

Report on a regional roundtable on strengthening the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

27-28 FEBRUARY 2025



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Article 36 is a specialist
non-profit organisation,
focused on reducing harm from
weapons.



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About Article 36. Article 36 is a specialist non-profit organisation, focused on reducing harm from weapons. We partner with civil society groups and governments to develop new policies and legal standards to prevent civilian harm from existing and future weapons.

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OVERVIEW OF WORKSHOP

Article 36 convened a regional roundtable from 27 – 28 February 2025 in Johannesburg, South Africa with state representatives from southern Africa and other key stakeholders including civil society and international organisations (UNIDIR and the ICRC). It focussed on building support for the ***Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*** as a framework that can help reduce harm to civilians living through armed conflict (see www.ewipa.org). The workshop aimed to do this by building dialogue among states, civil society, and international organizations in Southern Africa to encourage the endorsement and implementation of this Declaration and enhance regional cooperation in addressing the issue.

This report summarises reflections and recommendations from that workshop. This synthesis report is not intended to suggest agreement or consensus on the conclusions that it draws. It is a report on behalf of Article 36 but it is informed by the contributions of workshop participants. We appreciated the active engagement of all participants in the discussions.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) continues to cause devastating harm to civilians, including deaths, injuries, displacement, and destruction of essential infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, power networks and water systems. These impacts are especially acute in conflict-affected settings including Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, Lebanon, and eastern DRC, where civilians suffer long-term consequences when populated areas are subjected to bombing and shelling.

To address this, states - together with support from the UN, ICRC, and civil society, have developed the ***Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas***, adopted in Dublin in 2022, with 89 countries having joined so far. In Southern Africa, Comoros, Madagascar, and Malawi have endorsed the Declaration, while thirteen others have yet to do so.

The Declaration aims to strengthen civilian protection during conflict, aligning with African Union goals under Agenda 2063, the Kigali Principles, and the Safe Schools Declaration. Though not legally binding, it represents a strong political commitment to reduce harm and promote changes in military policy and practice. It calls on endorsing states to adopt national policies that respond to the immediate and long-term impacts of explosive weapons.

While Southern Africa is largely at peace, the region is not immune to the effects of explosive weapon use in populated areas. Armed conflict involving use of explosive weapons in towns and cities undermines development, contributes to insecurity, and risks hampering progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. The AU Peace and Security Council and the Maputo Communiqué¹ have already recognised the urgency of addressing these harms, and the 2024 Commonwealth IHL Pledge² renewed regional support for the Declaration.

By endorsing the Declaration, African states can help to play a key role in setting new global norms to reduce harm to civilians and further the AU's vision of a peaceful and prosperous continent.

1 Communiqué from Maputo Regional Conference on the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, 2017

2 2024 Commonwealth IHL Pledge, 6th Commonwealth Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference on International Humanitarian Law in Pretoria, South Africa, April 2024

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The roundtable highlighted a growing consensus among southern African states on the urgent need to address civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. With support from civil society, international organisations and other participating champion states, the workshop marked an important opportunity for regional dialogue and collaboration to advance the Political Declaration on EWIPA.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Many participating states expressed serious interest in endorsing the Political Declaration ahead of the November 2025 Costa Rica conference with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) announcing that the process to endorse the Declaration had already begun. Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia, Seychelles, and South Africa indicated active consultations underway.

Malawi, Madagascar, and Comoros shared experiences as early endorsers, outlining progress on military training reforms to include components on fighting in built-up areas, legal and policy reviews, consideration over policies on weapons procurement in line with the Declaration's commitments, and inter-ministerial coordination.

Civil society and international organisations including Article 36 (UK), Disarmament and Arms Control (South Africa), the ICRC (South Africa and HQ), UNIDIR (Switzerland), and the government of Ireland as depository for the Declaration, all offered technical and policy support to support national-level endorsement and implementation.

Strong support was voiced for data-driven implementation, using civilian harm tracking and feedback processes to shape military conduct and targeting policies to better understand impact on civilians. Similarly, participating organisations recommended states review and implement policies that avoid civilian harm by refraining from the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.

African states' leadership on humanitarian disarmament issues was acknowledged as an important foundation for helping to establish new norms against bombing and shelling in towns and cities.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- States are encouraged to formally endorse the Declaration by sending a Note Verbale to Ireland and announcing this at the Costa Rica Conference.
- Assign national focal points to lead internal consultations, inter-ministerial engagement, and coordination with civil society and international partners.
- Integrate EWIPA content into national IHL committee agendas and training curricula, and curricula at regional peacekeeping training centres.
- Review and update or develop, policies and procedures related to military targeting, use of wide-area effect explosive weapons, weapons procurement policies, and mechanisms to collect data.
- Organise national workshops, seeking support as required from organisations and other states, to build momentum and clarify understanding among all national stakeholders.
- Advocate for regional bodies (Southern African Development Community – SADC, and the African Union's Peace and Security Council) to include the issue of addressing civilian harm from use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and the Political Declaration, on the agenda.
- Strengthen regional cooperation through peer-to-peer support and military-to-military exchanges, drawing on lessons from the Safe Schools Declaration, the Arms Trade Treaty, Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Mine Ban Treaty.

OPENING AND FRAMING SESSIONS

The opening session brought together representatives from states, civil society, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to reaffirm the urgency of the issue and build momentum for wider endorsement in the region of Africa and implementation of the Political Declaration.

