Shattered Stalls, Shattered Lives: The Human Cost of Bombing Marketplaces

The Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and Their Impact on Food Security

November 2025

Insecurity Insight

Executive summary /report synopsis

Access to food is a basic human need, and markets, where goods are exchanged, serve as the lifeblood of communities, sustaining health, nurturing well-being, and fuelling resilience. From open-air markets and food stalls to supermarkets, bakeries, cafes or restaurants, markets are the social hearts of cultural food systems. This report documents how the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and in particular against markets, damages or destroys this important civilian infrastructure, and discusses the implications for livelihoods and food access.

Markets are not mere mechanisms for the exchange of goods, but social institutions that play a critical role in shaping human lives; enabling access to food, livelihoods, and essential goods; and supporting the well-being of communities. The roles and forms of markets vary among cultures. For example, in many Western contexts, supermarkets are the primary means of accessing food, whereas in many African, Asian, and Middle Eastern contexts, traditional open markets and livestock markets remain central in many other ways. In all cases, these sites are gathering points for large numbers of people and serve purposes beyond food procurement – they foster social interaction and form the heart of community life.

This report draws on Insecurity Insight's dataset of reports of 979 incidents gathered from open sources in which the use of explosive weapons affected markets. These incidents occurred in 36 countries and territories between 2018 and 2024, i.e. in the six years since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) on the protection of civilians during armed conflict, conflict-induced food insecurity, and the threat of famine. Incidents are documented using Insecurity Insight's incident-based methodology, which records reported incidents at the time and place they occur, capturing information dynamically rather than according to a predetermined case study focus. These records are then complemented with first-hand accounts and information from other on-the-ground sources to provide a unique and contextualised understanding of how conflict impacts food supply systems, civilian well-being, and humanitarian access.

The recorded incidents show that damage and destruction from explosive weapons use occur both through the direct targeting of civilian infrastructure and gatherings and the unintended civilian harm resulting from the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects. All conflict-related violence affecting markets has a devastating effect on communities, resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties and the destruction of essential goods, including food supplies, as well as long-term disruption to food access, livelihoods, and community cohesion. These impacts are not only immediate, but also deeply structural, affecting food supply chains, people's economic survival and public health. They reflect a wide range of consequences – ranging from mass casualties to price inflation and the erosion of social safety nets. Although conflict-related incidents affecting markets have significant impacts on communities, our understanding of how best to document and measure these impacts still suffers from major gaps. This report aims to be one of the first attempts to at least partly fill them.

Fundamentally, markets should not be attacked during conflict. International humanitarian law (IHL), which governs the conduct of warfare, requires the protection of civilian objects during conflict by making clear distinctions between civilians and combatants. Yet there is a persistent lack of transparency among conflict parties about what precautions were taken to minimise civilian harm in these 979 recorded cases of damage, destruction and deaths at markets.

The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA Political Declaration) identified the use of explosive weapons as of specific concern due to the wide-ranging and long-lasting harm they can cause by their direct impact and indirect or “reverberating effects”, and the wider connections between conflict and hunger. Of course, the use of explosive weapons is not the only way in which conflict impacts markets in particular. Shootings can create insecurity, and blockades, disruptions of supply chains, and other conflict impacts also affect the functioning of markets. However, this report focuses on better understanding the impacts of the use of explosive weapons in the specific context of markets – and how the use of these weapons affects human well-being more generally. Insecurity Insight’s incident-based methodology enables us not only to collect information on explosive weapons use against markets, but also to analyse the scale and possible impact of these incidents.

It is hoped that the findings presented here will contribute to ongoing discussions on implementing the EWIPA Political Declaration. They are also relevant to debates on the “conflict and hunger” agenda, where protecting livelihoods during armed conflict is essential to preventing hunger and aid dependency by ensuring that food supply systems can continue to function. It is further hoped that this report will contribute to a discussion of how IHL is applied in practice, how information on its practical application is collected and analysed, and to whom conflict parties are accountable.

Key findings

- The number of reported incidents of explosive weapons use against markets more than doubled between 2022 and 2024, signalling a sharp escalation in violence impacting marketplaces.
- Of the 36 countries and territories covered in this report, five – Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar - accounted for nearly 60% of all reported incidents (578 of 979). This concentration underscores the frequency of attacks on markets in certain conflicts, while also highlighting a widespread concern across more than 30 countries.
- Explosive weapons attacks on markets frequently result in high civilian casualties and trigger widespread panic in local communities.
- Marketplaces are essential for community member’s access to food and basic goods. When they are attacked, food supplies are destroyed or damaged, traders are killed or injured, markets may close, and prices increase, all of which cut communities off from access to fresh produce, food staples, and other essential supplies.
- Markets also serve as social hubs for communities. Repeated attacks disrupt daily life and weaken community cohesion and resilience.
- As a result, continued attacks on markets may increase food insecurity in affected communities and make them more dependent on humanitarian aid.

The nature of explosive weapons attacks has changed over the years

- Until 2023, the use of hand grenades, car bombs, suicide attacks and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs) attributed to non-state armed groups were the most reported types of explosive weapons affecting markets.
- Since 2023, air-delivered explosives have become the most frequently reported type of weapon used, with most attacks attributed to state forces, marking a shift in the scale and impact of the harm caused.
- The spread of technology that enables air-delivered strikes from both aircraft and drones is contributing to the growth in air strikes.

Markets are protected during conflict, but the rules of war are not respected

- The characteristics of explosive weapons in themselves cause civilian harm through the indiscriminate nature of their use.
- The reverberating effects caused by the use of explosive weapons include foreseeable excessive impact on food supply systems during conflict.
- This rise in state forces deploying explosive weapons against markets shows a worrying trend of eroding norms in the conduct of hostilities.
- IHL provisions that protect markets are largely absent from publicly available information and public discussions on this issue.

This report is part of a series covering the impact of explosive weapons use on **water supply systems**, **agriculture**, and markets during conflict. The data cited in it can be downloaded **here**. In the sources for boxes, figures and maps and in footnotes, this data is referred to as “2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data”.

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Introduction

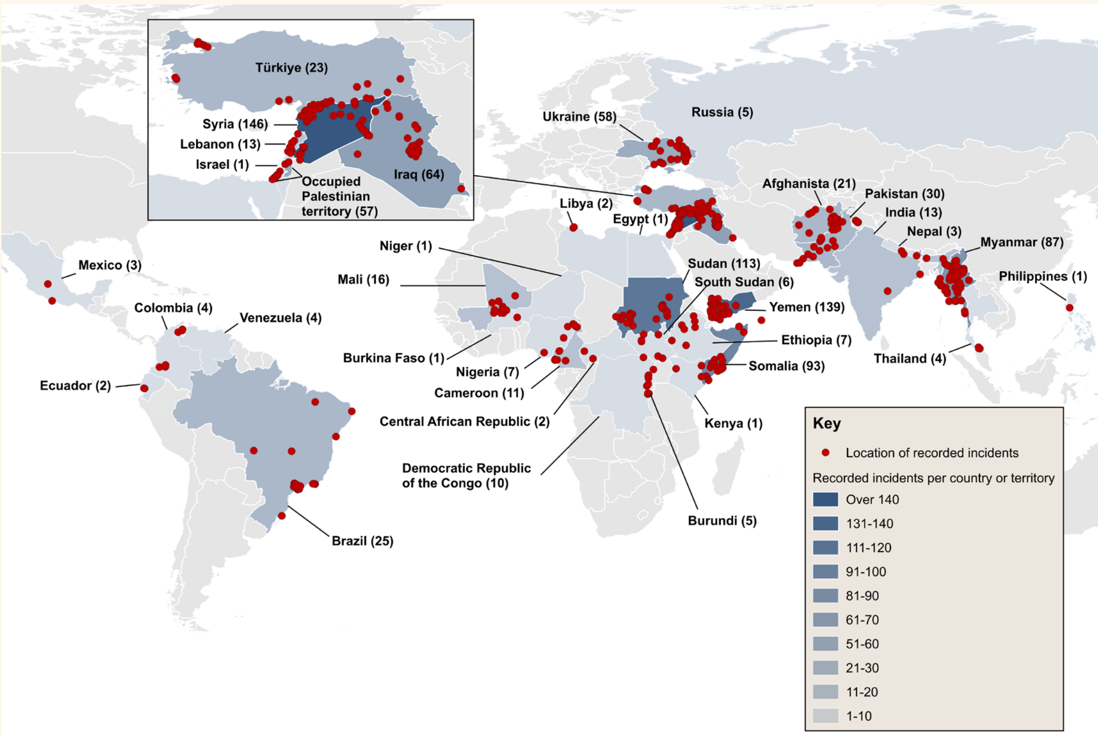
According to available data, marketplaces were damaged or destroyed by explosive weapons in at least 979 reported incidents in 36 countries or territories between January 2018 and December 2024. The data was compiled from open sources, and is neither comprehensive nor complete, but provides insights into changing trends in explosive weapons use affecting markets and its impact on food supply systems during conflict.

Of the 36 countries and territories covered in this report, five - Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar - accounted for nearly 60% of all reported incidents (578 of 979). While the conflicts in these countries show the highest concentration of harm, attacks on markets were also recorded in 31 other contexts. Together, the global data reveals a consistent pattern: the use of explosive weapons to attack markets inflicts severe civilian casualties and drives food insecurity across conflict zones.

This report addresses a largely under-recognised issue, using available evidence to examine not only the direct impact of explosive weapons use on individual marketplaces, but also how the practice of targeting markets contributes to the disruption of broader food supply systems and, over time, to conflict-induced food insecurity.

Map 1: Known locations of reported incidents involving explosive weapons use against marketplaces, 2018-2024[1]

In total, 979 incidents where explosive weapons use impacted marketplaces were reported between 2018 and 2024 across 36 countries and territories. High incident numbers were reported in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Definitions

Markets and marketplaces

In this report, the terms “markets” and “marketplaces” refer to infrastructure where communities access food and other essential goods and services. This includes a wide range of food access points such as open-air markets, food stalls, livestock markets, supermarkets and grocery stores, bakeries, and restaurants and cafés. People present at markets are described as marketgoers, traders or shop owners. Incidents were included based on reported information that described the location where they occurred as a market. The information provided in the original source has not been systematically verified.

Explosive weapons and delivery systems

The term “explosive weapons” encompasses a broad spectrum of systems, from small hand grenades and suicide vests to large artillery shells, rockets, and aerial bombs (see Annex 2). Their size, yield, and method of delivery produce different effects on people and infrastructure. To assess their impact and changes over time, this report classifies explosive munitions into three categories based on delivery method. This approach works well for non-military readers, because it relies on observable characteristics: directly emplaced weapons (e.g. car bombs, IEDs), ground-launched weapons (e.g. artillery shells fired from the ground), and air-delivered weapons (e.g. munitions dropped by aircraft or drones), while also providing the basis for further analysis.

State forces and non-state actors

The report also classifies the reported users of explosive weapons in terms of state forces and non-state actors (see Annex 3). This distinction is important from a policy perspective. When state forces use explosive weapons to attack markets, questions of state responsibility and violations of IHL arise. Harm caused by non-state actors is often addressed through counterterrorism frameworks, even though these actors are equally bound by customary IHL despite not being parties to relevant treaties. There are also direct links between the categorisation in terms of state and non-state actors and delivery methods, because non-state actors generally rely on improvised or limited delivery systems to deliver explosive weapons, whereas state forces typically have access to more advanced explosive weaponry, including delivery systems that launch explosives from the air or over long distances. Using both classification systems in the analysis allows the examination of patterns and trends from more than one perspective, which helps to understand nuances (see Annex 3).

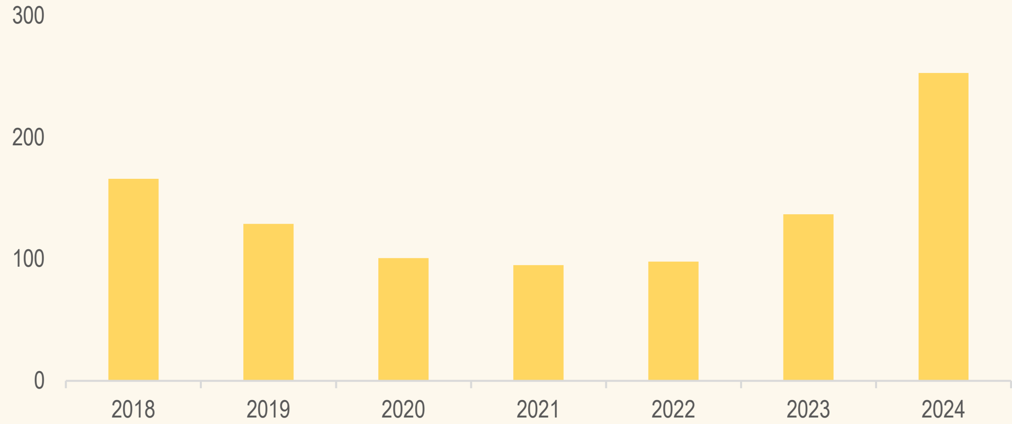
However, these distinctions and categorisations are not always clearcut. The distinction between state and non-state forces may not be universally accepted. For example, after regime changes, particularly those brought about by the use of force, governments may not be universally recognised, and competing claims can blur who legally represents a state. In some situations, de facto authorities that control part of a state’s territory function much like state forces.

Increase since 2022 of reported incidents in which explosive weapons use impacted marketplaces

In 2024, 253 incidents in which explosive weapons use impacted marketplaces were reported, compared to 137 in 2023, an increase of 85%. This increase was largely driven by a higher number of incidents in 2024 in which explosive weapons impacted markets in Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Pakistan, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine. Incidents were also recorded for the first time in this dataset in Ecuador, Mexico and Russia.

