



UK Mission
Geneva

CONSULTATIONS ON A POLITICAL DECLARATION ON EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

STATEMENT BY THE UNITED KINGDOM

H.E. Mr Aidan Liddle, Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament
Geneva, 17 June 2022

Mr Chair

You first convened us for consultations on a possible political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas on 18 November 2019. I recall at that time you had hoped to have three rounds of consultations with a final signing ceremony in May 2020.

Of course it didn't transpire exactly as you had planned. But you and your colleagues from the Irish Mission here in Geneva and back in Dublin have worked tirelessly, both in the real and virtual worlds, to keep up the momentum behind this process. Having steered the discussions to the point today where we have a final text before us is a major achievement, and I congratulate and thank you and everyone who has been involved very sincerely for that.

The world has changed in another way since those first discussions at the end of 2019. Though it is hardly the first or only example, Russia's conduct in its illegal war in Ukraine draws into sharp focus the realities of modern conflict and the particular vulnerability of civilians when faced with conflict in urban areas, and illustrates starkly the effects on civilians and civilian infrastructure when war is conducted with little regard for the requirements of International Humanitarian Law. It is a horrific reminder to responsible military states to ensure that proper and considered application of International Humanitarian Law remains the firm basis of all of our military engagements in all conflict scenarios.

Throughout our discussions over the last 2½ years, my delegation has been consistent in asserting that the robust, principled and balanced framework of International Humanitarian Law is the best way of governing the conduct of hostilities and achieving the protection of civilians. This Declaration can make a tangible contribution to the promotion of full compliance with International Humanitarian Law: by setting out fundamental principles; by adding context in relation to modern operational decision-making; and by creating a community for the sharing of best

practice, along with the improvement of processes and procedures, underpinned by real military experience.

The United Kingdom welcomes the Declaration's recognition that many armed forces already implement policies and practices designed to avoid – and in any event minimise – civilian harm during hostilities. We also acknowledge that there is room for practical improvements to achieve the full and universal implementation of, and compliance with International Humanitarian Law obligations in urban environments. This is an area for further work in the future, and we have a wealth of experience and ideas to offer.

Another theme of our discussions has been the need to understand both the direct and indirect effects of the use of explosive weapons. The United Kingdom is committed to this, and we already conduct such estimations in our targeting cycle. We are willing to work with the other nations here present, as well as civil society organisations, to further our common understanding of the indirect effects resulting from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The commitments in this Declaration are broader than just focussing on active operations and the targeting cycle and they go to the matters that the United Kingdom addresses through initiatives such as our Human Security Strategy, in which we look at the impact of conflict and the drivers of instability. These are important considerations in operational planning and we are grateful that this exercise has demonstrated our shared resolve to address civilian harm through all available mechanisms.

These discussions, and many others, are for the future. As you said, Mr Chair, this is the beginning, not the end, of this process. For today, let me end by confirming that the United Kingdom intends to sign this Political Declaration, as drafted. We encourage all other delegations represented here today to do likewise.

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