Joseph Dube, Disarmament and Arms Control (South Africa) opened the workshop by stressing the humanitarian urgency surrounding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, causing high numbers of civilian casualties. Explosive weapons, designed for use in open battlefields, cause immense destruction when used in populated areas, including long-term trauma, displacement, and damage to infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. Dube highlighted the 2022 Political Declaration on EWIPA, now endorsed by 88 states, as a critical international instrument to set new standards and protect civilians. Though not legally binding, it commits states to restrict and refrain from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and to adopt policies that prioritise humanitarian concerns, enable aid access, and support affected communities. While Southern Africa is not immune to armed violence—as seen in the eastern DRC, SADC states have shown leadership through the Maputo Communiqué and African Union processes, expressing concern and supporting action on this issue. Endorsing the Declaration is aligned with Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, and a starting point for more effective protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Sarah Mabeza, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in South Africa highlighted its unique dual mandate to promote International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and assist conflict-affected populations. It emphasised that while explosive weapons with wide area effects are not banned under international humanitarian law (IHL), their use in populated areas often breaches rules of distinction and proportionality. The ICRC strongly advocates for a policy of avoiding use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in populated areas, and cautioned that endorsement must not be merely symbolic – concrete changes in military policy and planning are essential. These include integrating civilian harm mitigation into operations, and robust data collection. The ICRC reiterated that addressing the humanitarian consequences from explosive weapons is a global issue that transcends national borders - from mass displacement to regional instability, and African states must lead in endorsing and implementing the Declaration.

Ms. Sicel'mpilo Shange-Buthane, Government of South Africa described the workshop as an important consultation, providing a much-needed platform for reflection, exchange of experiences, and policy consideration on a deeply pressing humanitarian issue. While South Africa has not yet endorsed the Declaration, Shange-Buthane confirmed that internal consultations are ongoing involving key ministries. She reaffirmed South Africa's strong commitment to IHL which is a foundational principle of South Africa's foreign policy and its approach to multilateralism,

peace, and security. In this context, the humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons in populated areas present serious challenges that must be addressed. Ms Shange-Buthane expressed deep concern over the devastating situation in Gaza, underscoring the urgent need for greater protection of civilians in armed conflict. As current G20 President, South Africa is prioritising humanitarian and peace issues.

Steven Murphy, Government of Ireland provided an overview of the Declaration's development, noting it was developed through collaboration among states, civil society, and international organisations. While not a treaty, it is a practical tool to promote change, that commit states to forward-looking, common-sense measures—such as policy review, training, operational planning, data collection, and facilitating humanitarian access. Acknowledging today's challenges to multilateralism and IHL, Murphy urged continued commitment to strengthening protection norms rather than retreating from them. He described the Declaration as a long-term, positive agenda—one rooted in real-world conflict dynamics, and essential to all regions and continents. Murphy praised Africa's role in shaping the Declaration and urged more states to join. He reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to supporting states through the endorsement and implementation process, particularly ahead of the Costa Rica conference in November 2025.

Linn Meinert Schøning, Representative of Norway. Norway, a key champion of the Declaration, underscored its life-saving potential and the role the Declaration can play in setting new standards in modern conflict. Schøning pointed to the 2024 Oslo conference to review implementation, which reaffirmed broad political support and showcased how states are integrating the Declaration's commitments into policy, doctrine, and operational practice, particularly in improving precautions to avoid civilian harm. Norway emphasised the importance of multistakeholder collaboration and highlighted the UNODA information portal (www.ewipa.org) as a tool to assist states. If fully implemented and widely endorsed, the Declaration can save lives, prevent harm, and establish new global standards on civilian protection in conflict. It also strengthens collective understanding of the short- and long-term humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons. Lastly, Norway reiterated that at a time when IHL faces serious challenges, the Declaration is a vital step in reinforcing humanitarian norms and protecting civilians in armed conflict.

Quent Kalichero, Government of Malawi. Malawi reaffirmed its commitment to the Declaration which it has already endorsed. Kalichero described the initiative as both a moral imperative and a legal responsibility aligned with Malawi's dedication to IHL and civilian protection. While not directly affected by conflict, Malawi recognises the devastating impact of EWIPA in neighbouring regions and stressed the importance of regional solidarity. Kalichero highlighted Malawi's current implementation efforts including work with the National Defence College to integrate civilian protection into military training and education. Malawi expressed hope that the Declaration would reduce urban bombing, strengthen accountability, and build international cooperation.

SESSION 1. THE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

Participants heard expert presentations on the direct, indirect and reverberating effects of the humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons in populated areas. Speakers drew on contexts and experiences of affected countries, communities and individuals, including looking in particular at the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as Sudan, Mozambique, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Alma Taslidžan, Humanity & Inclusion, highlighted the severe humanitarian consequences of using explosive weapons in populated areas, with particular concern over those with wide area effects. These weapons - including rockets, mortars, artillery, and air-dropped bombs, cause blast and fragmentation injuries that present significant risk of harm to civilians. The direct impacts include life-changing injuries such as amputations, paralysis, blindness, and traumatic brain injuries, often requiring long-term rehabilitation and physiotherapy. Children are especially vulnerable, with field data from Syria showing that bombing and shelling are primary drivers of forced displacement and psychological trauma, including depression, anxiety, fear, and hopelessness.

The use of these weapons also causes reverberating effects by destroying critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, water and electricity supplies, compounding harm and obstructing humanitarian aid when it is most urgently needed. The destruction often renders entire urban areas uninhabitable, making normal life impossible. Long-term dangers also persist through explosive remnants of war (ERW), posing ongoing threats to civilians, especially children. These cumulative impacts illustrate why the use of such weapons in populated areas is incompatible with protecting civilians and why change is both urgent and possible. Drawing on a field study from Syria, it was highlighted that the first catalyst of forced displacement was bombing and shelling.

