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Hidden Victims:

Additional Humanitarian Consequences of Explosive Weapons Use

On November 13, 2011, just after midnight, twin blasts echoed over Swabi, Pakistan. Government Girls Primary School No. 3 was bombed by the Taliban. When morning broke, more than two hundred girls between the ages of 4 and 15 woke to find themselves without a school building.¹ This case is a typical example of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in all but one way: no civilians were killed or injured. Such no casualty or low casualty events typically receive little media attention in contrast to bombings resulting in significant civilian casualties. However, even when explosive weapons do not kill and injure at the time of the blast, they inflict severe consequences on affected communities. Explosive weapons trigger humanitarian crises, amplify social inequalities, inflict psychological trauma, and economically paralyze communities for decades after their initial use. The international community has begun considering the humanitarian effects of explosive weapons. As they do, it is vitally important they look at both immediate casualties and the hidden victims² to fully explore the consequences of explosive weapons for the individuals and communities affected by them.

What are the problems with explosive weapons?

Explosive weapons are unpredictable. The size and force of their explosions are inconsistent, and many explosive weapons are inaccurate. This means that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, they can lead to significant civilian casualties. Data gathered by NGOs indicates that in such situations at least 90% of casualties are civilians.³ Beyond the obvious concerns about civilian casualties in war, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas negatively impacts individuals and communities in a variety of ways. Though immediate civilian casualties may be particularly visible, they are far from the only humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons. In the international discourse about explosive weapons use, many less visible but long-lasting consequences often go overlooked.

Wider harm

Explosive weapons' destruction of critical infrastructure has devastating effects on affected communities' health and education systems. The destruction of hospitals, water and sewer lines, roads, electrical grids

¹ "Pakistani girls defy Taliban school bombing" *Reuters*, 16 November 2011,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/16/us-pakistan-taliban-schools-idUSTRE7AF0GP20111116>

² The term "victims" is used to mean all persons who have been killed or suffered physical or psychological injury, economic loss, social marginalisation, or substantial impairment of the realisation of their rights caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated. They include those persons directly impacted by these weapons as well as their affected families and communities. Casualties and survivors are specific subsets of victims who have been directly injured or killed by explosive weapons.

³ Hunter, J. and R. Perkins, "Explosive States: Monitoring explosive violence in 2014," *Action on Armed Violence*, May 2015, <https://aoav.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AOAV-Explosive-States-monitoring-explosive-violence-in-2014.pdf>

and infrastructure often trigger humanitarian crises. When civilians have difficulty finding reliable access to clean water and food, infectious diseases spread rapidly, and damage to hospitals and roads makes it difficult for people to access emergency medical treatment and other medical services. Physicians for Human Rights documented 271 attacks on 202 separate medical facilities throughout Syria since March 2011. Of the attacks on medical facilities from January to May of 2015, 95% were carried out using explosive weapons from aircraft.⁴

Damage to schools may also contribute to these humanitarian crises, as schools are often key points for the delivery of humanitarian aid and government services. The destruction of schools also disrupts children's access to education, preventing them from achieving their full potential and making it difficult for them to succeed later in life. After the Taliban's midnight bombing, classes for the two hundred girls of School No. 3 were suspended temporarily. Though teachers resumed lessons after only a few days, they did so with no school buildings or other facilities, teaching in the rubble of their former classrooms.⁵

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas also economically debilitates regions for years after the initial destruction. In urban areas, explosive weapons kill and injure productive workers and damage critical infrastructure, necessitating costly repairs to buildings, roads, and utility grids. The 2009 suicide bombing of the Moon Market in Lahore, Pakistan, destroyed over 60 shops and 90 stalls causing millions of dollars of damage. Even four years after the blast, businesses told researchers from Action on Armed Violence that they had lost 50-70% of their business due to fears of another attack.⁶ Obtaining capital to rebuild can be very difficult for small businesses and for communities more generally.

The destruction of residential buildings has wide-ranging humanitarian impacts. The lack of shelter and heating can lead to indirect deaths especially during the winter months. Since the conflict in Syria began, the Violation Documentation Centre has recorded 72 civilian deaths from cold including 45 children. The data indicates that newborns and infants are at particular risk in the aftermath of explosive weapons use on residential buildings when families are forced to live in inadequate housing during the winter. Children under one year old made up 46% of child casualties and 29% of all casualties from cold in Syria.⁷ These indirect casualties often happen long after the bombing and can be easily overlooked when considering the humanitarian impact of explosive weapons use.

The destruction of residential buildings is a prime driver of displacement. Beyond the fear of death or injury from the explosive weapons themselves, destruction of homes forces families to find safety and shelter elsewhere. In areas with wide-spread use of explosive weapons, it can be difficult for displaced families to secure safe and affordable housing.

The population displacement caused by explosive weapons can also prevent societies from recovering. Better-educated citizens like doctors, engineers, or other skilled workers typically have greater means to

⁴ Physicians for Human Rights, "Worst Month Yet for Attacks on Hospitals in Syrian Conflict," 18 June 2015, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/worst-month-yet-for-attacks-on-hospitals-in-syrian-conflict.html#sthash.H9mtsLxN.dpuf>

⁵ "Pakistani girls defy Taliban school bombing" *Reuters*

⁶ Dodd, H. "Anatomy of a Suicide Bombing: Moon Market attack, Lahore, Pakistan," *Action on Armed Violence*, December 2013.