Figure 1: Reported incidents in which explosive weapons use impacted marketplaces, 2018-2024

Between 2023 and 2024, reported incidents rose by 85%.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

While the number of attacks on markets using explosive weapons is rising overall, this trend was not a single upward curve. Incidents fell between 2018 and 2021, before rising again, and by 2024 had exceeded the previous high of 2018. This growing number of incidents highlights a concerning escalation in explosive weapons use impacting markets and the communities who rely on them.

The decline in reported incidents between 2018 and 2021 followed by the rise in incidents in 2022 is mirrored by cases in which state armed forces reportedly attacked markets. Incidents attributed to non-state armed forces also broadly followed the same pattern, but overall showed a less marked decline until 2021 and a less noticeable increase from 2022. This underlines the need for both states and non-state actors to respect the rules and requirements of IHL.

Civilian casualties and cascading effects on food supply systems

When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, a disproportionately high number of casualties are civilians. This is particularly true in marketplaces, which are typically densely packed with people of all ages, including women, children and the elderly, making them acutely vulnerable to harm.

Beyond the immediate blast effects that cause civilian casualties and life-threatening injuries, the impact of explosive weapons on marketplaces is cumulative and systemic. These attacks undermine community access to food and essential supplies, disrupt livelihoods and informal economies, and weaken social cohesion.

Yet these long-term and indirect effects on economic survival, food security, and public health remain underdocumented and underanalysed.

Purpose, methodology and structure of the report

This report focuses on how the use of explosive weapons affects markets, highlighting their impact on civilians and food supply systems in conflict settings. The report covers issues directly relevant to international discussions on the implementation of the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA Political Declaration)[2] and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2417 (2018)[3] on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Key issues covered include conflict-induced food insecurity and the threat of famine, as well as compliance with IHL during conflict.[4]

The focus on explosive weapons does not imply that the use of other weapons systems, such as firearms, which can also threaten market safety, is irrelevant.[6] Nor does it suggest that broader conflict-related effects on markets, such as shortages caused by supply-chain disruptions, blockades, sanctions, or financial extortion and additional taxes imposed by armed actors, are unimportant.[7] This report also fully recognises that the overall impact of conflict on marketplaces is far more complex than armed attacks. Nonetheless, it concentrates on understanding how the use of explosive weapons to attack markets contributes to civilian harm. From an IHL perspective, this focus is particularly relevant, since explosive weapons are inherently indiscriminate and have a disproportionately destructive impact on both civilians and market infrastructure due to their wide blast radius. Their use in marketplaces almost inevitably results in high civilian casualties, and the blast wave and fragmentation from a single detonation can kill or injure dozens of people.[8]

The purpose of this report is to provide evidence-based insights that inform practical policy and operational decisions within international frameworks. To this end, it applies the tested classifications of the Security in Numbers Database (SiND), which is designed to enable structured, incident-based analysis of the impacts of conflict. These classifications support the generation of policy-relevant findings while also accounting for the nuances and complexities of real-world conflicts (see Annex 1).

The data for this report has been generated using Insecurity Insight's open-source data gathering methodology, which includes the use of web crawlers that continuously scrape open-source content and use AI-driven functions to classify information that human researchers then review and classify. This method, although not yielding a comprehensive or fully representative dataset, provides the basis for analysis of shifts in reported incident patterns over time (see Annex 1).

Box 1: International instruments protecting marketplaces from explosive weapons use

UNSCR 2417 (2018) recognises how armed conflict impacts food supply systems both directly and indirectly through the disruption of both these systems and markets. It reinforces protections by explicitly condemning both the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and attacks on essential civilian infrastructure, including food production and distribution systems.

UNSCR 2417 calls on all parties to armed conflict, including non-state actors, to comply with their obligations under IHL and to refrain from using starvation as a method of warfare. This includes ensuring the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians in need. While UNSCR 2417 primarily addresses state actors, it calls on all parties to armed conflict to adhere to IHL, and the obligation to refrain from using starvation as a weapon extends to non-state actors. Through international pressure, accountability measures, and the promotion of humanitarian access, the resolution aims to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians and uphold the principles of IHL.

UNSCR 2573 (2021)[5] builds on the protections outlined in UNSCR 2417 and has a wider scope by strongly condemning attacks on critical civilian infrastructure that is indispensable to the survival of civilian populations and highlighting that depriving people of the use of such infrastructure, including markets, threatens their survival and should be stopped.

The **EWIPA Political Declaration**, which was adopted in 2022, highlights the civilian harm caused by use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and aims to prevent attacks of this kind. As noted previously, the use of explosive weapons can cause severe civilian harm and damage to essential infrastructure. Although markets are not explicitly mentioned in the EWIPA Political Declaration, they are covered under *"vital civilian infrastructure"* due to their essential role in the provision of communities' basic needs. Marketplaces are not only hubs of civilian life and economic activity, but also critical sources of food and essential goods.

The EWIPA Political Declaration addresses the responsibilities of both **states and non-state actors** regarding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. State parties commit to mplement the policies outlined in the declaration and to train their armed forces to both implement these policies and comply with IHL. While non-state actors cannot endorse the EWIPA Political Declaration, they are still bound by the rules of IHL. The declaration strongly encourages non-state armed groups to adopt policy commitments to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas and to strengthen the protection of civilians.

Impact analysis

This report evaluates the impact of explosive weapons on markets by using the three-level impact framework developed by the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR),[9] which provides a structured approach to understanding the effects of such weapons on people, infrastructure, and market functionality, and was developed based on a review of a wide range of related literature.

While limitations remain in the data and methodology, and important knowledge gaps persist, the collected data and applied categorisations enable the exploration of connections among key phenomena. The identified information underscores the indiscriminate nature of the use of explosive weapons systems and the predictable risks they pose to civilians and civilian infrastructure. Assessing compliance with IHL, particularly the principles of distinction, precaution, and proportionality, remains challenging due to the lack of public scrutiny of the strategies and tactics employed by conflict parties that target markets.

Structure

The report is structured into an introduction and then three main sections, followed by conclusions, recommendations, and annexes. The first main section (Section II), which focuses on the impact of the use of explosive weapons to attack marketplaces, demonstrates that the use of such weapons causes civilian casualties at marketplaces and entails broader repercussions for food systems in conflict-affected areas. The second main section (Section III), which discusses patterns and trends in the use of explosive weapons against markets, provides a detailed analysis of available data, offering insights into the evolving ways in which state and non-state actors deploy different explosive weapon systems in attacks on markets. This section highlights a notable shift from the use of directly emplaced explosives to the deployment of air-delivered and ground-launched weapons. The third main section (Section IV) focuses on IHL, and underscores the significance of this issue under IHL frameworks and points out the existing limitations in ensuring legal accountability.

This report is part of a four-volume series examining how the use of explosive weapons affects key elements of food supply systems, including water supply systems, agricultural production, and markets. Collectively, the series illustrates how the use of explosive weapons drives the destruction of food supply systems and, when aid operations are targeted, exacerbates food insecurity and can ultimately lead to starvation.

The report is also connected to broader research examining the impact of explosive weapons on health care systems (see **2023** and **2024** reports) and the link between conflict and food insecurity (see reports on the **DRC**, **Ethiopia**, **Gaza**, **Lebanon**, **Mali**, **Niger**, **Somalia** and **Sudan**, **Syria** **Ukraine** and the **West Bank**). Additionally, it relates to assessments of how the introduction of new drone weapons-delivery technologies has affected the risks associated with delivering aid and **health care**, as well as the development of associated **guidance materials**.

The impacts of the use of explosive weapons on marketplaces

When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, a disproportionately high number of casualties are civilians. This is particularly true in marketplaces, which are typically densely packed with people of all ages, including women, children and the elderly, making them acutely vulnerable to harm.

Beyond the immediate blast effects that cause civilian casualties and life-threatening injuries, the impact of explosive weapons on marketplaces is cumulative and systemic. These attacks undermine community access to food and essential supplies, disrupt livelihoods and informal economies, and weaken social cohesion. Yet these long-term and indirect effects on economic survival, food security, and public health remain underdocumented and underanalysed.[10]

Civilian casualties from direct blast and fragmentation

Explosive weapons cause severe and often fatal injuries in marketplaces, where civilians of all ages, including children and the elderly, congregate in large numbers. The high-pressure wave and fragments from an explosion cause life-threatening injuries, rupturing internal organs and causing severe burns.[11] Children are particularly vulnerable, not only due to their physiology, but also because they are more likely to be at ground level when explosions occur, therefore they are more likely to experience head injuries, as well as burn injuries that affect a larger proportion of their body.[12] However, injury patterns and survival outcomes across ages and genders have been poorly documented, because most medical data is based on responses to injuries of adult male bodies.[13]

Box 2: High civilian casualties, but uncertainty about precise numbers

The use of explosive weapons in a marketplace often results in a high number of civilian casualties and injuries due to these areas frequently being crowded. However, the total number of people killed or injured by explosive weapons in markets is often not known, especially as some civilians may die a few days or weeks later because of the injuries they sustained from the blast. From the analysed sample of 979 incidents, at least 2,637 people have been killed, 98 of whom were children, in markets following an explosive weapons strike or detonation. On average, seven civilians were killed in each incident, while the number of civilians killed in a single attack ranged from less than ten to hundreds.[14]

- **Mali, October 2024:** At least five people, four of whom were children, were killed and 14 others injured after a drone-delivered explosive launched by the Mali Armed Forces struck a weekly market.[14]
- **Sudan, December 2024:** Between 30 and 100 people were killed and 42-50 wounded after a Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) air strike struck a market.[16]

Civilian casualties from structural collapse, fire and chaos

In enclosed or semi-enclosed marketplaces, blast waves are absorbed, reflected, and channelled through structures,[17] increasing the likelihood of building collapse and secondary injuries caused by falling debris, shattered glass or resulting fire. The effects of structural damage on an individual depend on the location of the person at the time of the attack and whether they were close to exits, load-bearing walls, or flammable materials. Additionally, when a market is hit by explosives, it creates immediate panic and chaos that can result in stampedes that further injure individuals. The elderly and children are particularly vulnerable in such chaos because they may be less mobile or unable to fend for themselves. However, these secondary harms are difficult to measure accurately.

Box 3: Examples of civilian casualties from explosive weapons attacks resulting in structural collapse, fire and chaos

- **DRC, 7 February 2024:** An unspecified explosive fired by the March 23 Movement (M23) inside Kisoko market damaged the infrastructure and created panic among marketgoers. No fatalities were reported.[18]
- **Myanmar, December 2024:** Over 50 shops inside a market were burnt down after air strikes launched by the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) struck the market.[19]

Disruption of markets' functions and wider community effects

Explosive weapons attacks on markets also undermine their core economic functions, halting trade and damaging vital supply exchanges. Vendors lose goods, infrastructure is destroyed and prices increase due to scarcity. For many individuals and families, marketplaces are a primary source of income, particularly for informal workers, traders, vendors, and small-scale farmers.

Box 4: Attacks on food production in Gaza

Since the Israeli assault on Gaza following a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on 7 October 2023, Israeli forces have systematically attacked and destroyed various types of infrastructure related to the production of food (e.g. agricultural land, greenhouses) and the distribution of food (bakeries, markets, food warehouses), which has resulted in Palestinians being unable to produce and access food, pushing families into an increased dependency on community kitchens and humanitarian aid. Repeated Israeli air strikes have destroyed bakeries, markets, and agricultural hubs, cutting informal food trade, causing crippling employment, and pushing families into food dependency and malnutrition.[20] Additionally, the tightening of the Israeli blockade on Gaza, which imposed a complete shutdown on the entry and delivery of humanitarian assistance, including medical supplies, baby formula, food supplies, fuel and other necessary resources, has further exacerbated the population's humanitarian needs. The destruction of food infrastructure and severe restrictions on humanitarian aid led to the declaration on famine in August 2025.[21]

Explosive weapons use inside markets destroys market stalls, goods, transport systems and the surrounding infrastructure necessary for commerce. Because of this, even a single strike can have a devastating cascading effect on the local economy, driving unemployment, food shortages and inflation. For some communities, especially those living on the economic margins, the destruction of a marketplace can mean the loss of their only means of survival and may lead to a collapse of local commerce. In Yemen, attacks on markets by both the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi (Ansar Allah) forces have repeatedly disrupted food access, destroyed produce, and inflated market prices, pushing communities further into food insecurity and reliance on humanitarian aid.[22]

Additionally, attacks on wholesale or trader markets can be particularly damaging because they serve as central hubs for the storage and distribution of staple foods. Their destruction disrupts supply chains, drives shortages and price increases, and has knock-on effects on smaller public markets that are sometimes at a considerable distance from the original site of the attack. The loss of these hubs also undermines the livelihoods of traders, transporters, and producers who rely on them, while severing critical rural-urban linkages between agricultural producers and urban consumers. In addition, the destruction of storage facilities and transport infrastructure compounds the disruption over time, while repeated attacks create a climate of fear that deters traders from operating, leading to prolonged closures and deeper economic hardships for traders and community members alike.

Markets are also centres for community life, and attacks on these sites spread widespread panic and trauma, fundamentally altering the targeted market from a site of connection to one of fear. Families may avoid markets altogether, weakening the social bonds that underlie community resilience. Repeated attacks fracture trust, discourage economic activity and increase long-term dependency on humanitarian assistance. The psychological impact of these attacks, particularly fear of future attacks, may also lead to the long-term abandonment of a particular market, further destabilising food access and economic recovery.