Eddy Luketi Kazila, Government of the DRC, described the catastrophic impact of three decades of conflict in eastern DRC including extensive civilian casualties and massive displacement. A recent escalation in fighting including use of 122mm rockets and mortars which has resulted in 4,000 civilian deaths in 48 hours, and yet more injured causing hospitals to be overwhelmed and unable to deal with demand. Major cities including Goma and Bukavu were without electricity and water, and humanitarian access has become extremely difficult. By the end of February 2025, more than 50 schools had been destroyed, with many children having no access to school or education. In addition to schools, hospitals and refugee camps as well as housing have all been attacked.

Other reflections included:

- Complex conflict dynamics see the involvement of both state and non-state actors present significant challenges for protecting civilians, particularly in densely populated areas.

- Risk education and victim assistance were identified as under-resourced but vital components of effective response. The need for inclusive, context-specific assistance was emphasised.
- There was strong support for expanding regional engagement and encouraging further endorsements of the Declaration, with participants acknowledging its value as a framework to reduce harm and improve civilian protection in conflict alongside other international agreements such as the Mine Ban Treaty and Convention on Cluster Munitions.

SESSION 2. ADAPTING MILITARY POLICIES AND PRACTICES

This session highlighted that changes are needed to military policy and practice to better prioritise and strengthen the protection of civilians including by restricting the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in order to reduce civilian harm. Presentations highlighted that the commitments in the Political Declaration suggest actions in these areas including reviewing military doctrines and practices, as essential measures to reduce civilian harm.

Sarah Mabeza, ICRC South Africa, emphasised that making practical, operational changes to military policies and practices is essential to reducing civilian harm. She highlighted the ICRC's report, *"Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas"* and noted that the Declaration provides a vital tool to help states move from recognition of harm to preventative action. Mabeza highlighted that international humanitarian law places prohibitions on indiscriminate attacks, disproportionate attacks, area bombardment, and that IHL places obligations on states to take feasible precautions in attack. Whilst use of explosive weapons in populated areas is not illegal per se, it places civilians in the vicinity of the target and as such, at high risk of harm – especially when the weapon has a large destructive radius, is prone to inaccuracy and / or delivers multiple munitions across wider areas.

Caroline Baudot, ICRC, presented concrete policy recommendations for implementing the Declaration, emphasising that while many armed forces already have relevant policies, there is a need to review these and room for improvement in line with the Declaration's commitments. Key recommendations include:

- Assign a national focal point to coordinate implementation.
- Make civilian protection a strategic priority in planning and operations.
- Review and adapt military doctrine, especially for urban warfare.
- Integrate avoidance policies: explosive weapons with wide area effects should not be used in populated areas unless sufficient mitigation measures are taken to limit their wide area effects and the consequent risk of civilian harm.
- Develop training, including IHL and context-specific tactical alternatives.
- Collect data on civilian harm and use it to inform operations and policies.

Restricting or refraining from use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a key part of the Declaration. In particular an “avoidance policy” to refrain from using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas was strongly recommended as a key preventative measure due to the high likelihood of indiscriminate effects and consequent risk of harm. This must be institutionalised at all levels - doctrine, policy, training, and practice - and that states must evaluate both the direct and indirect effects of their weapon choices. Other mitigation measures to reduce the area effects of explosive weapons and / or mitigate harm to civilians were also highlighted.

Col. William Mfuné, Malawi Defence Force, outlined how Malawi is actively implementing section 3 of the Political Declaration which calls on states to review and adapt national policies and practices regarding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Malawi’s efforts focus on three main areas: training, weapons procurement policy, and ratification of relevant international conventions.

Military Training and Doctrine

- Malawi Defence Force (MDF) has incorporated EWIPA-related principles into all levels of training. Military personnel are trained on how to use weapons, including those with an explosive effects - such as mortars and artillery, in accordance with IHL and with a strong emphasis on minimising civilian harm. Training includes:
- Operating in built-up areas (Fighting in Built-Up Areas/FIBUA) while avoiding incidental civilian casualties.
- Battlefield operating environment assessment where Commanders are trained to undertake prior assessment of the built environment to understand how it influences weapon effects and the potential for harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects from direct and indirect or reverberating effects.

Weapons procurement

Malawi’s procurement policy covers weapons banned under international law, such as cluster munitions, landmines and nuclear weapons. The MDF has also taken proactive steps to cease the use of white phosphorus in mortars due to its harmful effects on civilians.

International legal commitments

Malawi is a state party to key disarmament and humanitarian treaties related to explosive weapons, including the Convention on Cluster Munitions (ratified in 2009).

General Emma Randriamiramanana, Madagascar Armed Forces, shared its progress and strategic approach to implementation, framed as a reflection of the alignment between the Declaration’s principles and Madagascar’s national values. Following their endorsement, Madagascar developed a national strategy in 2023 based on three pillars:

- Legislative review and development of regulatory instruments needed to implement the Declaration.
- Establishment of a multi-stakeholder coordination body including both civil and military representatives to oversee implementation.

- Integration of EWIPA-related topics into initial and ongoing military training, alongside investment in the technical and technological capacity of personnel.

Madagascar has already taken several practical steps, including:

- Enhancing storage and transfer protocols for explosive materials, with a focus on military personnel training.
- Closing hazardous storage and training sites near populated areas, such as:
- A major ammunition depot near the international airport in Antananarivo.
- A military training ground in Itongafeno, now deemed too close to growing villages.

Colonel Cheikh Ahmed Abdallah, Government of Comoros, emphasised that the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas poses a serious threat to civilians and called for urgent action. He identified four key challenges: the limited effectiveness of international humanitarian law, the security justifications used by armed actors, the devastating humanitarian consequences, and a lack of political will and global cooperation. Comoros, an early endorser of the Political Declaration, urged stronger implementation of existing treaties, adaptation of military doctrine to prioritise civilian protection, and prohibition of the use of wide area effect explosive weapons in populated areas through new international regulations. He called on SADC states and the international community to lead coordinated efforts to reduce harm and protect civilians in conflict.

