

# Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

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A deadly threat to children



© UNICEF/UNI488744/Zaqout  
October 2023, Nasser Hospital, the Gaza Strip  
Shaimaa, 8, dreams of becoming a journalist.  
She lost her hand and her foot when a neighboring house was shelled.

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# 1. Introduction

Explosive weapons, particularly when they are used in populated areas, pose a deadly threat to children across the globe. Every year thousands of children are killed or seriously injured, or have their lives severely altered, during armed conflict and long after hostilities have ended. The [Political Declaration on the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas](#) (EWIPA) adopted in Dublin in November 2022, provides a crucial opportunity to better protect children, their families, and communities from armed conflict.

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## 2. Opportunity: EWIPA Political Declaration

The EWIPA Declaration, if effectively implemented, will save children's lives in conflict-affected zones.

History shows that ending the use of certain weapons and updating military practice to follow new norms are possible. The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions demonstrate the life-or-death difference international agreements make for children. The EWIPA Declaration, like the Safe Schools Declaration, while not legally binding, can prove an effective tool to minimize civilian harm and better protect children during times of war.

UNICEF encourages:

- **all parties to conflict** and those with influence over them, to protect and ensure respect for children's rights including by **ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas**.
- **all Member States to sign the EWIPA Declaration** and calls on Member States that are already signatories, to identify and **adopt military measures, policies, and practices that reduce harm to children**, share them with other countries, and encourage others, including non-state armed groups, to do the same.
- **Member States who are signatories to speak out about the devastating impact of EWIPA on children; urge warring parties around the world to cease the use of EWIPA**; honor their promise to "actively promote the Declaration"; and "seek adherence to its commitments by all parties to armed conflict, including non-state armed groups".
- **Member States to provide sustained, financial support for programmes and interventions that will protect children from EWIPA** through research, injury surveillance and other data collection systems, advocacy, conflict preparedness and protection, explosive ordnance risk education, clearance, and victim assistance.
- **Member States to refrain from transferring explosive weapons to warring parties that are likely to use them against civilians and civilian objects** in line with the [Arms Trade Treaty](#) ([113 State Parties](#) and [28 signatories](#)).
- **Member States**, international organizations and civil society **to gather and share evidence and data**, including casualty tracking and mental health, **on the direct and indirect impact of explosive weapons** on children to support the case for child protection.



February, 2024, Goma, DRC  
Kikuru and Kito, both 10, were in the 8th grade when they left home after it was hit by bombs.

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## 3. Rationale

Armed conflicts are increasingly fought in cities, towns, villages or other populated areas, a trend expected to persist as urbanization continues. With these shifts, weapons originally designed for use in open battlefields are increasingly being used in populated areas, posing a considerable threat to civilians and civilian objects. The fact that an armed force or group considers that a practice is permitted under international humanitarian law does not mean that it does not harm children.

The use of EWIPA is a significant contributor to grave violations against children. Civilians account for more than 90 per cent of casualties on average when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, according to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), many inevitably children. **Between 2018 and 2022 explosive weapons were responsible for 49.8 per cent of all instances of children killed and maimed (47,534) verified by the United Nations in 24 conflict situations across the world<sup>1</sup>.** The vast majority of these children were living in populated areas<sup>2</sup>. The suffering of survivors of EWIPA is immense. Beyond the physical injuries and psychological impact, the use of EWIPA causes indirect or 'reverberating' effects that are disastrous for communities and affect many more children. This has been demonstrated in numerous recent or ongoing armed conflicts, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia, Israel, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine and Yemen among others.

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### 3.1. Direct effects

#### Killing and maiming

Thousands of children are killed and injured every year by air strikes, artillery fire, improvised explosive devices and other explosive weapons. **Between 2018 and 2022, as verified by the United Nations, at least 23,420 children lost their lives or were seriously injured as a result of the use of explosive weapons (30.6 per cent by explosive ordnance, 26.2 per cent by aerial operations, 22.2 per cent by improvised explosive device incidents, 15.9 per cent by artillery/shelling, and 5.1 per cent by unspecified explosive weapons).** In comparison, during the same five-year period, explosive weapons killed or injured 1.7 times more children than those who were killed or injured by gunshots and other firearms (14,000 casualties).

The widespread use of explosive weapons in the Gaza Strip, State of Palestine – one of the most densely populated areas in the world – has made it “the most dangerous place in the world to be a child” with thousands of children killed and many missing and believed under the rubble of collapsed buildings and homes. Between February 2022 and February 2024, at least 1,639 children have been killed or injured by explosive weapons in Ukraine. In Myanmar, children are also affected by explosive weapons. In one incident on 5 February 2024, four school children and two teachers were killed as the result of an air strike on two schools.