Loss of access to food and essential supplies

One of the most far-reaching consequences of explosive weapon use against marketplaces is the immediate and long-term threat to food security. Marketplaces are crucial distribution hubs for food and essential goods in both rural and urban areas. When they are destroyed or deemed unsafe due to conflict, communities lose access to fresh produce, food staples and other essential supplies, such as hygiene items. Small-scale farmers and food vendors may be unable to sell their produce, leading to spoilage and income loss, while consumers face rising prices and empty shelves. For example, in Sudan, attacks on markets, coupled with limited aid delivery and shrinking agricultural land (due to the conflict), have led to 24.6 million people facing acute food insecurity,[23] because people are unable to access food supplies or afford food from still-functioning markets due to surging prices.[24]

Additionally, markets are not easily replaced in many conflict-affected areas. Their destruction may isolate communities from food supply chains for months or even years, particularly when combined with the damaging or destruction of roads, fuel shortages and ongoing fighting. Therefore, attacks on markets can push already vulnerable regions into emergency levels of food insecurity and make them dependent on humanitarian aid.

While the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) provides the most widely used framework for assessing levels of food insecurity and famine risk, its categories and terminology (e.g. Crisis, Emergency, Catastrophe/Famine) are measured at household and population levels and typically reflect cumulative drivers of hunger. The specific contribution of attacks on markets to IPC outcomes is therefore difficult to isolate, because the results of attacks are often not immediate but occur over time, and attribution is complicated by overlapping factors such as displacement, agricultural disruption, and access constraints. Nonetheless, the causal link is clear: the repeated destruction of marketplaces undermines food availability, access, and affordability, accelerating communities' progression toward IPC crisis or emergency phases. These challenges underline the urgent need to better monitor how conflict incidents, including explosive weapons use to attack marketplaces, contribute to the devastating consequences of armed conflict on food security.

Resilience

These cascading impacts on markets can sometimes be contained when effective mitigation measures and community resilience strategies are in place. Usually, such resilience is only possible with outside support. Traders may adapt by relocating stalls, moving their activities to roadside or temporary markets, and relying on informal networks to continue the flow of goods. Consumers can sometimes cope by turning to alternative neighbourhood markets, using barter or credit systems, or pooling resources in families and communities to secure essentials.

At a deeper level, disruptions can be limited when local authorities and humanitarian actors step in to restore functionality. Temporary trading spaces, cash transfers, and emergency food or commodity distributions help to stabilise supply chains and prevent prolonged market closures. Repairs to damaged infrastructure and the rapid reopening of market hubs reduce the risk of long-term economic collapse.

Ultimately, these coping strategies are rarely sufficient without outside assistance. Just as landmine clearance and input support are essential in agriculture, markets also require targeted interventions to recover after such attacks. With the involvement of committed authorities and well-resourced aid agencies, cascading impacts can be contained and communities can preserve access to food and their livelihoods. Without such support, survival depends largely on the fragile resilience of individual households and small trader networks.

Patterns and trends in the use of explosive weapons against marketplaces

Despite the adoption in 2018 of UNSCR 2417 and the EWIPA Political Declaration in 2022, the use of explosive weapons to attack marketplaces increased, causing not only visible physical destruction, but also profound disruptions to the social and economic fabric of affected communities. While these rising numbers may capture immediate attention, they obscure deeper shifts in how the various conflict actors employ such weapons. These changes signal troubling trends in the conduct of hostilities, including a shrinking of respect for IHL, particularly among state actors. Examining these patterns is crucial, not only to document the human and economic toll of these attacks, but also to inform more effective protection strategies and interventions.

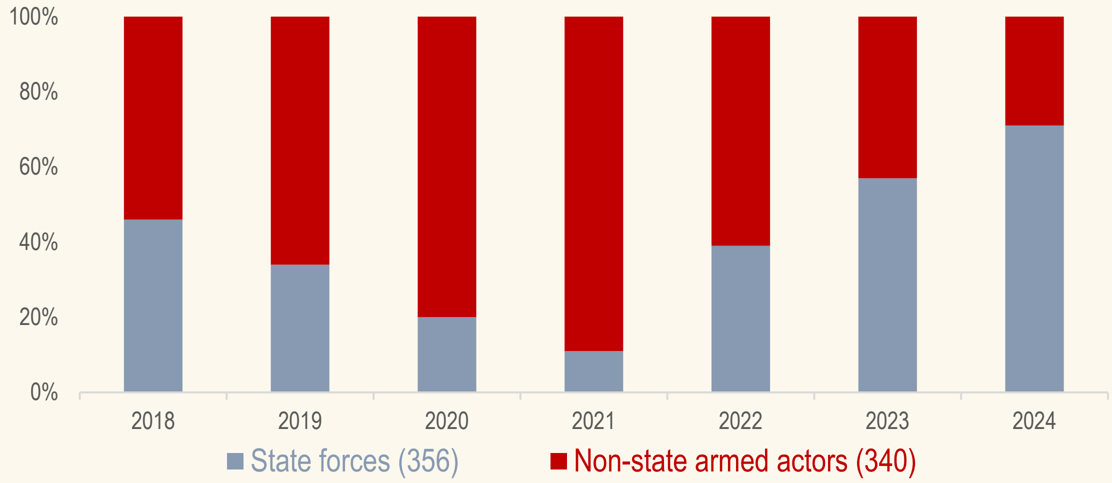
State and non-state actors' use of explosive weapons to attack markets

Between 2018 and 2021, non-state armed groups were more frequently linked to the use of explosive weapons to attack marketplaces than state forces. For example, in 2019, they were linked to 66% of recorded incidents, compared to 34% linked to state actors. However, by 2024, the pattern had reversed: state forces accounted for 71% of reported incidents in which explosive weapons impacted markets, compared to 20% attributed to non-state actors. Incidents involving state forces surged after 2021 and have risen each subsequent year.

In 2024, 62% of incidents attributed to named state forces were linked to just four state actors, some of whom impacted markets in more than one country: the Sudanese Armed Forces in Sudan, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Lebanon and the oPt, the Russian Armed Forces in Syria and Ukraine, and the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) under the direction of the military government that seized power in Myanmar in the 2021 coup.

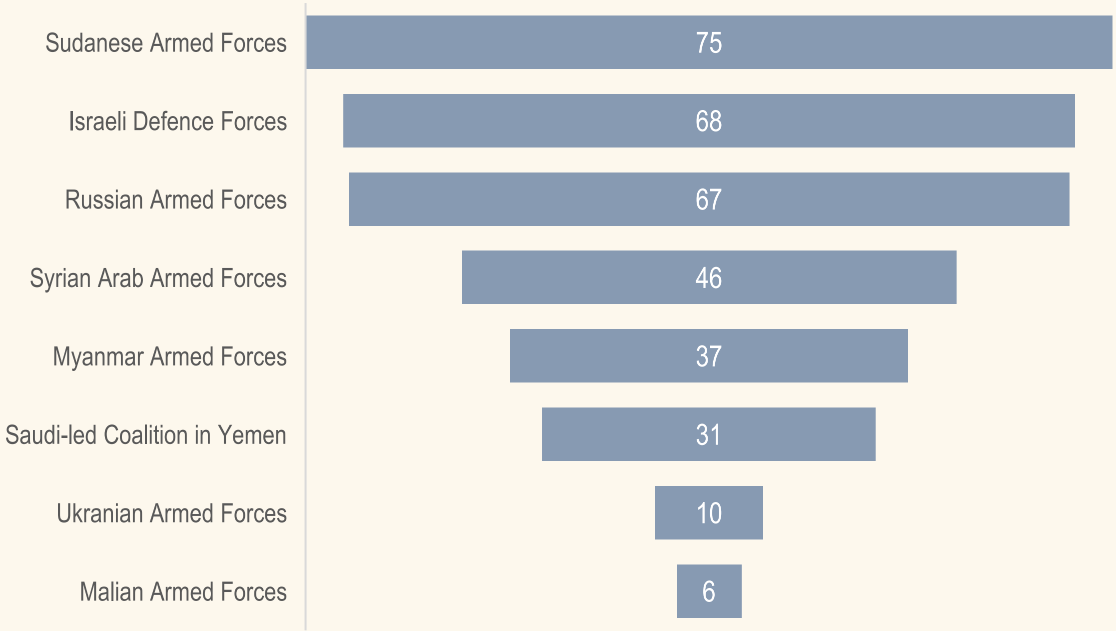
Figure 2: Reported incidents of explosive weapons use against marketplaces, by state and non-state conflict actors, 2018-2024

Between 2018 and 2021, incidents were frequently linked to non-state armed actors. By 2023, cases attributed to state armed forces increased, marking a significant shift in the dynamics of violence affecting markets.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Figure 3: Reported incidents of explosive weapons use against marketplaces, by named state forces, 2018-2024



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Actors responsible for less than five incidents were not included in the above chart to ensure it was visually accessible. These include Burkina Faso Armed Forces and Ethiopian National Defense Forces (three each), Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (2), Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, Armed Force of Niger, Armed Forces of Nigeria, Kenya Defence Forces, Somali Armed Forces and Turkish Armed Forces (one each).

State actors damaging and destroying marketplaces in foreign countries and occupied territories

State actors used explosives in foreign countries and occupied territories. The Russian Armed Forces were linked to slightly more than half of these incidents (67 incidents), using explosive weapons in Ukraine (48) and Syria (19). All incidents in Syria took place in the northern parts of the country, as well as in Deir ez-Zor and Rif Dimashq, when these territories fell outside the control of the Assad government in 2018. In Ukraine, incidents were reported from 2022 onwards, following the Russian invasion. A high number of incidents were also linked to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen during Operation Restoring Hope, with 70% of these incidents taking place in 2018. The IDF was linked to 11 incidents of explosive weapon use on markets in Lebanon – almost all of which occurred between October and November 2024, after its expanded ground operation in southern Lebanon. Incidents were also attributed to the Ukraine Armed Forces in Russia (5 incidents), Turkish Armed Forces in Syria (3 incidents), Burkina Faso forces in Mali (2 incidents) and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Yemen (2 incidents).

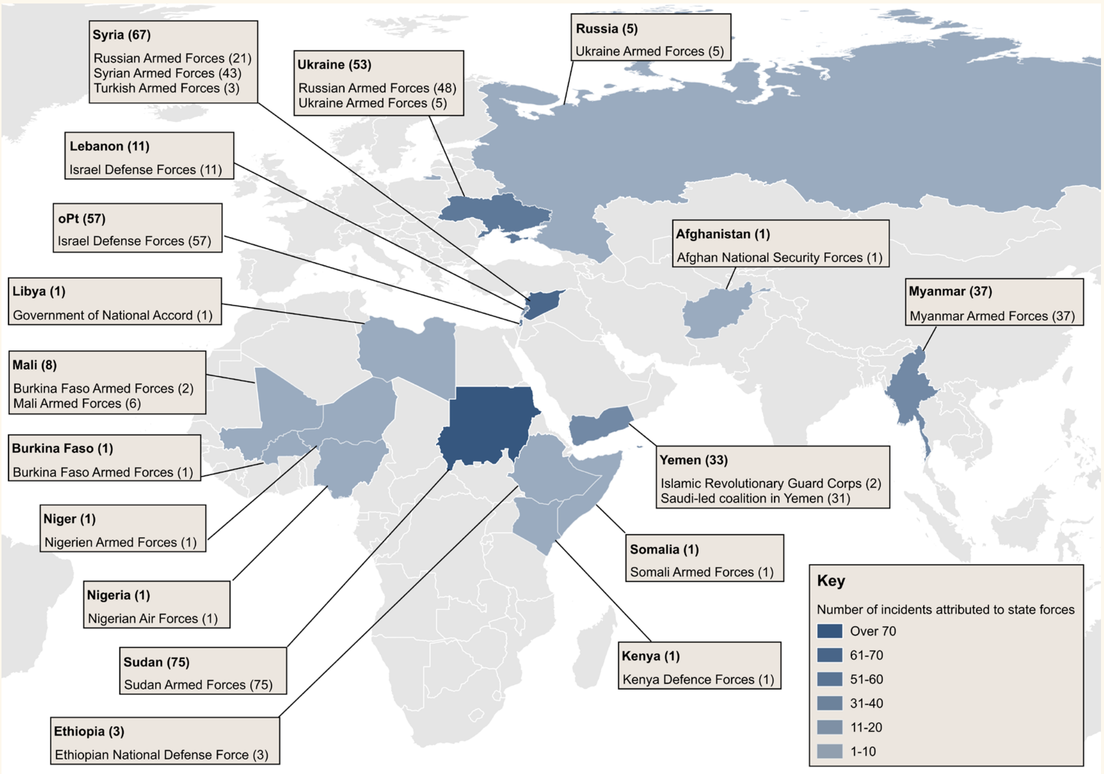
The IDF was also linked to 57 incidents of explosive weapon use against markets in the oPt, the majority of which took place in Gaza as a consequence of the Israeli military assault after the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. These incidents involved the use of air strikes delivered by aircraft or drones and artillery shelling that struck markets, killing and injuring people and damaging infrastructure.

State actors damaging or destroying marketplaces domestically

Incidents involving explosive weapons affecting markets were linked to state actors acting domestically. Often, this occurred when government forces struck infrastructure in areas outside their control, to weaken de facto authorities and deny services to civilians. The majority of these incidents were linked to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (75 incidents), the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (43 incidents) and the MAF (37 incidents).