James Chemiati, Center for Civilians in Conflict, Center for Civilians in Conflict, presented the protection of civilians (POC) and civilian harm mitigation (CHM) as not only a legal and ethical obligation, but a strategic necessity for conducting military operations, whereby it acts as a “force enhancer”, aligning battlefield conduct with political strategy and enabling transitions from combat to policing and governance. Poor civilian protection practices, on the other hand, can derail peacebuilding by fuelling resentment and creating new drivers of conflict. CHM must therefore be seen as integral to success across strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

The Case of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan

This is a practical example of how POC/CHM principles can transform military operations and improve strategic outcomes. Key components included:

- Creation of the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC) and later the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team (CCMT), which systematically gathered and analysed civilian harm data.
- Changes to operational directives, such as:
 - Limitations on indirect fire (mortars and artillery) in populated areas.
 - Improved rules of engagement for escalation-of-force incidents.

These measures led to an over 80% reduction in ISAF-caused civilian casualties by 2014, and a marked improvement in Afghan public attitudes towards coalition forces.

Key policy recommendations

- Limit the use of indirect fire in populated areas: Use of mortars and artillery must be restricted due to their high potential for indiscriminate effects.
- Integrate CHM into planning from the outset: Civilian harm tracking systems should be embedded in operations before deployment. This allows forces to identify risks, build mitigation mechanisms, and adapt in real-time.
- Use data as a feedback loop: Tracking and analysing civilian harm is not just about accountability, but also about learning and adapting. Civilian harm data should inform future targeting, weapon selection, tactics, and training.
- Adopt amends policies: A principled and humane response to civilian harm - including apologies, compensation, and community support.
- Prepare forces to transition from IHL to IHRL frameworks: As operations move from combat to stability, security actors must shift from IHL-based military conduct to police-led law enforcement approaches grounded in International Human Rights Law.

Broader lessons

- Drawing from both Afghanistan and Somalia, the presentation showed that:
- CHM practices can reverse negative trends even after harm has occurred.
- Multistakeholder coordination—including with civil society and affected communities—is essential.
- Military actors must be equipped with both technical tools (tracking systems, tactics, training) and ethical frameworks (CHM policies, amends mechanisms) to uphold protection standards.

Other reflections included:

- Participants emphasised that protecting civilians is both feasible and strategically beneficial. However, for implementation to succeed, clear methodologies, tools, and guidance are essential.
- It was widely acknowledged that training plays a key role in shaping behaviour. Military training that integrates civilian harm mitigation (CHM), IHL principles, and operational ethics leads to improved conduct over time. This includes education on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, the reverberating effects of their use, and the importance of precautionary measures.
- Beyond training, accountability was highlighted as a powerful driver of compliance with humanitarian norms. Without clear

consequences for violations, behaviour tends to deteriorate, with repeated breaches and increased civilian harm.

- Participants stressed the importance of preparing before conflict breaks out. This includes integrating IHL and EWIPA-related principles into training and doctrine during peacetime, stockpile management and secure storage of weapons, and familiarising personnel with procedures to avoid civilian harm.
- There was recognition of the challenge posed by the use of human shields and other violations by non-state armed groups (NSAGs). There is a pressing need for better strategies to hold non-state actors accountable and reduce the risk they pose to civilians.
- The role of national focal points was discussed, particularly regarding who should lead coordination for implementation of the Declaration. Clarifying responsibilities, and empowering focal points across defence, foreign affairs, and humanitarian agencies was seen as a way to build sustained national ownership.
- Some participants raised questions about how the Declaration relates to other instruments such as the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) and its Protocols, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and other treaties. There was interest in seeing how to informally align them to support coherent national approaches to regulating explosive weapon use.
- Questions were raised about how procurement policies connect with the Declaration's commitments and how to translate these obligations into practical limits on the types of weapons held or used by armed forces.

SESSION 3. DATA COLLECTION AND TRACKING CIVILIAN HARM

The session highlighted how data collection on the use and impact of explosive weapons is central to improving civilian protection and operational decision-making. Speakers underscored the need for data not only as a record of harm, but as a foundation for change. It underlined the importance of tracking civilian harm and accountability as behaviour-changing mechanisms.

Megan Wiseman-Searle, for the Explosive Weapons Monitor (EWM) reported on the forthcoming annual report on civilian harm which finds that:

- Civilian harm from explosive weapons occurred in at least 75 countries, with use of EWIPA and civilian casualties having increased.
- Civilian deaths in 2024 have reached unprecedented levels, particularly in Palestine, as well as Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine.
- Attacks on healthcare increased by 12%, with 763 incidents recorded.

- Education-related attacks rose by 80%, including hundreds of incidents damaging schools and harming students and teachers.
- Humanitarian aid operations were affected nearly five times more than in previous years.

The data also highlights reverberating effects - such as displacement, food insecurity, psychological trauma, and loss of access to services that compound the immediate damage. Cases from DRC and Tigray, Ethiopia, demonstrate the deadly and far-reaching consequences of using inaccurate explosive weapons in populated areas.

Barbara Morais Figueiredo, United Nations Office for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) highlighted that the value data collection and sharing value lies in informing policy and practice changes as well as accountability. The process of data collection and analysis is important for understanding and addressing the humanitarian impacts of explosive weapons in populated areas. Both the direct and indirect impacts of harm caused by these weapons should be understood - beyond immediate casualties and injuries, there are widespread reverberating effects such as displacement, psychological trauma, the destruction of infrastructure, and the collapse of essential services. Data collection should include information on indirect and longer-term effects, such as impeded access to healthcare and education, damage to housing, and impacts on livelihoods and mental health. Understanding these broader patterns is critical to shaping effective responses and prevention strategies.

