



Workshop: Explosive weapons in populated areas

Outline

Key highlights

Recent and current armed conflicts have illustrated the devastating consequences of the use of explosive weapons with wide-area impacts in populated areas. Such use of explosive weapons is a major cause of civilian death and injury. It also results in extensive and long-lasting damage to civilian objects, including essential infrastructure, with indirect effects like disruption to urban services, such as health care and water distribution, and the displacement of civilians.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) will exchange information and consider how to better coordinate their respective work on the issue, with a view to enhancing the protection of civilians through legal, policy and operational responses to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, in accordance with the 2013 Council of Delegates position.

Background information

Operative paragraph 4 of Resolution 7 of the 2013 Council of Delegates “*calls upon* States to strengthen the protection of civilians from the indiscriminate use and effects of explosive weapons, including through the rigorous application of existing rules of international humanitarian law, and to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated areas”.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement’s call echoes the ICRC’s position on explosive weapons in populated areas (EWPA), first published in its report on international humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts presented to the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (International Conference) in 2011, in which it stated that “due to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects and despite the absence of an express legal prohibition for specific types of weapons, the ICRC considers that explosive weapons with a wide impact area should be avoided in densely populated areas”.

Since 2011, the ICRC has been implementing a multidisciplinary strategy on EWPA, involving its experts working in the fields of protection, international humanitarian law, water and habitat, health, weapon contamination, dialogue with armed forces and communication. The ICRC has adopted an evidence-based approach to the issue, notably through: (a) documentation by a select number of its field delegations of the direct and reverberating effects on civilians and civilian infrastructure of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas; (b) analysis of the foreseeable design-dependent effects of certain explosive weapons, based on their technical characteristics; and (c) dialogue with armed forces on relevant military policy and practice. The key findings of this work will be published in an ICRC report and presented to National Societies during the workshop.

In parallel, many National Societies are operating in contexts in which explosive weapons are regularly being used in populated areas, with devastating humanitarian consequences, including those described above. This use of explosive weapons is impacting the capacity of National Societies to carry out their own relief activities. The protracted use of explosive weapons in urban contexts also has long-term detrimental effects on education and development.

With hostilities increasingly being conducted in cities and towns, the high cost to civilians of the use of explosive weapons in such environments is likely to continue to garner increasing attention in the coming years, including on national and international policy agendas. The workshop will provide the opportunity to discuss these issues.

Objectives of the workshop

The workshop will be chaired by the Norwegian Red Cross.

The main objectives are to:

- raise awareness among interested National Societies of the impact of EWPA and of potential responses involving good practices and standard-setting in affected contexts;
- update National Societies on developments since the workshop on EWPA held at the 32nd International Conference;
- brief National Societies on the key elements of the ICRC's work and its upcoming public report on EWPA and recommendations;
- highlight the types of concrete measures that have been or may be employed by the ICRC and several National Societies to reduce the humanitarian impact of EWPA; and
- explore with interested National Societies how they may continue to work in this field and the types of support they may need.

The ICRC and several National Societies will present their activities and working plans on the issue of EWPA, including National Societies that have reported activities in the draft report accompanying Resolution 7 to be submitted at the 2017 Council of Delegates. National Societies operating in contexts where the use of EWPA is a feature of the conduct of hostilities will also be invited to share their experiences and the challenges encountered.

References

Resolution 7 of the 2013 Council of Delegates, "Weapons and international humanitarian law": <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/red-cross-crescent-movement/council-delegates-2013/cod13-r7-weapons-and-ihl-adopted-eng.pdf>

The ICRC webpage on EWPA: www.icrc.org/ewpa