Map 2: Known locations of explosive weapons use against marketplaces, by named state forces, 2018-2024

Explosive weapons attacks on markets by state forces were recorded in 17 countries and territories, and were concentrated in fewer conflicts, but the overall number of active conflicts increased.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

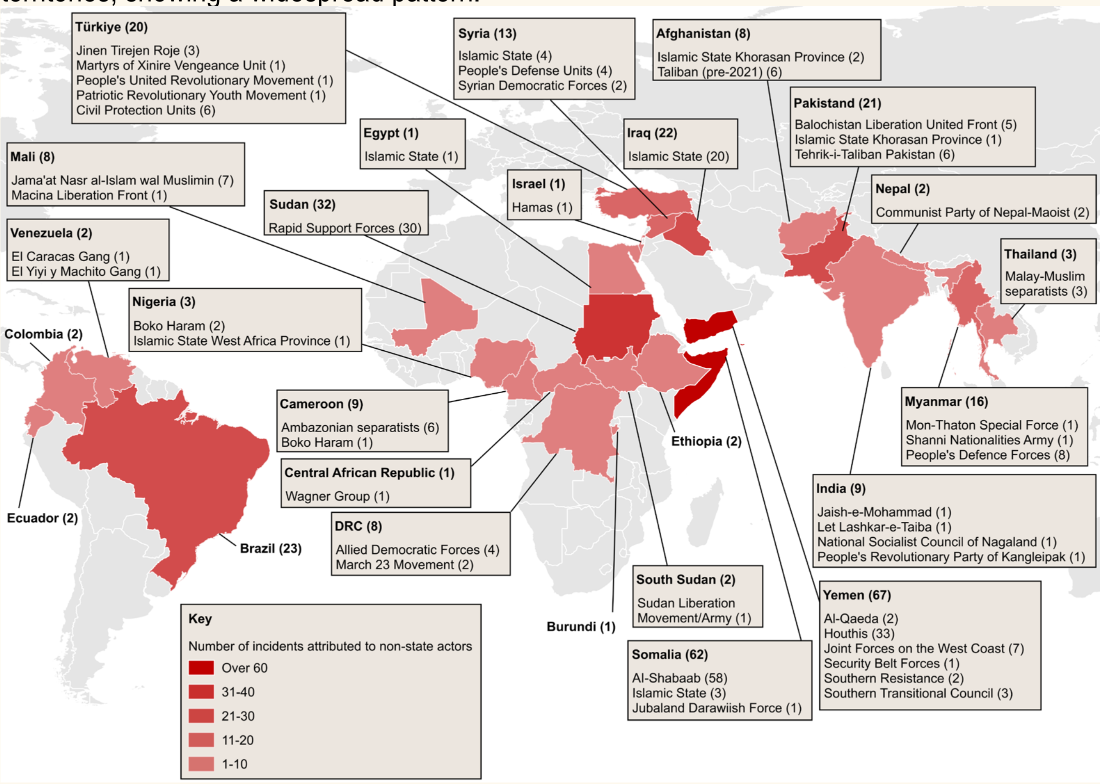
READ *BROKEN HARVESTS: HOW EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS DEVASTATE FARMLAND AND LIVELIHOODS*

Non-state actors damaging and destroying marketplaces

Overall, non-state armed groups used explosive weapons to attack markets in more countries and territories than state forces. Non-state actors' use of explosive weapons against markets was reported in as many as 26 countries and territories, compared to incidents in 17 countries being attributed to state forces.

Map 3: Known locations of explosive weapons use to attack marketplaces, by named non-state armed groups, 2018-2024

Explosive weapons attacks on markets by non-state actors were recorded in 26 countries and territories, showing a widespread pattern.



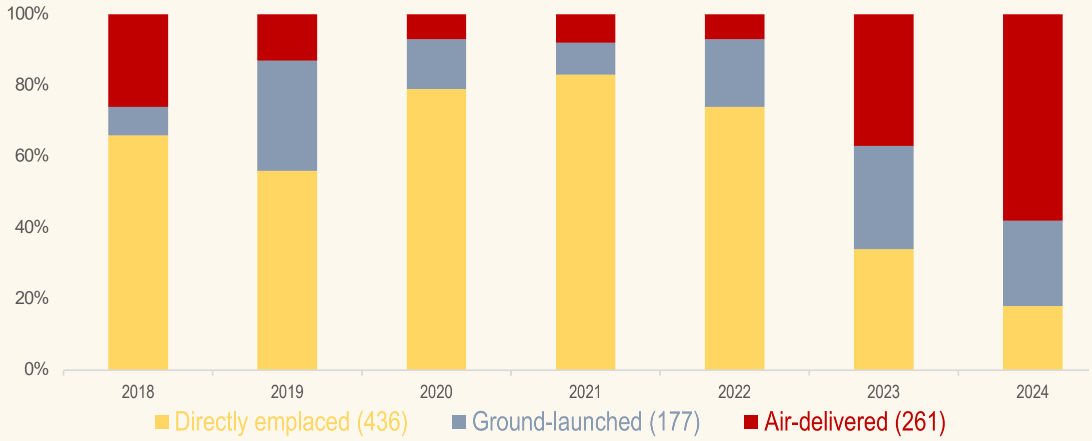
Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Changes over time in delivery methods

The methods used to deliver explosive weapons change over time. State forces and non-state armed actors do not have equal access to explosive weapons or their delivery systems, which influences the patterns of harm such weapons cause. Technological developments, budgets and weapons transfer regimes all influence which weapons systems are used. Depending on their budgets and access to weapons manufacturers, conflict actors can deploy a wide range of military-grade explosive weapons systems and munitions, and maintain complex delivery and maintenance structures, including air forces. These disparities in access to explosive weapons and delivery systems were reflected in a shift in the types of devices used in attacks on markets from the frequent use of directly emplaced IEDs or hand grenades to more ground-launched and air-delivered attacks. Different explosive weapons systems cause different patterns of harm. Trend analysis that combines information on users with information on the method of deployment and weapons systems used provides insight into the broader global trends in how markets are exposed to the effects of explosive weapons use.

Figure 4: Reported incidents of explosive weapon use against marketplaces, by delivery type, 2018-2024[25]

Between 2018 and 2022, directly emplaced explosive weapons, such as hand grenades and IEDs, were the most common weapons used in incidents impacting marketplaces. In 2023, this shifted to air-delivered and ground-launched explosive weapons.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Between 2018 and 2022, directly emplaced explosive devices such as hand grenades, car bombs and suicide vests were the most frequently reported explosive weapons affecting markets. Since 2023, air-delivered explosives have become the leading delivery method in reported attacks on markets. While IEDs still appear, they are now far less common than the state-designed delivery systems increasingly used by state-controlled armed forces. Markets that are such vital social hubs and lifelines for local economies and food security are now more often under threat from the skies than from the ground.

Directly emplaced explosive weapons in markets: IEDs and hand grenades affecting markets

Until 2023, directly emplaced explosives, which include IEDs, homemade explosives assembled from available materials, and hand grenades, were the most reported explosive weapons category, accounting for three-quarters of all reported incidents of explosive weapons use impacting markets between 2018 and 2022. Almost half of these incidents were attributed to non-state armed groups that used hand grenades, car bombs, and suicide vests inside markets, injuring and killing marketgoers and traders and damaging stalls, killing livestock, and destroying food items.

IED incidents affecting markets were reported in 29 countries and territories. A high number of incidents were reported in Iraq (62 incidents), Somalia (92), Syria (67) and Yemen (42). In 2024, incidents involving IEDs inside marketplaces increased in Pakistan, where nine incidents were reported, compared to three in the previous year. These incidents were all attributed to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, members of which detonated vehicle-borne IEDs, or the Baloch Liberation United Front, members of which threw hand grenades or detonated IEDs inside markets. Soldiers forming part of state forces were also implicated in at least three incidents after they detonated hand grenades inside markets.

Box 5: Examples of non-state armed actors' use of IEDs and hand grenades to attack markets

- **Syria, March 2024:** A car bomb planted by an unnamed armed group detonated inside a local market, killing two children and a woman and injuring five others.[26]
- **Somalia, February 2024:** Four IEDs, which were planted in various shops inside a market, detonated simultaneously. At least seven people were killed and eight more were injured. The IEDs were planted by suspected Al-Shabaab members.[27]
- **Cameroon, September 2024:** An IED planted by suspected Ambazonian separatists detonated in a market, killing one civilian and injuring six others, and destroying several unspecified food items.[28]

Between 2018 and 2022, attacks by non-state actors on markets using IEDs or hand grenades were frequent occurrences.

Ground-launched explosive weapons use impacting marketplaces

Ground-launched explosive weapons, including artillery shells, rockets, and mortar bombs, are fired from the ground to hit targets at a distance. They are often inaccurate, and can cause extensive damage when used near towns, fields, and markets. These incidents accounted for 20% of all reported incidents involving explosive weapons use affecting markets.

Between 2023 and 2024, the reported use of ground-launched explosive weapons impacting markets nearly doubled due to their more frequent use by both state and non-state actors.

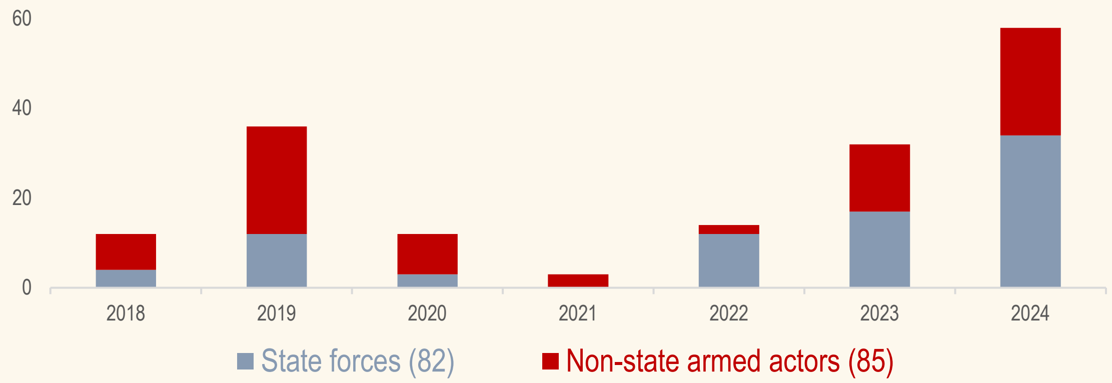
After a previous high in 2019, the use of ground-launched explosives increased in 2022. This was attributed to state forces, including the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine (27 incidents affecting markets with ground-launched explosives) and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces in Syria (20 incidents), as well as non-state forces that seized weapons systems from state forces. In Sudan, ground-launched explosives have been deployed by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a non-state force that had previously been integrated into the state security apparatus and that, after breaking away from the state in 2023, seized heavy artillery systems from state arsenals (30 incidents affecting markets used ground-launched explosives). Houthi forces (Ansar Allah) in Yemen, which had seized large parts of the army's artillery arsenal in 2014 and controlled an important part of Yemen, were responsible for 22 incidents affecting markets using ground-launched explosives. In these incidents, shelling damaged stalls, and killed and injured marketgoers and traders.

The use of ground-launched explosive weapons to attack markets was reported in 14 countries and territories. In 2023, incidents involving these explosives increased in Sudan primarily due to RSF artillery shelling of markets in the Greater Darfur region (primarily North Darfur) and Khartoum state (43 incidents). A high number of incidents where also reported in Yemen (45 incidents), Ukraine (31 incidents) and Syria (26 incidents).

Ground-launched weapons are sometimes fired at or near markets for clear tactical military reasons, and the resulting civilian harm is incidental to these attacks. Markets are often located in the centres of towns and cities in areas that may be contested or controlled by opposing forces, so striking them can serve both a tactical and psychological purpose. Markets concentrate people and goods, making them attractive targets for forces seeking to inflict mass casualties; disrupt local logistics; or deny an opponent access to food, cash, or informal supply networks. Marketplaces and surrounding infrastructure (including nearby roads) can be used by opposing armed actors to store weapons, launch attacks, or provision their fighters, so strikes may be intended to interdict personnel movement or destroy material such as weapons, fuel, and food supplies.

Figure 5: Reported incidents where ground-launched explosive weapons impacted marketplaces, by perpetrators, 2018-2024

Incidents increased in 2022, driven by attacks linked to state forces, while in 2023, incidents linked to non-state actors also rose.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Firing mortar bombs, rockets, or artillery shells into market areas can shape civilian movements by clearing routes, creating obstacles with craters or UXO, or generating fear that degrades an armed actor's ability to rely on local support. Tactically these attacks aim to degrade an adversary's operational capacity, but because markets are civilian spaces, the resulting loss of life, disruption of affected communities access to food, and damage to livelihoods are predictable consequences that must be factored into armed forces' targeting and precautionary assessments.

Box 6: Examples of ground-launched explosives causing damage to open markets, supermarkets, and restaurants and killing and injuring marketgoers, including children.