It was noted that civil society organisations, the ICRC, and other international actors have played a critical role in documenting these impacts over the years. These efforts directly influenced the development and content of the Political Declaration. It was stressed that data is not only essential for tracking and recording casualties, but also for enabling accountability and driving changes in policy and practice. To be meaningful, data should be disaggregated, including by age, gender, and type of harm, to understand the full scope and scale of civilian impact.

Figueiredo explained that different stakeholders collect data for different reasons, and at different times - whether for humanitarian programming, military planning, or legal investigation. This diversity makes data collection a complex and multifaceted issue. It is not an end in itself, but a tool to serve a larger humanitarian and policy purpose and to inform decision-making and reduce civilian harm. It was underlined that for data to be useful, it must feed back into military decision-making processes, influencing how operations are conducted and how civilian protection is prioritised. Data should guide training, planning, and after-action reviews. State-to-state exchanges on best practices in data collection and use can help advance implementation. There is no expectation for countries to have all systems and methodologies in place before endorsing the Declaration. Rather, the goal is to foster ongoing learning and gradual implementation, supported by international collaboration.

Dr. Omar Alasow, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) provided an example of how the

tracking of civilian harm can be operationalised within military operations to improve the protection of civilians. He described AUSSOM process for collecting data on civilian harm, including fatalities, injuries and property damage among other types of impact. This information is stored in a centralised database and drawn from a wide range of sources—including government forces, medical institutions, media reports, NGOs, and internal field investigations. Most importantly, the data is subject to regular analysis to identify trends, draw lessons, and inform adaptations to training and operational conduct. Civilian harm cases are investigated, and findings are used to assess whether appropriate mitigation measures were in place and where improvements are needed.

AUSSOM's approach uses a briefing schedule where findings from civilian harm tracking are reported to the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (SRCC) and senior force commanders on a weekly, monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, and annual basis. These regular updates ensure that insights are continuously communicated to decision-makers, enabling real-time adjustments to practice through feedback loops where the data is used to refine tactics, doctrine and training.

The case of AMISOM's Indirect Fire Policy

A key example of such operational adaptation is AMISOM's development and implementation of an 'Indirect Fire Policy', specifically designed to reduce civilian harm from mortars and other indirect fire weapons which are often inaccurate. The Indirect Fire Policy, first implemented by AMISOM (the predecessor to AUSSOM), imposed strict limitations on the use of indirect fire in populated areas. The policy required:

- Pre-approval from senior command before any use of mortars or artillery in populated areas.
- Verification of military necessity and civilian risk.
- The use of mapping and information sharing to avoid targeting civilian infrastructure.
- Integration of civilian harm mitigation into fire support coordination and planning.
- This policy also mandated pre-strike checks and post-strike assessments, ensuring a high threshold for the use of explosive weapons and learning from each incident.

Alongside this, AUSSOM has implemented a comprehensive package of preventative and responsive measures to mitigate civilian harm:

- Regular in-theatre and refresher training on international humanitarian law (IHL), with a focus on prohibited weapons and targeting principles.
- Issuance of force commander directives that set out conduct standards and limitations on the use of force.
- Public awareness initiatives to inform local populations about risks and safety protocols.

This structured, data-driven, and policy-informed approach exemplifies how civilian protection can be strengthened through practical military measures, embedded accountability, and a culture of learning. It also reinforces the value of the Political Declaration's commitments on data collection, operational review,

and harm mitigation, showing that they are entirely achievable in active conflict settings.

Other reflections included:

- Data is a useful tool to identify harmful patterns of behaviour. Analysis is necessary to lead to operationalising the Declaration and changes in practice.
- While many armed forces do collect data, much remains classified. Promoting transparency and collaboration with civilian actors is needed.
- Declassifying civilian harm data can help to build trust and can counter propaganda that fuels further violence.

SESSION 4: ASSISTANCE TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

This session focused on the role of victim assistance and humanitarian access and assistance in the implementation of the Political Declaration on EWIPA. Effective implementation of the Declaration's victim assistance commitments can help prevent further harm and improve quality of life for survivors. Participants agreed that assistance must be driven by the needs of affected communities, with an emphasis on non-discrimination, timely support, and long-term care. However, challenges persist, including challenges of humanitarian access in conflict zones when explosive weapons are being used, and limited resources in conflict zones.

Alma Taslidžan, Humanity & Inclusion, opened the discussion by emphasising a non-discriminatory, inclusive approach to victim assistance. She noted that support should extend beyond those physically injured to include all affected members of a community. This includes people living with disabilities, women, and children, whose needs may be overlooked in conventional approaches. Taslidžan drew links between the Declaration and existing frameworks such as the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). She highlighted the following key recommendations:

- Ensure basic needs are met promptly.
- Guarantee access to services, rehabilitation, and social inclusion.
- Apply a broad definition of victims (as set out in paragraph 4.5 of the Declaration).
- Invest in risk education and conflict preparedness and protection as life-saving measures.

Allan Ngeri, Human Rights Watch, presented case studies from Sudan, Eastern DRC, and northern Mozambique, illustrating the devastating impact of EWIPA:

- In Sudan, the 2023 conflict led to indiscriminate airstrikes, destroyed health systems, and displaced over 7 million people, with humanitarian corridors often denied.
- In Eastern DRC, intense shelling and artillery attacks by armed groups have devastated Bukavu and surrounding areas. Schools have been destroyed or repurposed, UXO contamination

is widespread, and agriculture has collapsed—exacerbating food insecurity.