⁷ Violation Documentation Centre, [VDC Martyr's database](#). A number of prisoner deaths from cold documented in the VDC database were not included in this total as they were attributed to poor prison conditions rather than destruction of residential buildings.

escape the threat of explosive weapons within their country or abroad, but may not return once fighting has stopped if they have established lives in other locations. It is particularly difficult for societies to rebuild without these vital personnel. It is hard to rebuild infrastructure when the engineers have fled; it is hard to rebuild a community when the teachers have fled and it is hard to rebuild an economy when the business owners have fled. Explosive weapons use also puts immense economic pressure on affected families. When primary providers have been killed and injured, families are forced to find other ways to survive. Serious injuries often transform productive workers into dependents with costly medical bills, unable to contribute to the family's livelihood but requiring significant levels of care.

When communities are subjected to the intense pressures of explosive weapons, existing social inequalities are often amplified. Men and boys are typically killed and injured more frequently by explosive weapons than women and girls. In societies with rigid gender roles, when men are killed or disabled, financial pressures may force women to find employment. However, as employers often discriminate against women in hiring, women must take low paying or high risk jobs, working long hours to provide for their families. Furthermore, with women out of the home working, young women and girls may be expected to perform housework and other domestic duties. Families often pull girls out of school sooner than boys and take longer to return them to their studies. With their education thus disrupted, girls may have difficulty keeping up with their male classmates.

Although the physical effects of explosive weapons on individuals and communities are well-documented, their psychological damage often goes unnoticed. Psychological trauma can be just as crippling as physical injury, despite its hidden nature. The impact of explosive weapons use on mental health goes far beyond the current medical research on the topic.⁸ If left untreated, psychological injuries may never go away, haunting victims and their families for lifetimes. A few days after the bombing in Swabi, head teacher Razia Begum expressed her deep concern for her students' mental health. "My worry," she said, "is that we will spend our time helping the girls deal with fear instead of teaching them math and science."⁹ Although the debilitating psychological effects of explosive weapons were first recognized on battlefields over one hundred years ago as shell shock, emotional and psychological damage continue to be overlooked, misunderstood, and under-treated. What we know from the past about the mental health impacts of explosive weapons use may not apply to current situations. One hundred years ago shell shock developed among military personnel experiencing heavy bombardment with explosive weapons while in entrenched positions; today it is civilians experiencing heavy bombardment in cities and towns; we do not know how these changes will affect the mental health of those living under bombardment.

The hidden victims of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas can result from the destruction of businesses, infrastructure, health facilities, and residential buildings, as well as displacement and psychological trauma. Beyond the hidden human victims of explosive weapons use, the harm to the environment is often overlooked as well. Rubble, residue from weapons, emissions from destroyed manufacturing facilities and other results of explosive weapons use can cause lasting damage to the

⁸ ICRC, "Experts' Meeting - Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas: Humanitarian, Legal, Technical and Military Aspects," February 2015, http://www.inew.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/icrc_ewpa_report_12.06.2015.pdf

⁹ "Pakistani girls defy Taliban school bombing" *Reuters*

environment.¹⁰ The environment is yet another hidden victim of the explosive weapons used in populated areas.

Why are the complete humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons often overlooked?

The complete humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons use are often overlooked because they are less visible than deaths and injuries. There is also a significant media bias toward stories with obvious victims, instant photos and clear emotional narratives. While the long term economic outlook of families in affected regions warrants serious consideration, it may make for less compelling headlines than recent civilian casualties. Furthermore, many of the social, psychological, and economic consequences of explosive weapons take place on timelines of years and decades. Concerns about assisting immediate casualties rightfully take priority in most responses to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas yet a preventive approach or long term assistance and response are often needed as well.

What is being done about these problems and what remains to be accomplished?

The International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW) was formed in 2011. It is a network of nongovernmental organizations working together to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. INEW members undertake research and advocacy to promote greater understanding of the issue and concrete steps that can be taken to address it. Through their activities, INEW members are working to bring the complete range of effects of explosive weapons use in populated areas to the public consciousness. International treaties like the Ottawa Treaty (Mine Ban Treaty) and the Convention on Cluster Munitions present examples of success, and include provisions for addressing the long term consequences of these particular weapons for civilians.

INEW was formed because there remains a great deal to be accomplished. Some states remain reluctant to fully account for the humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons use, and many explosive weapons with the highest potential for affecting civilians continue to be used. Furthermore, in international institutions like the United Nations, victims' voices are underrepresented, and those victims who are given a chance to speak tend only to be casualties or their family members. With explosive weapons, casualties may be most visible, but they are far from the only victims. All victims of explosive weapons, whether physical, economic, psychological or social, must participate in the discussion.

How is Mines Action Canada involved?

Mines Action Canada is an INEW member organization and has been active on the issues around explosive weapons for over twenty years. MAC is a global leader in disarmament advocacy, and was an integral part of the successful negotiation of treaties banning landmines and cluster munitions. Mines Action Canada continues to push for wider international adoption of both these treaties and is involved in a variety of projects to assist victims and monitor the use of indiscriminate explosive weapons.

For more information, visit www.minesactioncanada.org or contact info@minesactioncanada.org.

¹⁰ Toxic Remnants of War Network, "TRW Sources," <http://www.trwn.org/trw-sources/>