- **Sudan, July 2024:** A vegetable market in North Darfur was struck by RSF artillery shells, killing at least 11 children.[29]
- **Myanmar, August 2024:** A market was hit by MAF artillery shells, killing eight women and three men and injuring 21 others.[30]
- **Ukraine, May 2023:** A market was hit by Russian Armed Forces artillery and mortar shells that caused a fire and killed one person and injured another.[31]

The impact of air-delivered explosive weapons on markets

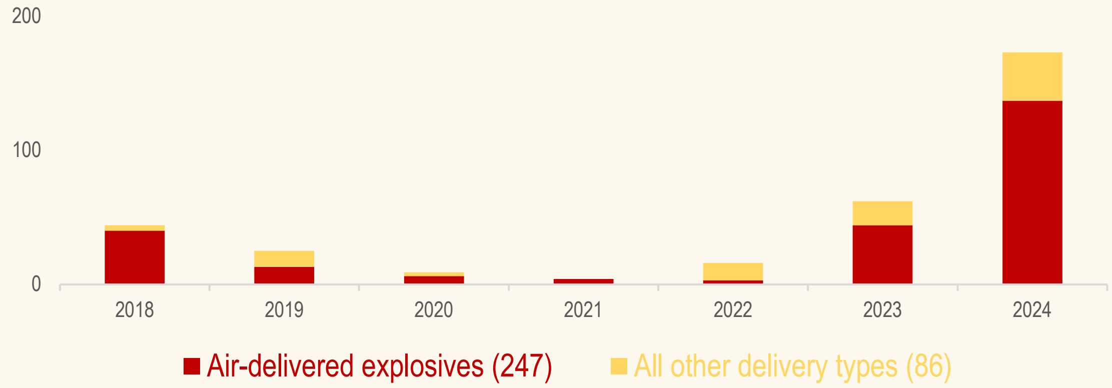
Air-delivered explosives include munitions launched from aircraft (both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters) and drones. Their wide blast and fragmentation effects can cause mass casualties and seriously damage or destroy markets. These weapons accounted for almost a third of all reported incidents involving explosive weapons use affecting marketplaces.

While non-state actors continued to use ground-launched and directly emplaced explosives during this period, the overall rise in explosive weapons use in attacks on markets from 166 in 2018 to 253 in 2024 was largely driven by state actors, particularly through air-delivered attacks, since 2023. Of 261 identified incidents involving the use of air-delivered explosive weapons, 95% were attributed to state forces across 16 countries and territories.

Prior to 2022, only three state actors were consistently linked to attacks on markets using air-delivered explosives: the Russian Armed Forces and Syrian Arab Armed Forces in Syria and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. By 2023, the number had risen to at least 13 state forces, including the Burkina Faso Armed Forces in Burkina Faso and Mali, Turkish Armed Forces in Syria, IDF in Lebanon and the oPt, MAF in Myanmar, and SAF in Sudan.

Since 2023, state actor increasingly used air-delivered explosives in attacks on markets.

Figure 6: Reported incidents where air-delivered explosive weapons impacted marketplaces, by state forces, 2018-2024
The rise in incidents is attributable to state actors' increased use of air-delivered explosives: 95% of incidents involving air-delivered explosives were attributed to state actors across 16 countries and territories.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

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From 2022, state forces increasingly began using explosive weapons within their own borders, demonstrating a growing willingness to deploy them in populated civilian areas as part of counter insurgency and broader conflict strategies. Before 2022, most attacks by state forces occurred in foreign or occupied territories. However, in 2024, 93 out of 152 incidents involving state forces occurred inside the territory of the state where the attacks took place. This was primarily due to an increase of incidents attributed to the SAF in Sudan, where 59 incidents were reported in 2024, compared to 16 the previous year. Incidents attributed to the MAF in Myanmar also increased in 2024, more than doubling compared to 2023. Many of these domestic attacks on markets were described by the armed forces as targeting terrorists or opposition groups operating in markets, and raise serious concerns over civilian harm and the shrinking distinction between military and civilian spaces during conflicts.

Box 7: Examples of air-delivered explosives launched from/by aircraft, helicopters, and drones that struck markets, supermarkets, and bakeries causing damage to infrastructure and killing and injuring marketgoers, including children

- **Niger, December 2023:** A market was hit by an airstrike carried out by the Nigerien Armed Forces, injuring five marketgoers.[32]
- **Syria, December 2019:** A local market was attacked by barrel bombs dropped by Syrian Arab Armed Forces helicopters. Two people were killed and another four were injured. Two schools located near the market were also damaged in the strike.[33]
- **The oPt, December 2024:** An IDF air strike hit a group of people gathered around a food stall and bakery in Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza. Five people, four of whom were children, were killed in the strike.[34]

Over the seven-year period between 2018 and 2024, more than three-quarters of air-delivered explosive weapons attacks on markets were attributed to just five state actors: the SAF in Sudan (64), IDF in Lebanon and the oPt (63), Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (26), Russian Armed Forces in Syria and Ukraine (31), and MAF in Myanmar (21). The frequency of such attacks, combined with the rare international attention given to many of them, appears to have normalised such tactics. This rise in state forces deploying explosives in attacks on markets shows a worrying trend of eroding norms in the conduct of hostilities that is being adopted in more and more conflicts.

Increasing use of drones in attacks impacting markets

The expansion in the number of states using explosive weapons in attacks on markets is likely linked to increasing access to technology that allows air-delivered strikes, not just from aircraft, but also by using drones.[35] This technology has also enabled some non-state actors to deliver IEDs using drones. Of the 979 identified incidents involving explosive weapons impacting markets, 58 involved drone-delivered explosives targeting markets across 14 countries and territories.

Since 2021, the use of armed drones by both state and non-state actors has increasingly impacted marketplaces, particularly as drone technology has become more accessible. By 2024, the use of armed drones had increased by 900% compared to the number of reported drone-related incidents in 2021, with a growing number of state and non-state actors deploying them to attack marketplaces.

One of the first documented instances occurred in Ethiopia in June 2021, when at least 40 people were killed and another 400 injured when a drone launched by the Ethiopian National Defense Force struck a market, allegedly to strike Tigray People's Liberation Front targets inside it.[36]

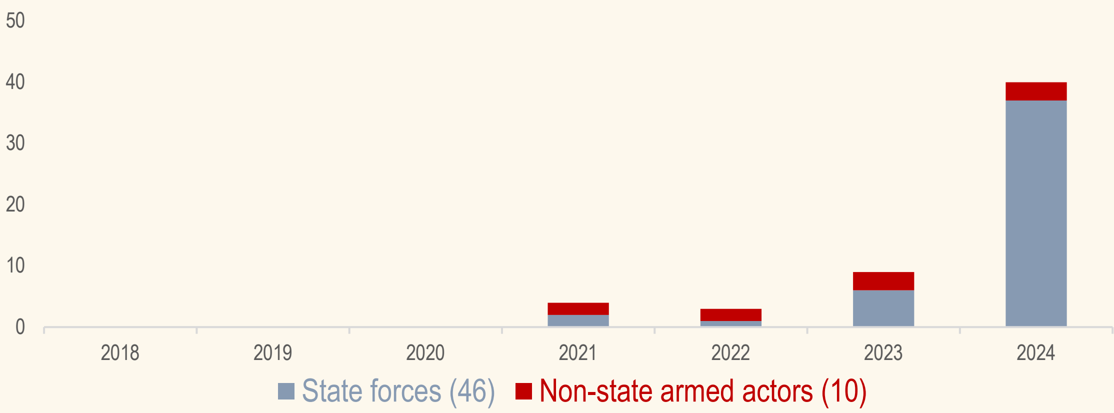
At about the same time, a range of non-state and paramilitary actors also began deploying armed drones in ways that affected markets. Notably, Houthi (Ansar Allah) forces in Yemen[37] and Wagner-affiliated forces[38] in the Central African Republic[39] carried out strikes on marketplaces that resulted in civilian casualties.

The increasing use of air-delivered explosives near markets has driven up the overall incident rate of attacks impacting markets.

Manned aircraft strikes are typically used for both strategic and tactical purposes: to quickly engage high-value targets, shape battlefield conditions, and project power over wide areas. Aerial platforms can rapidly engage concentrated targets (such as fighters, checkpoints, or visible security forces) or destroy stocks and logistics hubs in and around markets, and their speed and reach make them useful for striking fleeting or time-sensitive targets. Drones add persistent surveillance and loitering strike options, allowing forces to wait for a target to appear and then engage it with precision munitions or weapons with wide-area effects. Striking markets can therefore interdict supplies, deny access to food and cash flows, and degrade an opponent's ability to use urban commercial hubs for resupply or shelter. Air strikes also have a strong psychological effect – causing mass panic, disrupting commerce, and undermining public confidence – while the larger blast and fragmentation patterns of many air-delivered weapons raise the risk of extensive civilian casualties, secondary fires, and long-term damage to infrastructure and humanitarian access.

Figure 7: Reported incidents in which drone-delivered explosive weapons impacted markets, 2018-2024

Since 2021, both state and non-state actors have deployed drone-delivered explosives in attacks on markets. In 2024, incidents involving drone-delivered explosives surged, primarily driven by state actors.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Precision munitions can reduce collateral damage, but limitations in sensors, targeting, and detailed awareness of the state of a particular military engagement, as well as the fact that markets are essentially civilian spaces, mean that civilian harm remains highly likely. The remote nature of many air strikes complicates the real-time ability of those who order the strikes to assess the presence of civilians in or near the targeted area. Nonetheless, the foreseeable impacts of a strike on civilians, as well as food access and livelihoods, should factor into the targeting and precautionary assessments of military personnel who order such strikes.

Box 8: Examples of explosive munitions being delivered by drones to attack markets.

- **Central African Republic, January 2021:** A market was struck by explosives dropped from a drone operated by Wagner-affiliated forces that killed 11 people and injured several others.[40]
- **Russia, April 2024:** Four Ukrainian drones struck a city in an attack that Russian forces claimed to have intercepted; however, one fell onto a market and another on a youth centre, causing a fire at both locations.[41]
- **Pakistan, October 2024:** A market was struck by an explosive dropped by a quadcopter drone, injuring 13 people, including children, when they were hit by shrapnel from the explosion. The drone was allegedly linked to Pakistani military forces that were targeting militants in the area; however, there had also been an increase in Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan militants' use of quadcopter drones in the area.[42]

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International law and other instruments, and the protection of marketplaces and food security during conflict

The protection of marketplaces under international law

Markets are civilian spaces where communities access food, essential goods and services. Therefore, under IHL they qualify as *"civilian objects"* and are protected on two levels: general and specific IHL provisions. Under the general IHL principle governing the protection of civilian objects in both international[43] and non-international armed conflicts,[44] markets are protected against attack, which should be limited *"strictly to military objectives"*, and if there is any doubt whether a structure is being used for military purposes, then it should be assumed that it is not.

Additionally, markets are also protected because of their function of supplying and distributing food to the civilian population. Under IHL, foodstuffs are considered to be *"objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population"*, and their destruction is therefore prohibited.[45] These provisions are directly linked to the prohibition on using the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. Destroying or rendering useless food sources, including marketplaces, not only violates the protection of civilian objects, but may also constitute a form of starvation of civilians, particularly since their destruction denies access to food to much of the civilian population.[46] Additionally, this protection is also considered as applicable to non-international armed conflicts under customary IHL[47] and is linked to the prohibition on the use of starvation as a method of warfare.[48]

In situations of belligerent occupation, the occupying power, which is recognised under IHL as a temporary administrator, has an obligation to *"restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and civil life"*.[49] Accordingly, it must safeguard the resources of the occupied territory and has no legal authority to exploit them for its own benefit.[50] The ICRC adds that the occupying power *"may not destroy objects located in occupied territory which are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population"*.[51]

Human rights law remains applicable during armed conflict, particularly in situations of occupation. Although human rights instruments do not explicitly address markets, their protection is increasingly recognised as integral to people's enjoyment of their fundamental rights, including life, health, property, and privacy, all of which may be affected by the destruction of food or the deprivation of access to it. Human rights law also directly protects the right to food and to an adequate standard of living, both of which are closely linked to secure access to land and the fulfilment of the fundamental right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition.[52]

The protection of marketplaces under other policy instruments or commitments

Recent policy initiatives have also focused on regulating the use of explosive weapons during armed conflict, particularly in terms of their impact on civilians and essential resources. Both the EWIPA Political Declaration and UNSCR 2417 are grounded in IHL as the key legal framework for achieving their objectives.

The preamble to the EWIPA Political Declaration reaffirms the applicability of International Humanitarian Law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution, to the use of explosive weapons in populated area.[53] The operative section outlines specific commitments specific to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and commits states to go beyond the foundations set by IHL by developing their own military policies and practices specific to the use of explosive weapons. In section 3.3, states commit to *"restricting or refraining, as appropriate, from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas when their use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects"*. In section 3.4, they commit to ensuring that their armed forces take into account the direct and indirect effects on civilians and civilian objects that can reasonably be foreseen in the planning of military operations and the execution of attacks in populated areas, and conducting damage assessments to the degree feasible to identify lessons learned.[54] Other specific commitments require states to develop new military policies and practices that both ensure compliance with IHL and go beyond it, which includes as a first step a review of national policies and armed forces training procedures. As of September 2025, 88 states had endorsed the EWIPA Political Declaration.[55]

UNSCR 2417 calls on all parties to armed conflicts to comply with their obligations under IHL. This includes ensuring the protection of civilian infrastructure critical to the delivery of humanitarian aid and the proper functioning of food supply systems, including markets. The resolution emphasises the importance of adhering to IHL principles designed to prevent and mitigate the impact of conflict-induced hunger. It reaffirms that states bear the primary responsibility for protecting their populations throughout their entire territory. This responsibility includes ensuring that IHL is respected and that actions leading to food insecurity, such as the unlawful denial of humanitarian access, are prevented and addressed. The resolution strongly condemns the use of the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, and underscores that such actions may constitute a war crime under IHL, particularly under the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

While these instruments apply to both states and non-state actors, the latter can also sign Geneva Calls' Deed of Commitment[56] for the Prevention of Starvation and Addressing Conflict-related Food Insecurity.[57] This instrument underscores the links between food insecurity, displacement, health, and environmental degradation; recalls IHL protections for displaced persons, health care, and the natural environment; and highlights the severe and lasting impacts of armed conflict on food security, health, education, sustainability, and peace. So far, only one non-state actor, Nduma pour la défense du Congo-Rénové/Guidon in the DRC, has signed the Deed of Commitment on the Prevention of Starvation, pledging to protect objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies, and irrigation works, including when such objects are part of the natural environment.[58]

Box 9: IHL principles and the protection of markets during conflict

1. Principle of distinction

Parties to a conflict must always distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects.[59] Markets are places where large concentrations of civilians gather to access food and essential goods, and are thus civilian objects and protected against attacks. Attacks that deliberately or indiscriminately target such objects are prohibited and may amount to war crimes.[60] As with any civilian object, marketplaces lose their protection if and for such time as they are used for military purposes, and may then be subject to attack in accordance with the principles of proportionality and precautions.[61] In situations where there is doubt as to whether a market constitutes a legitimate military target, it must be treated as a civilian object, and conflict parties must protect it from attack.