- In Mozambique, the presence of IEDs and weak explosive ordnance disposal and victim assistance capacities hinder the response. Infrastructure damage and risk of unexploded ordnance pose ongoing threats.

Ngeri stressed that the Declaration can serve as a framework to address both immediate needs and long-term impacts.

Claudio Mate, from the Government of Mozambique highlighted its long experience of armed conflict from the 16-year civil war, where explosive weapons including landmines were used resulting in widespread contamination. Since 2017, over 2,000 people have been killed, and more than half a million displaced, and infrastructure has been destroyed leaving tens of thousands of children out of school. The growing use of improvised explosive devices has also further worsened humanitarian conditions and placed civilians at severe risk.

The government has taken steps to strengthen victim assistance, including ratifying the African Union's Kampala Convention on Internally Displaced Persons and adopting a national displacement policy in 2021 as well as a recently passed victim assistance law. Mozambique underlined the relevance of the EWIPA Political Declaration's commitments on victim assistance, humanitarian access, and risk education, while noting it has not yet formally endorsed the instrument. Planned follow-up actions include reporting to the national interministerial human rights commission, holding consultations with civil society and state institutions, and assessing the feasibility of endorsement by national authorities.

Other reflections included:

- The Declaration can be used to assess and improve existing systems, engage donors, and align national policies with inclusive principles.
- In many countries, victims of explosive violence face different treatment from others with similar disabilities – more needs to be done to prevent discrimination of other people with disabilities. It can also be challenging to identify individual victims.
- Multilateral cooperation and funding is essential to supporting conflict-affected populations.

SESSION 5: INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS AND THE POLITICAL DECLARATION

This session explored how the Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA) functions as a tool for international and national action, what steps can help progress implementation, and what opportunities lie ahead for promoting its uptake and operationalisation globally.

In a video statement, **Ambassador Lansana Gberie of Sierra Leone** emphasized its strong support for the 2022 Dublin political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas, highlighting the importance of universal endorsement, effective implementa-

tion, knowledge exchange, and capacity building to strengthen civilian protection. While progress since adoption has been encouraging, Sierra Leone noted the need for greater African engagement, and international technical and financial assistance. The country is active in the Geneva-based 'Group of Friends', has co-hosted regional briefings, and will continue to support awareness-raising and implementation efforts, encouraging more African states to endorse and integrate the declaration into security frameworks to advance humanitarian outcomes and regional stability.

Laura Boillot of Article 36 and Alma Taslidžan of Humanity & Inclusion, both representatives of the civil society network **INEW** gave an update on the international process of work.

The Declaration as a tool for action

The Political Declaration, adopted in 2022 and now endorsed by 89 states, is the first international instrument that directly addresses the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. While not a treaty, it sets new political and policy standards aimed at strengthening the protection of civilians.

- It builds on IHL, and most notably commits states to "restrict and refrain" from using explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Endorsing the Declaration implies policy reviews, adapting military training, among other steps. While not legally binding, the commitments are practical, measurable and aimed at reducing harm to civilians.
- Like the Safe Schools Declaration, it creates a shared platform for aligning national and international standards, shaping military conduct, and reinforcing humanitarian norms.

National-level action

The Declaration requires operationalisation at the national level, supported by an international process of work, multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration:

- National focal points are important to coordinate cross-ministerial consultations, lead briefings, and drive implementation.
- Civil society, the UN, and ICRC can support national efforts by providing briefings, resources, and advocacy materials.
- National stakeholders, especially defence ministries and armed forces, need reassurance that endorsement need not hinder - and can enhance - operational effectiveness. This often requires a shift in mindset to prioritise strategic civilian protection.
- Examples from the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) process were highlighted, showing how states like the DRC, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Côte d'Ivoire have developed policies, laws, and training curricula in response to similar political commitments.

Advancing universalisation and international collaboration

Broadening endorsement of the Declaration remains a central goal, including through:

- Military-to-military exchanges, regional peer learning, and diplomatic outreach to encourage endorsement, particularly in Africa, where current uptake remains limited.
- States that have already joined have a well-placed role in promoting the Declaration through technical support, workshops, and experience sharing.

- Even if some majors state users and non-state armed groups do not join a 'coalition of the willing' can shift norms and set new standards.

African states were encouraged to join Malawi, Madagascar, and Comoros in endorsing the Declaration and helping to shape future work on this theme.

International calendar and opportunities for engagement

Upcoming opportunities for engagement were highlighted to help build momentum:

- San Jose Conference (18-20 November 2025) is the next international process meeting that Costa Rica will host.
- Other forums include:
 - First Committee at the UN General Assembly (October), New York
 - UN Security Council's open debate on the Protection of Civilians in armed conflict (May), New York
 - Convention on Certain Conventional Meetings (November), Geneva
 - Regional workshops, such as a workshop in Rabat, Morocco (September 2025) for North Africa and a potential follow-up in Africa in 2026, as well as other ad hoc events. Workshops between these conferences (like this one in Johannesburg and a previous one in Lomé, Togo) help build technical capacity on implementation themes,

Civil society and international organisations play a vital role in organising and sustaining this momentum. The UNODA portal at www.ewipa.org acts as an information hub to support coordination through resource-sharing, and information on events.

Other reflections included:

- National visits from civil society and international organisations and various experts can support national processes.
- A compendium of documents and guidance, including for Commanders would be useful.
- The importance of multistakeholder collaboration was reiterated, and willingness of lead states and organisations to support new states through the endorsement and implementation process.

SESSION 6: STRATEGIES FOR NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

This session explored how African regional frameworks, national processes, and existing institutions can be used to promote endorsement and implementation of the Political Declaration on EWIPA, aligning with Africa's broader peace and development goals. It also looked focused on concrete steps that states can take to follow up on the Johannesburg roundtable, with a shared aim of endorsing the Political Declaration on EWIPA ahead of the Costa Rica conference.

