



FACTSHEET November 2023

Impact of explosive weapons in GAZA

"We were living in our homes, and now we are homeless. There is no proper care for us or our children. Recently, we discovered the remains of people killed in airstrikes near our location. The situation is truly devastating."

Manal, a 67-year-old female with multiple disabilities, was displaced in a designated UNRWA Shelter in Khan Younis, Gaza.¹

Latest wave of armed Violence in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)

Since October 7th, 2023, more than 10,300 Palestinians have been killed, including more than 4,000 children and 2,700 women, and more than 25,000 have been injured in the Gaza Strip, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH).² There are more than 2,200 persons reported missing in Gaza, including 1,270 children most are trapped under the rubble.³ According to the Palestinian MoH, more than 70% of fatalities are children, women, and the elderly. Since the start of the hostilities, 258 school buildings have sustained damage, representing more than 51% of all schools in the Gaza Strip.

Approximately 1.5 million individuals in Gaza are internally displaced, seeking refuge either in UNRWA schools, hospitals, churches, or with host families. The overcrowded conditions persistently expose Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to severe health and protection risks, significantly impacting their mental well-being. Compounded by damage to water and sanitation infrastructure and the limited availability of fuel for water pumps, there are additional public health concerns. Instances of acute respiratory infections, diarrhea, and chickenpox have already been reported among those seeking refuge at UNRWA shelters.⁴

¹ Names have been changed to protect the people mentioned in the testimonies.

² Daily report, Ministry of Health Palestine, published on November 7th, 2023.

³ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-31>

⁴ Ibid.

This data encompasses the severe impact of armed violence, with not only immediate fatalities but also a considerable number of injuries, leaving a profound and lasting humanitarian crisis in its wake. Both air-launched and surface-launched explosive weapons are being extensively employed against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe. The consequences are devastating, with not only civilians being directly killed and injured, but also massive destruction of infrastructure, including homes, schools, and hospitals, being destroyed, and entire communities forced to flee their homes.

Since October 7, approximately 1,400 Israelis have been killed and 5,400 Israelis have been injured by Palestinian armed groups, the vast majority of them on the first day of the conflict.⁵ Around 300,000 Israelis have been reportedly displaced due to the conflict.⁶ The launch of rockets against Israeli population centers causes some additional deaths and injuries every week, damages civilian infrastructure and creates EO contamination.

Armed violence has also increased in the West Bank, as the total number of Palestinian fatalities by Israeli forces or settlers since 7 October amounts to more than 150, including 44 children.⁷ According to OCHA, the number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank since 7 October accounts for more than one-third of all Palestinian fatalities in the West Bank in 2023. Since 7 October, Israeli forces have injured 2,340 Palestinians, including at least 248 children, over half of them in the context of demonstrations.⁸

In a large-scale operation on July 3-4, 2023, Israeli forces in Jenin City and the Jenin Refugee Camp caused 12 Palestinian fatalities, including four children, marking the highest West Bank operation casualties since 2005. The aftermath included damage to hundreds of housing units, displacing over 500 families, with approximately 41 families still displaced.⁹

Between January 2021 and September 2023, 165 Palestinians, including 53 boys and 28 girls, were killed in the Gaza Strip, with 133 fatalities in 2021 alone, highlighting a pre-existing pattern of attacks prior to October 7. The majority of casualties were caused by air-launched explosive weapons, resulting in 2,843 injuries during this period.

Impact of Bombings and Shelling on Civilians and Their Needs

The use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas must stop, as they have a systematic, indiscriminate impact on civilians. Moreover, it threatens access to essential services for hundreds of thousands of people, including shelter, water, electricity, and humanitarian assistance. It also impedes the ability of humanitarian aid agencies to respond adequately and quickly to the vast and growing needs of civilians.

In addition, the use of explosive weapons might bring mid- and longer-term effects due to the fact that the unexploded ordnance contamination is likely to remain in the ground after the crisis.

Palestinian victims and survivors of explosive weapons face long-term challenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic hardship. The Gaza Strip is one of the world's most

⁵ Data available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-4-november-2023-2359>

⁶ Statement by Israeli prime minister's office, 22 October 2023.

⁷ Flash update available at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-31>

⁸ Flash update available at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-31>

⁹ Document available at: [Jenin_Humanitarian_Impact_July2023_13_07_2023_final \(ochaopt.org\)](#)

densely populated areas. The use of explosive weapons has caused severe destruction of vital infrastructure, including water and sanitation, telecommunication towers, electricity, housing, schools, hospitals, and medical centers, resulting in a pattern of wide, long-term suffering.

In addition to the immediate need for emergency medical care and rehabilitation, injured people, their families, and, more broadly, the affected communities are facing longer-term challenges in terms of accessing psychological support and returning to their houses, school, or work. The bombing of populated areas kills and seriously injures children, women, and men who are not involved in the fighting.



*UNRWA supports the transport of HI-donated items to collective shelters in the Middle Area, Gaza, October 2023.
© HI Palestine*

Besides, the constant bombing of populated areas increases the possibility of contamination by unexploded ordnance, which creates a high risk for civilians on the move to be involved in new accidents. This makes indispensable the implementation of **risk education activities and clearance** to guarantee the safe mobility of the populations looking for refuge or trying to return.