Embedded in the principle of distinction is the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks.[62] Parties to conflicts are prohibited from launching attacks that fail to distinguish between military targets and civilian objects, or that employ weapons that cannot be directed at specific military objectives, or the effects of which cannot be limited as prescribed by IHL.[63] More broadly, the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects to attack markets or areas near them often causes damage well beyond the intended target and results in large civilian casualties, raising serious concerns over compliance with the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks.

2. Principle of proportionality

The principle of proportionality obliges all parties to a conflict to assess whether the expected incidental harm to civilian and civilian objects, such as markets, from an attack against a legitimate military objective would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.[64] This principle prohibits attacks likely to cause disproportionate harm to civilians or to essential civilian infrastructure. In assessing proportionality, particular weight must be given to the potential damage to objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs and markets, taking into account both the immediate and long-term consequences for civilian well-being. The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects against or in the vicinity of markets is almost certain to result in civilian casualties due to their densely populated nature, and to disrupt market functions, depriving communities of access to food and essential goods.

3. Principle of precautions in attack

The principle of precautions requires that, constant care be taken in the conduct of military operations to spare the civilian population and civilian objects such as markets. All feasible precautions must be adopted to avoid – or in any event to minimise – the incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian infrastructure.[65] This includes verifying that the intendent target is a legitimate military objective[66] and selecting means and methods of warfare that are least likely to cause civilian harm or damage to civilian objects such as markets.[67]

In the context of protections for markets, the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects should be avoided when military targets are in or near densely populated markets areas, given the predictable risk of high civilian casualties and the destruction of essential goods and infrastructure. Precautionary measures also extend to the timing and location of attacks – for example, avoiding strikes during peak trading hours or market days when large numbers of civilians are present. When the likelihood of incidental harm to civilians or civilian objects cannot be sufficiently reduced, an attack should be cancelled or suspended.[68]

4. Special protection for objects indispensable to civilian survival

Under IHL, attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including foodstuffs, are prohibited. Markets, as central hubs for the distribution and exchange of food and essential goods, fall within this category of protected civilian objects. Rendering markets unusable or destroying them directly undermines food security, disrupts people's access to essential supplies, and deprives communities of their means of sustenance and income. When such attacks are deliberate or carried out in a way that foreseeably deprives civilians of access to food, they may amount to the use of starvation as a method of warfare – an act expressly prohibited under both IHL and recognised as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The protection of marketplaces and the pattern of explosive weapons use impacting markets

A review of patterns in the use of explosive weapons and their impact on markets and food systems highlights serious concerns regarding compliance with IHL. Publicly available information indicates that, in many cases, the fundamental IHL obligation to always distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects, including markets, in relation to the anticipated military advantage that might be gained from an attack was not always respected.

This conclusion is supported by the inherently indiscriminate nature of most explosive weapons, the repeated harm to vital civilian infrastructure, and the absence of publicly available evidence showing that conflict parties conducted proportionality assessments or took adequate precautions to mitigate foreseeable civilian harm. While these findings cannot be considered conclusive, they raise serious legal and humanitarian concerns that merit further examination.

Explosive weapons with wide-area effects are inherently prone to causing indiscriminate harm, challenging compliance with the IHL principle of distinction between civilian and military targets. Their use in populated areas not only inflicts immediate civilian casualties, but also produces foreseeable and excessive reverberating effects on food supply systems and essential services. These characteristics raise critical questions about how the principles of distinction, precautions, and proportionality are applied in incidents involving attacks on or near markets, and whether adequate measures are taken to prevent the resulting food insecurity and disruption to civilian livelihoods.

Challenges to respect for the principle of distinction when using explosive weapons with wide-area effects

IHL requires all parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. Yet there is a persistent lack of transparency over what precautions are taken during the planning of and execution of attacks, and how conflict parties ensure that civilian harm is minimised and attacks remain proportionate. In some incidents, there are claims that a strike on a market was directed at opposing armed actors inside the market. For example, in Sudan in October 2024, Sudan Armed Forces air strikes hit RSF forces in Khartoum's central market. The attack killed at least 23 people and injured 40 others, many of whom were marketgoers, traders, and street tea sellers.[69] In this incident it is not clear whether the market would constitute a legitimate military target, given the presence of RSF forces; however, in most cases there is no publicly available information about the definitive absence or presence of armed actors.

Even if a military target is situated near or in a marketplace, any attack must not cause incidental civilian harm that is excessive in relation to the direct and concrete military advantage that was anticipated. The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects, particularly air-delivered or artillery-based weapons, often results in disproportionate harm when they are deployed in densely populated marketplaces. As noted in this report, a single strike can cause dozens of civilian casualties and can destroy entire economic systems, constituting an effect that is unlikely to meet the proportionality standard. In one example, on August 2024 the Myanmar military carried out an air strike on a town's central market. Six 500 lb bombs were dropped on the market, while machine gun fire caused further damage. The blast wave also damaged nearby civilian infrastructure, destroying at least ten homes and setting fire to over 400 market stalls. According to eyewitnesses, the attack lasted almost an hour, and fires continued to burn in the market long after it was over. At least eight people were killed and ten injured.[70]

Additionally, when an attack must take place, all feasible precautions must be taken to minimise harm to civilians and civilian objects. This includes verifying the target, choosing appropriate means and methods of warfare, and cancelling or suspending attacks if it becomes clear that the target is not lawful or the anticipated harm is excessive in relation to the potential military gains. The pattern of repeated attacks on markets, especially during peak hours, suggests a failure to take such precautions. In all cases referred to in this report, it is unclear what precautions attacking parties took to comply with IHL requirements, including if any warnings were issued prior to an attack. Markets were often hit during opening hours when people would inevitably be present, which would lead to high civilian casualties. For example, in Gaza on 29 October 2024, two Israeli missiles fired from an aircraft struck a popular food market, killing at least five people. The attack took place at 3:30 pm, when the market was filled with people.[71]

Foreseeable excessive and long-term impacts on food supply systems during conflict

IHL protects food supply systems that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including food production, storage, distribution and access points. Markets, as central nodes in these systems, are vital for the exchange, transport and availability of food. When explosive weapons with wide-area effects are used in or near markets, the consequences extend far beyond the immediate casualties. These attacks damage supply and distribution networks, destroy stored goods, and disrupt trade routes and transport systems that are essential for moving food from producers to consumers.

"All of a sudden we realised that missiles were falling on top of people. People were in the market; it was a packed market."

Palestinian marketgoer [72]

The foreseeable excessive impacts on food supply systems are both immediate and long term. In the short term, attacks on markets destroy food stocks, halt trading activities, and drive up prices, leaving communities without access to essential goods. Over time, repeated attacks erode livelihoods, weaken urban and rural economies, and entrench food insecurity, pushing families into displacement and long-term reliance on humanitarian assistance. These impacts are compounded when attacks also affect other parts of the food chain, such as agricultural land,storage facilities or transport infrastructure, magnifying the cumulative disruption.

Under IHL, parties to a conflict are required to take all feasible precautions and assess proportionality before launching attacks that could affect civilian objects, particularly those essential to food security. Yet there is evidence that they have frequently used explosive weapons with wide-area effects in attacks on or near markets. The absence of transparent proportionality evaluations raises serious concerns about compliance with IHL and the protection of civilian access to food during conflict.

The protection of markets during conflict: conclusion

While definitive conclusions remain impossible in the absence of information provided by conflict parties, the patterns described in this report raise significant questions about how the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions are applied in incidents of explosive weapon use against markets, and what measures, if any, are taken to prevent food insecurity. Even if individual incidents cannot be conclusively assessed, the cumulative characteristics of such attacks raise critical concerns about compliance with IHL. While IHL does not require conflict parties to explain their operational decisions, diplomats, parliamentarians, civilian society and other stakeholders need to urgently demand explanations from conflicts parties as to how these principles were applied.

Although markets represent only one component of complex food supply systems, the repeated attacks on and damaging or destruction of these places by explosive weapons directly impact these systems, contribute to people being denied access to food, and undermine food sovereignty. This in turn increases the risk of conflict-induced starvation when insufficient precautions are taken to mitigate the foreseeable humanitarian consequences of these attacks. Further work is required to better measure the impact of attacks on markets using explosive weapons and how this may contribute to depriving civilians of sufficient food during conflict.

Although the strategies and tactics behind such attacks remain opaque, the wide-area effects of explosive weapons and their repeated use against marketplaces raise serious concerns about the indiscriminate targeting of markets and a diminishing respect for IHL protections.

Conclusion

Attacks on markets with explosive weapons are not only an assault on people's lives – they are also attacks on the very systems that keep entire communities alive. When a marketplace is hit, civilians die or suffer life-changing injuries, with children, women, and the elderly often among the victims. But the damage extends far beyond the blast site: livelihoods are destroyed, food supplies are disrupted and hunger takes hold.

This investigation into 979 incidents across 36 countries and territories from 2018 to 2024 exposes an alarming reality. In just two years, from 2022 to 2024, reported attacks on marketplaces more than doubled. The weapons used have shifted from smaller, directly emplaced explosives to large-scale military systems, both ground-launched and, increasingly, air strikes for which state forces are overwhelmingly responsible. This escalation reflects a dangerous normalisation of the use of high-impact explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

Most troubling is the sharp rise in incidents attributed to state forces, signalling a wider erosion of long-standing norms in the conduct of hostilities. When state actors – which are bound by international law – increasingly resort to tactics that devastate civilian spaces, they undermine not only humanitarian protections, but also the very rules designed to limit war's impact on civilian populations. Unless this trend is urgently addressed and reversed, there is a real danger that the norms safeguarding civilians, which are already under strain, will collapse, leaving marketplaces and other vital civilian infrastructure even more vulnerable to attack.

Under IHL, markets are protected civilian spaces, and attacking them violates the fundamental rules designed to spare civilians from the worst horrors of war. Yet evidence of precautions taken – or even serious attempts to distinguish between civilian and military targets – is scarce.

In essence, explosive weapons with wide-area effects cannot be used in markets without inflicting indiscriminate harm. Continued attacks show a blatant disregard for both IHL and human life.

States and armed actors must act now to:

- implement and monitor commitments under the EWIPA Political Declaration;
- end the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas and, in particular, in or near markets; and
- protect markets and food supply systems to prevent conflict-driven hunger and aid dependency.

We cannot accept markets becoming front lines. Protecting them is not optional – it is a legal obligation and a moral imperative to maintain the lives and dignity of conflict-affected populations.

Recommendations

The issues of the destruction of marketplaces and the long-term, cumulative effects of their destruction on communities and economies should become central to monitoring systems, legal compliance, strategic policymaking, and humanitarian and development planning. Implementing the recommendations laid out below would strengthen alignment with commitments in the EWIPA Political Declaration, IHL duties, and the goal of protecting civilians and their essential infrastructure during armed conflict.

1. Marketplaces should be recognised as vital civilian infrastructure.

States and humanitarian actors should explicitly categorise marketplaces as "object[s] indispensable to the survival of the civilian population", granting them greater legal and operational protection in conflict settings.

2. Attacks on marketplaces should be systematically monitored and documented.

Under paragraphs 4.2-4.3 of the EWIPA Political Declaration, states parties commit to collecting and sharing disaggregated data on both the direct and indirect effects of explosive weapons use. This data collection process should integrate reports of attacks on marketplaces using explosive weapons into civilian harm tracking systems, including weapon type, timing of the incident, casualties, and the broader disruption to local food access, in line with commitments to foresee and account for the reverberating effects of explosive weapons use.

3. Harm to marketplaces should be incorporated into other international frameworks.

The damaging or destruction of marketplaces should be integrated into harm indicators aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 11 (inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities). Tools like the UNIDIR EWIPA Research Framework can be used to monitor and assess marketplace-related harm to track the number and proportion of marketplaces destroyed or rendered non-operational; to monitor shifts in market functions, such as price fluctuation, supply chain breaks and vendor displacement; and to measure changes in food security and livelihood to reflect the cumulative impact of the destruction of marketplaces.

4. Context-sensitive post-attack recovery support should be provided.

Support should be given to repair/rebuild damaged/destroyed markets, assist traders who have lost goods and income, and restore local food networks. Rehabilitating marketplaces should be prioritised in post-conflict reconstruction.

5. Legal accountability and reporting mechanisms should be strengthened.

States should be required to publicly explain how they assess IHL principles – especially those of distinction and proportionality, when their armed forces are targeting or operating near market areas. Third-party observers such as the OCHR, ICRC and civil society should be empowered to investigate attacks on marketplaces as potential violations of international law. Additionally, policies to minimise risk to marketplaces, such as restricting the use of wide-area effect explosives in high-density civilian areas or during market hours, exploring the use of alternative weapons, and/or changing the timing of attacks to reduce civilian harm.

The foreseeable excessive impacts on food supply systems are both immediate and long term. In the short term, attacks on markets destroy food stocks, halt trading activities, and drive up prices, leaving communities without access to essential goods. Over time, repeated attacks erode livelihoods, weaken urban and rural economies, and entrench food insecurity, pushing families into displacement and long-term reliance on humanitarian assistance. These impacts are compounded when attacks also affect other parts of the food chain, such as agricultural land, storage facilities or transport infrastructure, magnifying the cumulative disruption.

