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Ukraine Burns, but the World is Still on Fire: Patterns of Global Harm From Explosive Violence Since February 24, 2022

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Letter to the Editor

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 saw a transformation in the way explosive weapons are used on Ukrainian territory, and a consequent transformation in the patterns of harm associated with explosive violence.[1] However, while Europe's media hones in on the devastating conflict in Ukraine, parallel conflicts involving state and non-state actors go under-reported and forgotten.[2]

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) runs a global monitor of explosive violence, using an incident-based methodology to collect data on casualties of explosive weapons from reliable English-language news reports. The data are gathered on the following factors: the date, time, and location of the incident; the number and circumstances of people killed and injured; the weapon type; the reported user and target; the detonation method; and whether displacement or damage to the location was reported.[3] Data collected by AOAV from ongoing explosive violence around the world highlights high levels of explosive violence against civilians in many regions, and underscores the need to engage with both state and non-state armed actors if civilians and civilian objects are to be protected from explosive weapons during armed conflict and hostilities.[4]

Indeed, as Ukraine burns, the world is still on fire—and civilians still suffer the brunt of explosive violence everywhere. Between February 24, 2022 and January 31, 2023, 2402 incidents of explosive weapons use were recorded in 54 countries other than Ukraine.[5] A total of 53 percent (9392) of the resulting casualties have been civilians.[5]

A significant pattern emerging from this data, and one which stands in contrast to the coverage and international response emerging from Ukraine, is that 54% (5118) of global civilian casualties in populated areas since February 24, 2022 were caused by armed non-state actors (ANSAs), who are largely absent from multilateral efforts to engrain the protection of civilians in the practices of legal warfare. Correspondingly, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) caused 46% (4288) of civilian harm outside of Ukraine, in particular non-specific IEDs (2804 civilian casualties), car bombs (1014), and roadside bombs (437). In comparison, air-launched weapons have caused 16% (1518) of civilian casualties outside of Ukraine since February 24, 2022, and ground-launched weapons 33% (3103).[5]

Casualty recording has been a key driver behind the widespread civil society push to end the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA),[6] but efforts have been largely state and civil society-centric thus far.[7] On May 10, 2022, the United Nations Security Council released the Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Citing the fact that up to 160 million people live in areas under the direct control of non-state armed groups, the report pushes for strengthened humanitarian engagement with non-state actors.[8] Engaging with armed non-state actors (ANSAs) around healthcare infrastructure and access is consequently going to be a key driver in responding to civilian harm from IEDs through emergency trauma response, long-term physical and mental follow-up, and shelter.

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