On the long path towards recovery and inclusion, the collapse of Gaza's economy has made any return to normal life almost impossible for people with severe injuries, making families primarily reliant on humanitarian aid. Therefore, it's essential to implement **Victim Assistance** with a non-discriminatory approach, promoting the access of EO victims and other persons with disabilities to a variety of services such as health, physical and functional rehabilitation, psychological and psychosocial support (including cultural, sports, and leisure activities), education, work, and employment, as well as adequate standards of living and social protection.

The impact of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

Explosive weapons cover a broad category of weapons, including mortars, rockets, grenades, artillery shells, aircraft bombs, and improvised explosive devices. These are of varying sizes, delivered from the air or the ground, but they all share the same characteristic: they affect an area around the point of detonation, usually through the effects of blast and fragmentation. Civilians, both in immediate proximity and at a distance, will suffer from blast injuries caused by the multiple effects of explosive weapons, including the 'overpressure' they create. The force of this pressure is not only enough to cause injury itself, but can also create fragments, hurt civilians, especially children, into surrounding objects, and cause buildings and other structures to collapse.

The displacement caused by war disrupts stable living conditions, leaving this population particularly vulnerable. Forced displacement has a detrimental impact on civilians' well-being, both immediate and long-term, leading to severe psychological distress among children, exacerbating existing mental health issues, and potentially causing new ones. Persons with disabilities encounter additional barriers in such environments, with limited accessibility and accommodations exacerbating their already challenging circumstances.

In Gaza, HI and its partners within the years provided a range of services to people with blast injuries affecting their lungs, ears, eyes, and intestines. The explosion itself, or in some cases fragments and shrapnel from the explosion, caused broken bones and flesh wounds, which frequently required surgical amputation. Due to the projection of the body by the blast, injured persons also suffered from traumatic brain and spinal injuries caused by collision, as well as traumatic amputations.

Finally, our patient population also included people with burns to the skin and even respiratory damage from inhaling smoke, dust and chemicals. Some patients presented with a combination of all these injuries, and many of them showed signs of severe psychological trauma.



The difficulties faced when assisting persons injured from explosive weapons relate to a number of factors, but it is very important to highlight the environment where these weapons are used and the complex domino effects that explosive weapons create when used in populated areas. In towns, cities, and other areas populated by civilians, explosive weapons damage or destroy vital civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and other health facilities, reducing access to emergency medical care for the person injured and for the conflict-affected population more broadly.

The wide area effects of explosive weapons also include damage to and destruction of roads, water, electricity, and other critical infrastructure, all of which reduce access to essential services, which challenges the provision of health services in general. In addition to this, unexploded ordnance contamination can also limit access to these services and increase the risk of new EO accidents.

Armed Violence Reduction at HI

HI defines **armed violence** as "the intentional or unintentional use of weapons, threatened or actual, to inflict injury, impairment, death or psychological harm."

Violent armed conflicts undermine the safety and security of individuals and communities. It drives humanitarian crises, reverses development gains, and is an obstacle to the realization of the SDGs.

HI's comprehensive approach to Armed Violence Reduction includes four main technical expertise: Explosive Ordnance (EO) Disposal, Risk Education, Victim Assistance, and Conflict Transformation.

HI do not only survey and clear contaminated land, provide Conflict Preparedness & Protection (CPP), and Risk Education on the threat posed by EO (EORE), but we also support victims to promote universal access to services (health, rehabilitation, education, economic inclusion etc.) and utilize the space created to discuss instruments of violence to transform conflicts at the community level.

The pillars of Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) attend to the instruments (weapons) of war, their risks, and direct consequences. However, unless we address the root causes of violent conflict, our impact can only be temporary and the need will continue.

HI Interventions in Gaza, October 2023

Since October 7, 2023, HI Staff and volunteers have reached more than 90 out of 91 shelters in the south, conducting victim assistance assessments for around 4,222 IDPs. 1,106 individuals have received assistive devices, wound dressings, and non-food items. HI has organized more than 20 recreational sessions for around 18,000 displaced persons. HI has conducted 74 group sessions of Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) have been conducted, reaching out to 4,105 children and their caregivers in the shelters. HI also sent preventive messages about the threat posed by the use of explosive weapons in open conflict and urban settings, reaching 500,000 people via SMS.



HI team and volunteers conducted recreational activity sessions in DES UNRWA shelters, Gaza. ©HI Palestine

The Stories of Khaled and Sara¹⁰

Khaled - The Impact of the Ongoing Escalation on Our Daily Lives

Khaled, internally displaced along with his family, seeks refuge in a UNRWA School due to the unsafe conditions in the Fukhary Area, a border area in Gaza.