Joseph Dube, Disarmament and Arms Control emphasised that Agenda 2063 of the African Union and its *Practical Steps to Silencing the Guns by 2030* place the protection of civilians and control of weapons at the heart of Africa's peace and security agenda. He recalled that Africa has already shown leadership on EWIPA through the 2017 Maputo Communiqué, the first regional instrument on the issue, and the 2019 communiqué of the AU Peace and Security Council. This continues a long tradition of African states championing disarmament and humanitarian protection issues.

Looking forward, he urged African states to endorse the EWIPA Political Declaration, using the 2025 Costa Rica conference as a milestone. At the national level, states should organise briefing sessions with civil society and ICRC, assign a government focal point to coordinate implementation, and send a Note Verbale to Ireland, the depository of the Declaration, to formalise endorsement. These steps would ensure African states continue to lead on strengthening civilian protection and advancing AU peace and security commitments.

Simbarashe Manjera, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), underlined how the EWIPA Political Declaration aligns closely with SADC's broader peace, security, and development agenda. He stressed that "there is no development without peace, and no peace without development," noting that protecting civilians and controlling weapons is central to the region's vision of an inclusive, just, and prosperous future. The Declaration complements SADC's existing frameworks, including the Protocol on Defence, Security and Cooperation, the Protocol on the Control of Firearms and Ammunition, and strategies against organised crime and illicit arms trafficking. He highlighted that peace support operations already include standing procedures to protect civilians, but more needs to be done to integrate EWIPA into military training, awareness-raising, and benchmarking of best practices.

SADC structures such as the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDC), Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC), and Ministerial Committees can play a pivotal role in urging member states to endorse and operationalise the Declaration. Greater knowledge of IHL, more national dialogues including on the humanitarian impacts of EWIPA, and stronger regional cooperation are all essential steps forward.

Ambassador Limam El Jalil Aall Brahim, African Union (AU) placed the Declaration in the broader framework of Agenda 2063, describing it as essential to achieving Africa's vision of inclusive and sustainable development. He recalled Africa's leadership in convening the first regional conference on EWIPA and the AU Peace and Security Council's dedicated session on the issue, which stressed the devastating humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons in populated areas. He warned of the risks posed by explosive weapons and called for stronger multilateral efforts to ensure accountability and compliance with IHL. While only 11 African states have so far endorsed the Declaration, he urged broader adoption and implementation, noting this would create the necessary conditions for peace and development and contribute to Africa's roadmap to "silence the guns."

At the sub-regional and regional level, recommendations included:

- Hosting SADC-led briefings or declarations of support (e.g., at the SADC Summit or during AU Gun Amnesty Month).
- Promoting the Declaration through regional peacekeeping training centres, and ensuring its content is reflected in military curricula.
- Holding EWIPA-specific workshops across subregions, building on examples like the Togo meeting (West Africa) and planned events in Morocco (North Africa), as well as this workshop in Johannesburg (Southern Africa).
- States should make statements in forums like the UN General Assembly's First Committee, the UN Security Council's open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.
- The international Costa Rica Conference is seen as a key milestone for both endorsement and implementation planning.

Several practical tools and processes were discussed:

- National IHL Committees are ideal platforms to introduce and advance discussions on EWIPA.
- The ICRC offered support, including resources like factsheets, and the ability to convene regional seminars and peer-to-peer legal discussions.
- Participants called for Article 36 and the ICRC to support national and regional visits to sustain momentum.
- The UNODA portal (www.ewipa.org) and INEW resources were noted as valuable tools for implementation and outreach.

Participants shared experiences promoting related instruments like the Arms Trade Treaty, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and the Safe Schools Declaration. These examples show how cross-sectoral collaboration and regional coordination can elevate humanitarian disarmament agendas.

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

African states have a critical opportunity to shape implementation of the Political Declaration through their leadership and active participation in the process of work to strengthen the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Workshops such as this roundtable play a vital role not only in advancing national processes, but also in fostering a broader support to reducing the devastating harm caused by explosive weapons in populated areas among both states and organisations who can work together on this issue.

COMMITMENTS MADE

Participants welcomed the momentum generated by the Johannesburg roundtable and several states made concrete pledges:

- The Democratic Republic of Congo confirmed that technical steps toward endorsement of the Declaration have already been completed, and political approval is expected soon.
- Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, and others indicated that internal consultations are underway and expressed strong intent to move forward toward endorsement.
- Malawi, Comoros, and Madagascar reaffirmed their leadership as early endorsers and offered to share lessons learned to encourage regional peers.
- Multiple states committed to raising the issue in national IHL committees in the coming weeks, using these forums to brief ministries and advance national ownership.
- Participants expressed readiness to use regional platforms - including the SADC Commission on Defence and Security and upcoming AU and SADC summits - to highlight the issue and encourage collective endorsement.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

Despite progress, participants highlighted key challenges:

- Few ministries, parliamentarians, or military personnel are familiar with the Declaration; sustained awareness-raising is required to facilitate more states endorsing the Declaration.
- Only three Southern African states have endorsed so far, underscoring the need for peer outreach and regional champions to sustain momentum.
- Some states expressed concern that joining might constrain military operations, underlining the importance of sharing experiences that endorsement strengthens rather than weakens operational effectiveness.
- Many endorsing states still need to review and adapt their military doctrines, procurement policies, and training curricula in line with the Declaration's commitments.
- Humanitarian access and victim assistance remain constrained in conflict zones, and more resources are needed for risk education and support to affected communities.

