post-conflict harm that explosive weapons cause.

NOTES

¹ Landmine Action (2009), Explosive violence – Israel and Gaza, online at:

[http://www.landmineaction.org/resources/Explosive%20violence%20-%20Israel%20and%20Gaza%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.landmineaction.org/resources/Explosive%20violence%20-%20Israel%20and%20Gaza%20(2).pdf)

² Landmine Action presentation on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to the Group of Governmental Experts of Amended Protocol II to the CCW, online at:

<http://www.landmineaction.org/resources/LMA%20presentation%20on%20IEDs%20to%20the%20UN%20CCW.pdf>

³ <http://www.medact.org>

⁴ Data was gathered using a methodology developed by Nathan Taback and Robin Coupland, see “Towards Collation and Modelling of the Global Cost of Armed Violence on Civilians”, *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 19 – 27 (2005).

⁵ The term civilian is used here to refer to persons who were not identifiable in the reports either as armed actors or security personnel. It should not be assumed that all of the dead and wounded who were identified as armed actors or security personnel would be legitimate military targets under international humanitarian law.

⁶ Populated areas - 1,080 incidents, 4417 killed, 10,377 wounded, other areas - 756 incidents, 1,698 killed and 2,293 wounded.

⁷ John Borrie, Maya Brehm, Silvia Cattaneo and David Atwood, “Learn, adapt, succeed: potential lessons from the Ottawa and Oslo processes for other disarmament and arms control challenges”, in *Disarmament Forum: Ideas for Peace and Security, 2009, no.2*, chapter online at: <http://www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art2860.pdf>