Child survivors of explosive weapons endure devastating physical injuries – some lose their sight, hearing or limbs, while others lose the ability to speak. Children injured by explosive weapons require more care and attention than adults with the same injuries. When they suffer blast injuries their chance of survival is lower than adults. Their smaller and growing bodies require more frequent and specialized access to health, rehabilitation, and prosthetic services. If physical injuries to children are not treated quickly and appropriately, there is a greater risk of death or permanent injury. Children who have been injured, especially those left with disabilities, have different physical rehabilitation needs than adults and, in situations where resources are limited, they are less likely to receive age-appropriate assistance.

Ali, 17, lost both of his hands during shelling in western Mosul in Iraq in 2017.

**“Life is very complicated [since the shelling],”** said Ali, who now uses a prosthetic arm.

**“I had to drop out of school because I couldn’t stand being bullied.”** Ali said it has been difficult to find work because potential employers don’t think he can do certain jobs.

**“I’d like to work in a store. I see myself as capable and useful, despite my disability.”**

The lives of children who survive explosive weapons, even those who are not physically injured, are significantly altered and they often endure different forms of distress or post-traumatic disorders such as persistent fear, severe anxiety, difficulty sleeping or concentrating, nightmares, withdrawal or a loss of appetite. This creates a significant public health issue that is often overlooked and not well understood nor measured. The violence and upheaval around children can induce stress that interferes with their physical and cognitive development, jeopardizing their ability to learn as well as the development of their brains. Many of them will need critical and sustained mental health and psychosocial support.

As of 24 February 2024, children in Ukraine’s frontline areas had been forced to spend between 3,000 and 5,000 hours – equivalent to between four and almost seven months – sheltering in basements and underground metro stations, as air raid alerts sounded above, since the escalation of war two years prior. This has had a devastating impact on children’s mental health and their ability to effectively learn.

March, 2017, Aleppo, the Syrian Arab Republic  
Saja, 13, lost her four best friends in a bomb attack. She also lost her leg in the same attack.





December 2023, Bago region, Myanmar  
Aung, 15, accidentally stepped on a landmine. His badly shattered left leg had to be amputated to save his life.

**“I really miss my home, my house,” Veronika, 9, says. “I miss school. I want to go there, but we can’t because there are always air-raid sirens.”**

## Denial of humanitarian access

The use of bombs, shells, rockets and improvised explosive devices can prevent humanitarian workers and supplies from reaching communities or areas in need. Humanitarian, healthcare, and local technical workers around the world are often at risk when working in conflicts. Water and sanitation technical staff, for example, often come under attack, or are injured or killed while repairing critical civilian infrastructure. Even the threat of attack can deter maintenance or repair of essential infrastructure, leaving communities without power, safe water or means of communication.

Humanitarian agencies also depend on existing civilian infrastructure to move supplies and to deliver services. Without cranes to offload humanitarian cargo, or bridges and roads to safely move food or drugs, the ability of humanitarian actors to reach children in need is severely restricted.

## Displacement

The use of EWIPA can cause or exacerbate displacement in multiple ways, including when people fear injury or death and flee airstrikes, artillery or other explosive weapons. In the Sudan, for example, children’s hospitals had to evacuate as shelling moved closer.

People are also forced to flee when their homes or essential infrastructure are destroyed, essential services and livelihoods interrupted, or humanitarian aid cannot reach them because of the use of explosive weapons.

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## 3.2 Reverberating effects

The use of EWIPA often triggers humanitarian consequences for a much larger part of the population than those in the immediate vicinity of the impact zone – and long after the explosions have stopped.

When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, civilian infrastructure often falls within the radius of the weapons, whether or not it was the intended target, resulting in damaged or destroyed essential services. EWIPA destroy water pipelines, sanitation facilities, hospitals, schools and playgrounds. They destroy power plants, cranes and bridges needed to provide assistance and protection services to children.

Health, water and sanitation and other essential services, particularly in populated areas, are characterized by their complexity and interconnectedness. The disruption of any single component of this system can have multiple, cascading consequences. These include outbreaks of waterborne diseases, the release of chlorine gas, and displacement on a massive scale.

If alternatives to access safe water are unavailable, disease outbreaks can occur within days. In protracted conflicts, children under 5 are more than 20 times more likely to die from diarrheal disease linked to unsafe water and sanitation than violence in conflict.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas also often has a devastating impact on education. In the Gaza Strip, for example, following the escalation of conflict in October 2023, close to 90 per cent of all school buildings had sustained damages by November 2023, and nearly 80 per cent of the remaining school facilities were being used as shelters for internally displaced people.

March 2022, Mosul, Iraq  
Yousef, 12, holds destroyed books at Jummuria Secondary School, severely damaged by shelling.



In Ukraine, over half of school-aged children enrolled this schoolyear had been unable to access full-time face-to-face learning by November 2023. Damage to schools and power cuts following attacks on critical infrastructure also hinder children's ability to access education in-person and online, putting the future for millions of children at risk. Since the escalation of the war in 2022, 864 educational institutions have been damaged and 245 destroyed.

Attacks on power plants in Ukraine are also seriously impacting children, especially during winter, when temperatures can reach as low as -20°C. Blackouts and power cuts make it extremely challenging for health facilities and the education system to provide critical services.