NEXT STEPS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

Building on these commitments and discussions, participants agreed on priority actions:

- **Endorsement:** States should complete national consultations and send a Note Verbale to Ireland, the depositary of the Declaration, ideally ahead of the Costa Rica Conference (November 2025).
- **National coordination:** Governments should designate a national focal point, potentially within existing IHL committees, to lead inter-ministerial engagement, coordinate with civil society, and liaise internationally.
- **Regional action:** SADC structures, including the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDC), Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC), and Ministerial Committees, should play a more formal role in urging member states to endorse and implement the Declaration. Raising the issue during AU Gun Amnesty Month and at the SADC Summit were identified as key opportunities.
- **Military engagement:** Integrate the Declaration's provisions into the Regional Peacekeeping Training Centre (RPTC) curriculum and expand military-to-military exchanges on practical implementation.
- **International advocacy:** African states were encouraged to speak at upcoming multilateral forums - the UN Security Council's open debate on the protection of civilians (May), the UN General Assembly's First Committee (October), and participate in upcoming EWIPA meetings including the Costa Rica conference.
- **Civil society and UN support:** Article 36, Disarmament and Arms Control, ICRC, UNIDIR, and UNODA offered to provide technical expertise, briefings, and resources, as well as to support national visits and workshops to sustain momentum.

ANNEXES

A: AGENDA

Regional Roundtable on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. 27-28 February 2025

Day 1: Thursday 27 February 2025

09:30-10:00	Opening remarks and introductions <i>Overview of the workshop's purpose and objectives, tour de table of introductions.</i>	Moderator: Laura Boillot, Article 36 Joseph Dube, Arms Control and Disarmament Sarah Mabeza, ICRC South Africa Sicel'mpilo Shange-Buthane, South Africa ICRC video on explosive weapons in populated areas
10:00-11:00	Framing remarks: The humanitarian impact of explosive weapon use in populated areas and the significance of the Political Declaration <i>Introduction to the issue, background to the process and development of the Political Declaration, key commitments and current status.</i>	Moderator: Laura Boillot, Article 36 Steven Murphy, Ireland Linn Meinert Schønning, Norway Quent Kalichero, Malawi
11:00-11:30	<i>Coffee break and group photo</i>	
11:30-13:00	Session 1. Current challenges and humanitarian impacts of explosive weapons <i>What are explosive weapons and what effects do they have? Why are they of particular concern when used in an urban environment?</i> <i>What are the direct and indirect/reverberating effects and how do civilians experience this in the short and long-term?</i> <i>What are some examples of use and impact in the region?</i>	Moderator: Steven Murphy, Ireland Alma Taslidzan, Humanity and Inclusion Eddy Luketi Kazila, DRC
13:00-14:00	<i>Lunch break</i>	

14:00-15:30	Session 2. Changes to military policies and practices to strengthen the protection of civilians <i>What are the key commitments in the Declaration that require changes to military policy and practice and how can they be operationalized?</i> <i>What relevant doctrine, policies and practices do militaries already have in place on EWIPA and the protection of civilians?</i> <i>How can the Declaration be used as a tool to strengthen the protection of civilians from use of EWIPA?</i>	Moderator: Sarah Mabeza, ICRC Caroline Baudot, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Lt Colonel William Mfune, Malawi General Emma Randriamiramanana, Madagascar Colonel Cheikh Ahmed Abdallah, Comoros James Chemiati, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)
15:30-16:00	<i>Coffee break</i>	
16:00-17:00	Session 3. Data collection and tracking civilian harm <i>How can the commitments on collecting and sharing data help to better understand and respond to harms?</i> <i>What are some examples of how this has been used in practice in the conduct of military operations?</i>	Moderator: Joseph Dube, Arms Control and Disarmament <i>Megan Wiseman-Searle, Article 36</i> <i>Barbara Morais Figueiredo, United Nations Office for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)</i> <i>Dr. Omar Alasow, The African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM)</i>

Day 2: Friday 28 February 2025

09:30-09:45	Introduction to day 2 and recap of day 1	Laura and Joseph
09:45-11:00	Session 4. Assistance to conflict affected communities <i>What are the needs of conflict affected communities?</i> What are the key commitments in the Declaration related to victim assistance, humanitarian access, clearance and risk education?	Moderator: Caroline Baudot, ICRC Alma Taslidžan, Humanity and Inclusion Allan Ngari, Human Rights Watch Claudio Mate, Mozambique
11:00-11:30	<i>Coffee break</i>	
11:30-13:00	Session 5. The Political Declaration and the process of work internationally <i>What are the key aims for work around the Political Declaration at an international level?</i> <i>What international and other meetings are taking place to support these aims?</i> How can African states, including their armed forces contribute to this process of work?	Moderator: Alma Taslidzan, Humanity and Inclusion Laura Boillot, Article 36 Amb. Lansana Gberie, Sierra Leone (via video message)

13.00-14.00	Lunch	
14:00-15:30	Session 6. Strategies for engagement around the Declaration at the national, sub-regional and regional level <i>How does the Declaration align with key policy, security and development goals for Africa?</i> <i>What is the status of the Declaration within Africa, in terms of uptake and national positions?</i> How can the Declaration be better engaged with and promoted at a national, subregional and regional level?	Moderator: Sarah Mabeza, ICRC Joseph Dube, Arms Control and Disarmament Simbarashe Manjera, SADC Amb. Limam El Jalil Aall Brahim, African Union
15:30-16:00	Coffee break	
16:00-17:00	Conclusion and Next Steps Summary of discussions, plans for follow-up actions including tour de table on next steps.	Moderators: Joseph Dube, Arms Control and Disarmament & Laura Boillot, Article 36

B. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

27-28 February 2025
Johannesburg, South Africa

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