Under IHL, parties to a conflict are required to take all feasible precautions and assess proportionality before launching attacks that could affect civilian objects, particularly those essential to food security. Yet there is evidence that they have frequently used explosive weapons with wide-area effects in attacks on or near markets. The absence of transparent proportionality evaluations raises serious concerns about compliance with IHL and the protection of civilian access to food during conflict.

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Although the strategies and tactics behind such attacks remain opaque, the wide-area effects of explosive weapons and their repeated use against marketplaces raise serious concerns about the indiscriminate targeting of markets and a diminishing respect for IHL protections.

Annex 1: Insecurity Insight's incident identification methodology

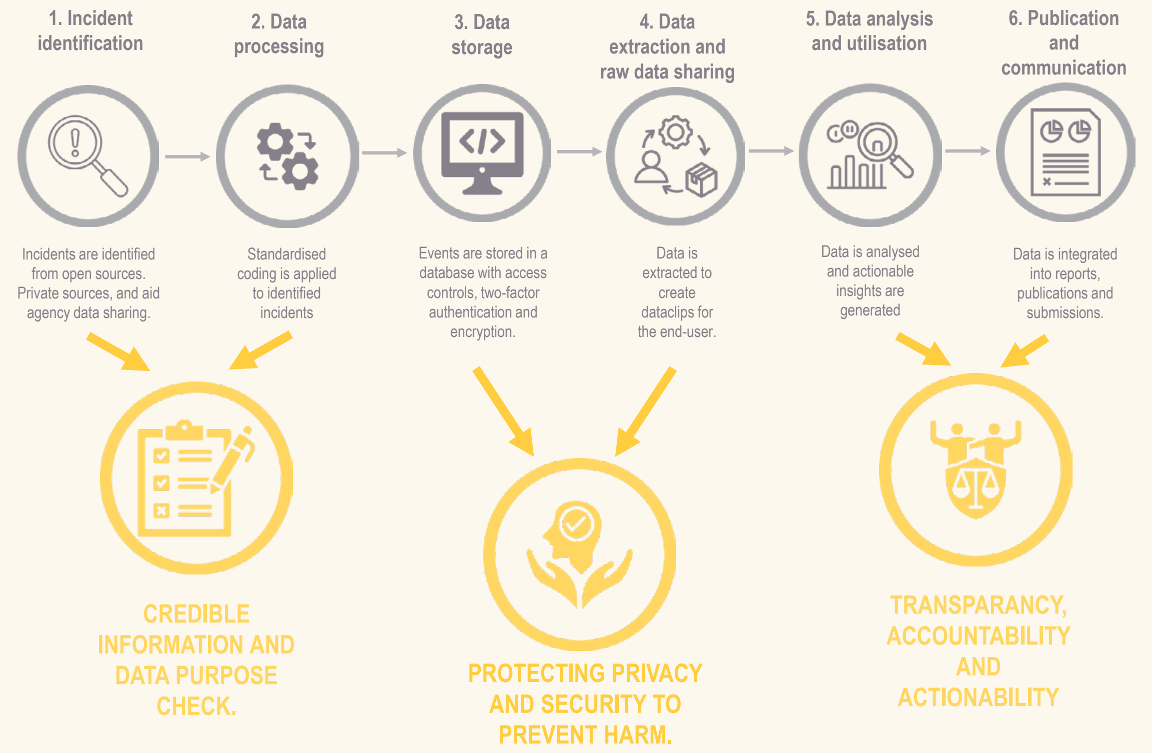
Insecurity Insight works to mitigate violence against aid operations, strengthen the duty of care towards staff and local aid partners, and improve humanitarian access. It supports analysis on how vital civilian services – such as food supply, health care, education, protection and aid delivery – are affected by conflict. It also promotes strong data responsibility practices and ethical standards for data on conflict incidents, ensuring that information is handled with integrity. The methodology's adaptive, database-driven design is built to flexibly generate and tailor data that can inform and support humanitarian policies across the aid sector.

Insecurity Insight's six-step data-processing procedure

1. Incident identification

Insecurity Insight uses an event-based approach to document incidents affecting humanitarian operations, health care, education, food systems, and protection. Event-based information is documented from three primary sources: open sources (information publicly available on the internet, usually taken from edited media or from organisations identified through our AI-supported search functions), private sources (information on incidents provided by individuals) and aid agency data-sharing mechanisms. Documented incidents must provide sufficient information to ensure that events are verifiable, fostering trust in the data. Information is collected on when and where an incident occurred, what or who was affected, and how they were affected (including information on the conflict actor an incident was attributed to, the type of weapon used and how it was launched or delivered).

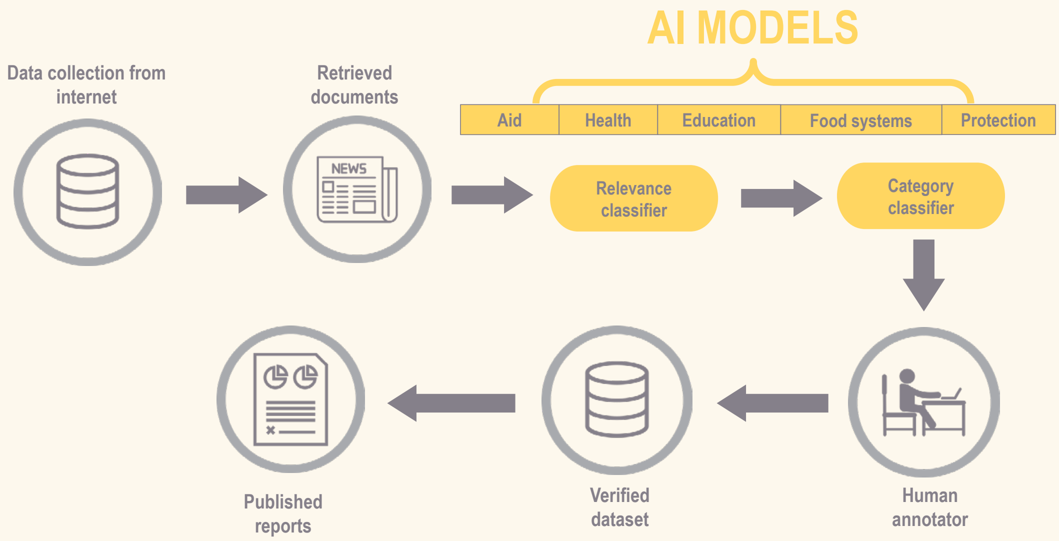
Figure A1: Insecurity Insight's six-step data-processing procedure



Source: Insecurity Insight

Figure A2: AI-supported open-source search functions

To identify relevant event descriptions in the vast amount of information available online, Insecurity Insight has developed a web crawler that continuously scrapes open-source content. This system uses AI-driven functions and advanced deep-learning techniques to retrieve information on potential events, which is then processed by a natural language-processing classifier and categorisation tools in English, French, and Arabic. These tools are trained on over 15 years of our experience collecting event data on incidents affecting aid access and vital civilian services in conflict zones. The retrieved data is automatically fed into a platform, and tagged with suggested relevance levels and thematic categories. Our team of human researchers then reviews the suggested content and determines which information meets our inclusion criteria and will become part of the event-based data analysed in reports. This system was short-listed for an award at the AI for Good Global Summit in 2025.



Source: Insecurity Insight

This event-based data can be combined with first-hand accounts and other on-the-ground sources to build a rich, contextualised understanding of how ongoing conflict affects civilian well-being and humanitarian aid access and delivery. It allows us to understand the context of a given situation and helps us analyse trends and patterns of attacks.

This report includes incidents where marketplaces were described as having been impacted by explosive weapons. Information on these incidents was collected using Insecurity Insight's overall data collection system, making use of the best available sources. Incidents affecting marketgoers, traders and shop owners have only been included if they occurred inside a market. The countries included in this study are a reflection of where our open-source data collection system identified incidents, rather than a preselected set of case study countries.

2. Data preparation

Data preparation follows a standardised coding system inspired by the approach of the Taback-Coupland model for analysing armed violence[73], which is built around the six Ws (**W**ho did What to **W**hom, Where, **W**hen and with what **W**eapon). This method turns the elements that make up a violent event into independent and structured data points. Events are coded with their date, location, and perpetrator along with information on the affected civilian infrastructure and victim attributes, where relevant.

All data preparation follows defined quality control standards, including credibility checks to verify incidents wherever possible and cross-checking sources to prevent duplication, ensure consistency, and complete missing information. These steps support comparability and interoperability across datasets. Data is prepared according to internal protocols and codebooks, which define standards for collection, formatting, and consistency. All data is selected to enable data use for action, in accordance with Insecurity Insight's data responsibility policy.

3. Data storage

Events are stored and managed in the strictly confidential Security in Numbers Database (SiND), an event-based database built on the general principles of event recording.[74] All data is stored securely on encrypted servers with strict access controls to protect sensitive information. User access is limited to authorised personnel and safeguarded through multifactor authentication and regularly updated passwords. Routine security audits and system backups ensure data integrity and resilience against loss or unauthorised access. All of Insecurity Insight's staff are given cyber-security training. These measures collectively uphold high standards of data protection and confidentiality throughout the data management process.

4. Data extraction and raw data sharing

Insecurity Insight shares raw data through private partnerships, online platforms and application programming interfaces (APIs) with partners to allow them to use the data for their own analysis. Data sharing is based on memorandums of understanding or other specific agreements. Data included in the data-sharing process must comply with Insecurity Insight's data responsibility policy and allow end users to meaningfully use the data without exposing anyone to harm. In countries where information-sharing protocols to govern data and information sharing exist, usually with the host government or among UN and humanitarian actors, Insecurity Insight takes note of these protocols and will comply as far as they are compatible with its own data responsibility policy.[75]

Data is extracted into data clips using query language to filter, organise, and classify information into relevant and usable categories based on different stakeholders' use cases. Each incident is assigned a unique event ID number to ensure traceability and consistency. The process is designed to make the data accessible and meaningful for end users, while excluding all confidential or personally identifiable information.

Datasets of all the data used in this report are made publicly available through Insecurity Insight's **HDX** (Humanitarian Data Exchange). Data collection on the topic of this report continues and datasets are updated beyond the content of the report and are automatically updated through APIs every Monday. The information is also available through the relevant **country pages**, where it is combined with other incident data documenting the impact of a particular incident on aid and vital civilian services. Curated datasets are also available on request.

Insecurity Insight also supports data collection and data analysis for the **Coalition Against Conflict and Hunger** and the **Explosive Weapons Monitor**.

5. Data analysis and utilisation

Insecurity Insight produces data tailored to enable it to be used for action. Data use is central to Insecurity Insight's data responsibility policy and focuses on support for aid sector decision-making, and for practices that uphold the rights and dignity of affected individuals and communities, in order to enable their empowerment and support humanitarian access and respect for IHL. Responsible data use is linked to aid agency operations, but also to policy and advocacy for aid policy.

Insecurity Insight's data is used in a variety of ways. It forms the basis of the organisation's own reports. Insecurity Insight also generates data for NGO coalitions and their reports, such as the **Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition** report, the Conflict and Hunger Coalition, the **Explosive Weapons Monitor** yearly report and the annual **Protection of Civilians** report, among others. Various NGOs and organisations also use the data for confidential internal processes.

Finally, Insecurity Insight makes available selected datapoints for aid policy documents, such as submissions to UN Special Rapporteurs, responses to other groups' calls for information and data, and statements issued by various coalitions and NGOs, which may use the data for both public and internal processes.

6. Publication and communication

Insecurity Insight publishes information on conflict incidents affecting aid agencies and vital civilian infrastructure to strengthen trust in conflict-related incident data, amplify the voices of affected communities, and support policy processes by enabling stakeholders to integrate the data into their own policy processes. Insecurity Insight communicates sufficient detail to allow stakeholders to assess the credibility of information and to understand data limitations.

It publishes selected data from the SiND in its various thematic or commissioned reports. Data publication in such reports is subject to situational analysis, and context-specific editorial guidelines apply. Insecurity Insight communicates metadata and documentation outlining limitations, uncertainties, and data reliability, as well as copyright information.