“It was not safe for me, as there were many Israeli airstrikes, so I fled to one of the schools to find a safer place for my family, but there was no safe place in Gaza. The situation is challenging; the location is not suitable for persons with disabilities. I cannot access the toilet because it is not adapted for someone with my level of mobility disability. The shelter is overcrowded, leaving no space for me to move with my wheelchair. I don’t have my medicines with me. The place is unclean, and my children are currently experiencing diarrhea. I avoid eating because I am reluctant to use the inadequate toilet facilities. There is a shortage of water. I appreciate HI for providing me with a wheelchair, I urge people to help us find a medical center that is adapted to host persons with disabilities. I also need psychological support for me and my children.”

Najwa – The Challenge of Self-Reliance

Najwa, a 48-year-old mother of four sons and one daughter from Gaza, faced a life-changing incident during the previous escalation in May 2023. She was on her rooftop with her son when a

¹⁰ Names have been changed to protect the people mentioned in the testimonies.

missile struck the area, causing a water tank to fall. In a moment of instinctive motherly protection, she pushed her son out of harm's way, resulting in the water tank falling on her. This impact propelled her seven meters into her neighbor's house, leading to paralysis on one side of her body and a lung blockage caused by the injury.

“The injury has had a profound impact on how I perceive myself. I feel limited. I'm not the type to sit still for extended periods; I enjoy being active and independent. But now, I can't even move.”

Najwa had previously worked at a kindergarten for two years to support her family. Her husband, who is 52 years old, is currently unemployed, which adds to the challenges they are facing. Due to her spinal cord injury, she is unable to walk, and even everyday tasks like showering have become difficult. The injury has caused significant disruptions in Najwa's family life, affecting their home, which still needs repairs. Najwa's most significant challenge is her mobility and ability to walk. She has been receiving essential rehabilitation services, including physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

“The injury has impacted every aspect of my life. I'm separated from my family members, and they now live with their grandfather. My house has also been damaged by the explosions, but I haven't been able to repair it yet. It's partially destroyed, and we haven't received any assistance to fix it.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

To parties to the conflict:

- **Immediately reach a ceasefire as it is the only way to protect the lives of civilians.**
- Respect and uphold IHL principles, including precaution, proportionality, and necessity, aligning with principles derived from human rights law, by any use of force by all parties involved in the conduct of hostilities;
- **Stop the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas**, as they have a systematic indiscriminate impact on civilians. Moreover, it threatens access to essential services for hundreds of thousands of people, including shelter, water, electricity, and humanitarian assistance. It also impedes the ability of humanitarian aid agencies to respond adequately and quickly to the vast and growing needs of civilians;
- Allow and facilitate rapid safe and **unimpeded passage of humanitarian assistance** for civilians in need, including food, water and medical supplies. Restore electricity and fuel to allow the delivery of humanitarian services.
- Open and secure all crossing points to affected areas ;
- Prioritize the protection of humanitarian actors, particularly local staff and reaffirm that it is an essential component of humanitarian access, to ensure the continuity of the service delivery.
- Immediately abide by international humanitarian law and UN Security Council Resolution 2286 (2016), which specifically refers to the **bombing of hospitals and health facilities**;
- Create an **enabling environment for organizations that conduct, emergency risk education activities, and victim assistance programs**, including by ensuring rapid authorizations and **registration**;

- Build sustainable community knowledge and behavioral change solutions through **community focal point training and awareness about** the risks posed by the use of explosive weapons by the parties of the conflict, including unexploded ordnance.

To donors and UN agencies:

- Commit humanitarian funding to meet existing humanitarian needs, **including emergency risk education and victim assistance activities, and later on clearance, technical and non-technical surveys and Explosive Ordnance disposal after the end of the active phase of the conflict;**
- Include resources in calls for proposals that **focus on the effects of the use of explosive weapons and better data collection**, monitoring, and reporting measures on affected populations, in a gender, age, and disability-inclusive manner;
- Require that recipients of mine action funding (including any sub-grantees/sub-contractors) conduct their activities in line with the International Mine Action Standards and humanitarian principles, and mainstream a gender, age and disability perspective and conflict sensitivity.

To UN Member States:

- Support and call on all parties to the conflict to reach a ceasefire immediately. The safety of civilians and civilian infrastructure must be prioritized. A long-lasting ceasefire is the only way to prevent further deaths, injuries, and human suffering, and escalation of the conflict in the region;
- Loudly and publicly **condemn the continuous use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas**, in addition to the targeting of schools and hospitals where civilians are especially likely to be injured and killed;
- Actively **support the EWIPA¹¹ political declaration** that addresses the harm caused by explosive weapons in populated areas that **commits States to develop operational policies and procedures to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas and to provide assistance to victims and affected communities and recognize their rights.**

¹¹ The final text of the political declaration is available online at:
<https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/ourrolepolicies/peaceandsecurity/ewipa/EWIPA-Political-Declaration-Final-Rev-25052022.pdf>

Published by Handicap International – Humanity & Inclusion

Website: <http://www.hi.org>

First published in November 2023, © Handicap International.

Handicap International is registered in France under the following references: N° SIRET: 519 655 997 00038 - Code APE: 9499Z.

This publication is copyrighted, but may be reproduced by any method without fees or prior permission for teaching purposes, but not for resale. For copying under any other circumstances, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher, and a fee may be payable.