**"I'm so upset because my house and school are destroyed,"** Misha, 9, said. Many of the buildings in his neighborhood in Ukraine have been reduced to rubble.

The disruption of access to essential education, health, water and sanitation services can also force children to bear the consequences of conflict for the rest of their lives. Long-term harm caused by repeated disruptions or receiving services of a consistently lower quality leads to various impacts, including malnutrition, delayed physical and mental development, reduced levels of education, and diminished household and community prosperity.

November 2022, Chernihiv, Ukraine  
Lidia, a pediatrician, meeting with a patient at a temporary hospital after the city's main hospital was shelled.





### 3.3 Explosive ordnance contamination

Even after conflict subsides, the effects of explosive weapons reverberate for years to come. Landmines and remnants of war still claim many lives across the world. In 2022, children made up 66 per cent of civilian casualties for whom the age group was known in 35 states and one other area according to the Landmine Monitor 2023. Children are particularly vulnerable to landmines and other remnants of war, often attracted to them for their colourful appearance and unaware of how dangerous they are or because these dangerous devices can be sold on the scrap metal market and thus become a source of income for children and families in need.

Ukraine is one of the most mine-contaminated countries globally with up to 25 per cent of the country's territory affected by mines and explosive remnants of war according to the government. Mines and other explosive devices caused at least 120 child casualties between February 2022 and February 2024. Myanmar also ranks today among the countries most heavily contaminated by landmines and explosive remnants of war worldwide – 226 children were killed and injured in 2023 by these ordnance and nearly three times as many civilian casualties were recorded in 2023 compared to 2022.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the explosive ordnance from previous conflicts continue to put the lives of children at risk, killing and maiming 85 children in 2022.

Each single unexploded ordnance represents an unacceptable lethal threat for children: in June 2023, in the Lower Shabelle region in Somalia, one old mortar shell killed 27 children while they were playing with it.

In the Gaza Strip and beyond, meanwhile, the contamination by explosive remnants of war is unprecedented, with potentially tens of thousands of remnants scattered – a lethal threat to children that could last for decades.

April 2024, Kassala state, the Sudan  
Noha, a dedicated psychologist, trained by UNICEF, guides Walaa through the journey of healing. Walaa had to flee when her neighbour's house was bombed, tragically killing everyone inside.





March, 2023, Aleppo, the Syrian Arab Republic. Iman, 13, is attending remedial classes.

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## 4. What is UNICEF doing?

UNICEF, alongside our humanitarian partners, is ready to respond to the needs generated by armed conflict, providing lifesaving aid and strengthening systems to protect children and support their survival, health and development.

UNICEF focuses on the most vulnerable children and their families to:

- provide them with the essential interventions required for their protection;
- save lives; and
- ensure the rights of all children, everywhere, are realized.

This includes interventions to ensure access to food, shelter, social support and health care. UNICEF rehabilitates and upgrades destroyed water and sanitation systems, provides cash transfers to displaced families because of conflict, or provides education in emergencies and mental health and psychological interventions to children affected by EWIPA.

UNICEF also assists survivors of EWIPA through facilitation of medical care, provision of artificial limbs, availability of mental and emotional support, and access to education – and helps build our government and civil society partners' capacity to protect and support children with disabilities as well.

For example, in 2023, UNICEF supported more than 8 million children in 19 countries in receiving life-saving explosive ordnance risk education, mostly in regions affected by ongoing conflicts. During the same period, UNICEF helped rehabilitate 5,712 children injured by remnants of war and landmines in 13 countries. In the State of Palestine, Ukraine, Yemen and other conflict situations, UNICEF is increasingly investing in developing vital and practical messaging for children and their communities on how they can protect themselves from the use of EWIPA in the context of shelling or airstrikes.

But this will never be enough to protect all children from the use of EWIPA. The evidence of harm is overwhelming: when explosive weapons are used in populated areas children's most fundamental rights are endangered.

- 1 List of countries: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso (included since 2020), Cameroon (as part of the Lake Chad Basin region until 2019, and as a new situation since 2020), Central African Republic, Colombia, Chad (as part of the Lake Chad Basin region), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia (included since 2022), India (included until 2021), Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mozambique (included since 2022), Myanmar, Niger (as part of the Lake Chad Basin region), Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine (included since 2022), and Yemen.
- 2 As a global trend, the vast majority of civilian casualties from explosive weapons are reported in populated areas. For example in 2022, 19,632 civilians casualties from explosive weapons were recorded by AOAV in populated areas, which represented 94% of globally reported civilian casualties. <https://aoav.org.uk/2023/explosive-violence-monitor-2022/>

# for every child,

Whoever she is.

Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

A future.

A fair chance.

That's why UNICEF is there.

For each and every child.

Working day in and day out.

In more than 190 countries and territories.

Reaching the hardest to reach.

The furthest from help.

The most excluded.

It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.