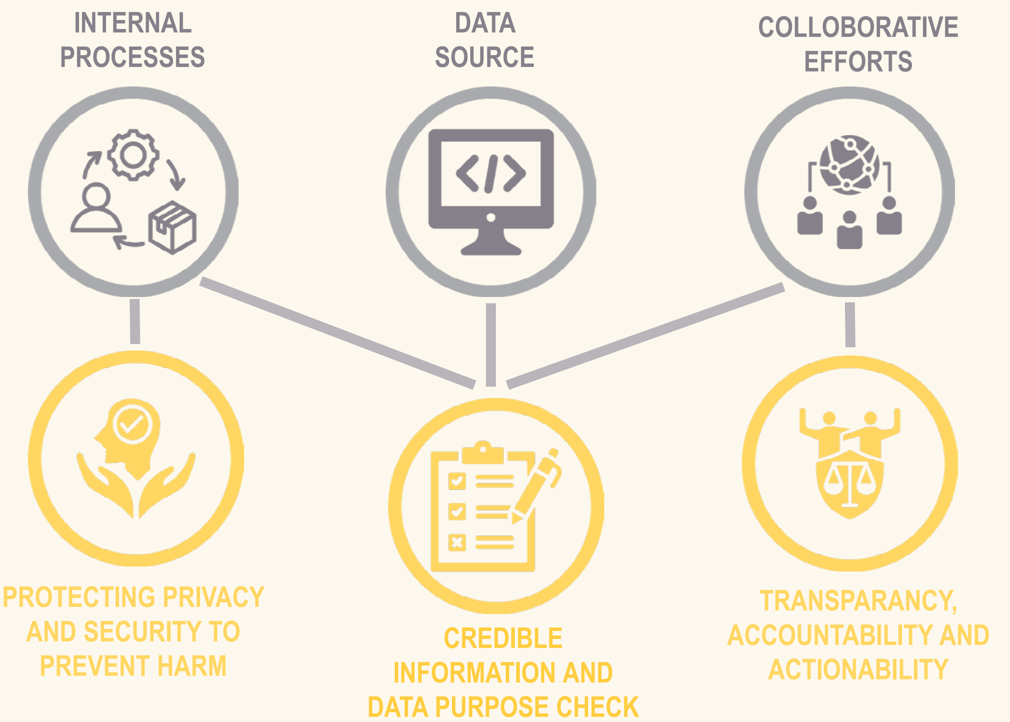
Insecurity Insight's data quality assurance process

Insecurity Insight's data responsibility policy is designed to ensure safe, ethical and effective data management. To achieve this, Insecurity Insight applies a comprehensive data quality assurance process to maintain the accuracy, credibility, reliability and ethical integrity of its datasets. Quality assurance is embedded throughout all stages of the six-step data processing procedure, with additional checks conducted whenever information on incidents is updated or backdated. The process covers three steps of credibility and data purpose checks designed to protect privacy and security in order to prevent harm, and ensure transparency, accountability and understandability. These steps are applied through three interconnected components: internal mechanisms, collaboration efforts and source verification.

1. Internal processes

Internal quality assurance relies on strong standardisation, continuous training, and the ongoing development of our research and coding systems. This includes the consistent application of definitions, terminology, and coding practices, as well as ongoing training for data coders and regular updates to guidance materials. The process integrates thematic classification systems such as explosive weapons launch systems, water-related categories, and food-system classifications to ensure coherence across datasets. These measures strengthen the link between methodological purpose and assurance practices, ensuring that outputs remain consistent, transparent, and comparable across projects.

Figure A3: Insecurity Insight's data quality assurance process



Source: Insecurity Insight

2. Data sources

Rigorous source verification underpins the final layer of quality assurance. Analysts consult multiple types of evidence, including other verified databases such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database, Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) and the Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA); contextual reporting; and satellite imagery to cross-check and triangulate incidents. Specific thematic standards, such as those used in incidents affecting children in armed conflict, EWIPA, food supply systems, and conflict-related sexual violence frameworks, are also applied to ensure consistency with broader humanitarian and protection classifications.

The widespread use of internet-based communication – through mobile phones, apps and social media – has broadened the range of conflict reporters. While the risks of misinformation and disinformation are well documented, this technological shift has also democratised and diversified the production of publicly available narratives. It has brought greater visibility to the lived experiences of affected populations, reshaping perceptions. Direct and self-initiated information sharing by affected communities is one way in which local actors are actively working to influence and reshape humanitarian action.

Across all components, Insecurity Insight continuously refines its internal guidance documents, integrates evolving standards, and adapts to new data challenges, focusing on accuracy, understanding of data gaps, and consistency. This cyclical and collaborative approach ensures that the Security in Numbers Database remains a robust, transparent, ethically managed repository of conflict-related event data.

3. Collaborative efforts

Quality control is further enhanced through collaboration with partners and experts. Insecurity Insight maintains two-way communication with field-based and external partners to validate incidents, identify gaps, and ensure that data reflects grounded and trustworthy information rather than unverified reports. Collaboration is conducted sensitively to avoid causing reputational or operational harm to aid agencies, particularly in contexts where findings may be politically sensitive or controversial.

Methodological challenges

Information on explosive weapons use against markets can be incomplete or unevenly reported across contexts, leading to potential under- or over-representation of some regions and time periods. The attribution of responsibility is complicated by conflicting claims and blurred distinctions between state and non-state actors. Additionally, casualty figures, long-term economic effects and indirect impacts on food security remain underdocumented, making it difficult to isolate the specific contribution of attacks on market to broader conflict-related food insecurity. Where incidents were identified, source material may lack precise details on the scale of the impact of the attack or the estimated economic loss, limiting the ability to fully quantify the impact.

Annex 2: Explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA)

Explosive weapons are weapons that are activated by the *"detonation of a high-explosive substance that produces thermal energy and a blast and fragmentation zone"*.[76] They have the capacity to affect wide areas and to kill or injure any person or damage or destroy objects within their blast radius. There are many different types of explosive weapons, including bombs, missiles, artillery shells, and IEDs, and they can be delivered in various ways such as air-delivered (e.g. by aircraft or drones), ground-launched or directly emplaced.

The term **"explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA)"** refers to explosive weapons used in areas containing a large number of people such as towns, cities, refugee camps or markets. Many types of explosives are designed to be used in open battlefields and not urban settings, such as artillery shells, large mortar bombs, unguided rockets or tank gun shells. These weapons have large blast radiuses or wide-area effects, and their inaccuracy means that in populated areas their effects extend far beyond the intended military target. They can not only kill or injure civilians, but also damage or destroy civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, schools, markets, water supply systems, power grids and roads, which leads to cascading effects on essential services.

However, in recent years, precision-guided munitions, smaller shaped charges or carefully applied close-support munitions are designed to be used in urban areas, but the same provisions to prevent civilian harm apply.

Delivery systems for explosive weapons

Explosive weapons range from small hand grenades or suicide vests to larger artillery shells, rockets, and aerial bombs. Their size, yield, and method of delivery produce different effects on people and infrastructure. To help with analysis, they can be grouped into three categories:

- **Directly emplaced weapons** (IEDs, grenades, suicide vests) are placed in position manually and are often used by non-state actors inside markets or near market stalls or water infrastructure, causing concentrated but lethal harm.

- **Ground-launched systems** (artillery shells, mortar bombs, rockets) are deployed by both state and non-state actors, are fired from fixed or mobile platforms, and can carry moderate to large explosive charges, often damaging large areas of open markets, surrounding shops, and wider infrastructure, including water supply system components.

- **Air-delivered systems** (bombs, missiles, rockets) are deployed from aircraft or drones and can involve very large payloads able to create extensive blast and fragmentation effects over a wide radius. These explosives are primarily used by state forces, because they are more likely to afford to maintain an air force capable of delivering such explosives. However, drone use has increased among both state forces and non-state actors, but varies in terms of systems, with states having access to military-grade armed drones, while many non-state actors have been known to use civilian and commercial drone systems and modify them to carry explosive loads.

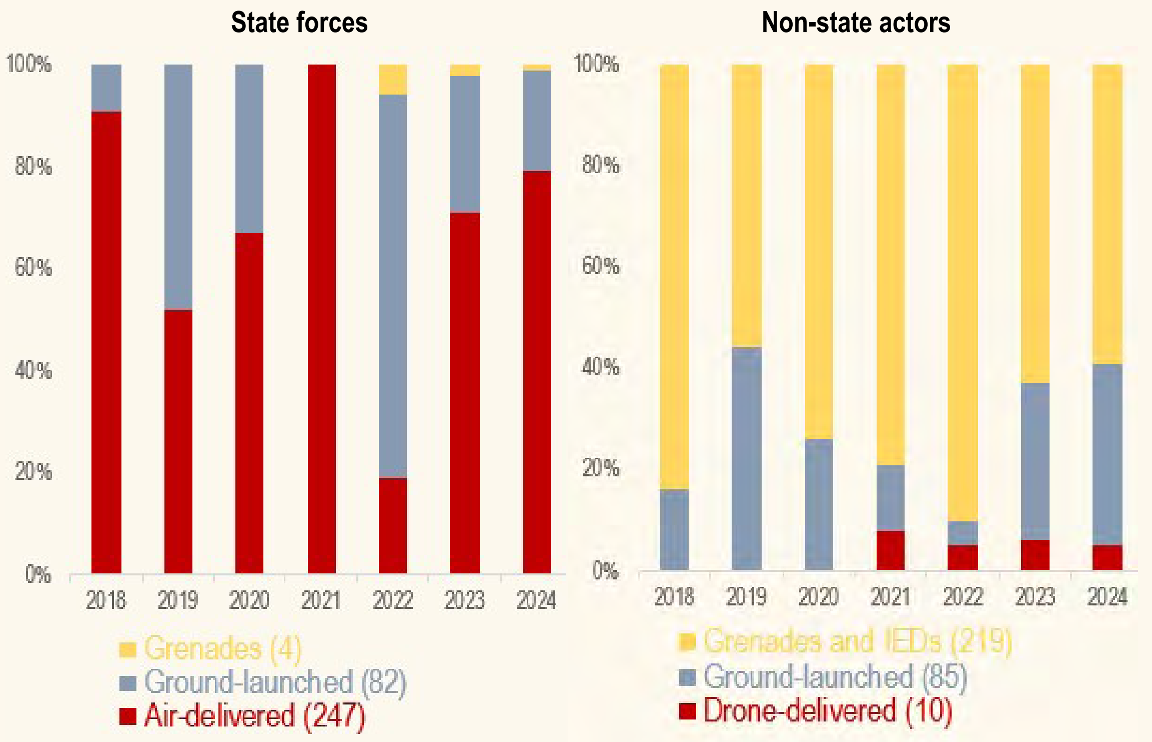
Insights based on weapon delivery classification

Information on the reported use of explosive weapons needs to be accurate, yet most civilian observers documenting the effects of explosive weapons use are not weapons experts. As a result, most available information does not contain technical information, such as the precise types or manufacturers of explosive weapons. However, most non-expert observers can reliably identify how a weapon arrived at its place of impact – whether it was planted, fired from the ground or dropped from the air – making this classification a useful tool for systematically analysing incidents and their humanitarian impacts.

For the analyst, information on the weapon delivery method provides important added information. Firstly, it helps to confirm or raise questions about the conflict party the incident has been attributed to, and helps to apply impact frameworks. Different conflict actors tend to have different access to weapons systems, thus allowing for the cross-checking of incident reports. State forces are more likely to deploy manufactured systems from licensed defence industries, including precision and heavy-payload weapons for air strikes, while non-state actors use more IEDs or may have access to certain ground-launched or drone-delivered explosives, depending on their external supporters or supply networks. As Figure A4 shows, clear patterns can be observed of different conflict parties using different types of explosive weapons delivery systems.

Figure A4: Reported incidents of explosive weapon use and their delivery method attributed to state forces and non-state actors, 2018-2024

In the reporting period, non-state armed groups were more likely to deploy directly emplaced explosives, such as hand grenades, car bombs and IEDs, while state actors were more likely to use air-delivered explosives.



Source: 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data

Annex 3: State forces and non-state actors

Clear distinctions between state and non-state actors are vital for policymaking and for ensuring accountability under international law. However, classification becomes complex when state authority is disputed and governments or their armed forces are not universally recognised. From an analytical standpoint, it is equally important to define these categories conceptually and to establish consistent criteria for assigning classifications in contested political settings.

State forces

The terms “state actors” and “state forces” are used to refer to state armed forces that are the official military forces of a country, controlled by its government and recognised as such under national and international law. They usually include the army (land forces), air force (air and outer space operations), and navy (maritime forces), and may also have other branches such as marines, special forces or intelligence units. Their main role is to defend the country and carry out military operations authorised by the state.

In some contexts, the attribution of responsibility for a specific action is complex. Some authorities may lack effective control over the armed forces or may not be internationally recognised as a government, or a country may have competing or parallel authorities.

For the purposes of this report, the following categories have been applied to address such complexities. They are employed exclusively for coding purposes and do not imply endorsement or recognition of any authority, government or territorial claim.

State actor: This refers to a legally recognised government directing its armed forces.

State armed forces: This refers to national armed forces under government control.

Acting state armed forces: This refers to de facto forces controlling a country’s capital that are not internationally recognised.

Non-state actors

Non-state actors are organised armed actors that are not part of a country’s official military or police forces and are not controlled by a government. They can include militias, insurgent groups, rebel movements, or other organised forces that use weapons and military-style tactics. Their aims and activities vary widely – from controlling territory to challenging governments – but they operate outside the formal command of state armed forces.

- forces seeking to attack or gain territory that are opposing a recognised or de facto state military force; and
- military branches of de facto territorial authorities that are not internationally recognised and that do not control the capital of a recognised state.

This report used a binary state v. non-state classification for armed actors, while recognising that in many conflicts the distinction between state forces and non-state armed actors is not clear-cut. Some forces, such as paramilitaries or government-aligned militias, may operate with state support or coordination, but without being fully integrated into the official state chain of command. In other cases, breakaway factions may originate within the state security apparatus, but later act independently or in opposition to the government. Situations can be further complicated when a government is not internationally recognised after a coup or contested government transition, raising questions about whether its armed forces are representing the state and should be considered "state" armed forces under international law. Foreign involvement can blur the lines even more: troops from other states may be deployed under formal agreements, while private military companies such as the Wagner Group/Africa Corp operate in support of a government's objectives, but remain outside the official armed forces. These grey-area actors challenge straightforward classification and complicate the application of legal frameworks and monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Endnotes

1 The 36 countries and territories reflect where our open-source data collection identified incidents rather than a preselected set of case study countries.
2 UNODA (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs). 2022. Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. 18 November. https://ewipa.org/the-political-declaration.
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5 UNSC. 2021. Resolution 2573 (2021). S/RES 2573 (2021) of 27 April. https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2573(2021).
6 Violence at marketplaces caused by non-explosive weapons accounted for 70% of all incidents of violence at markets identified by Insecurity Insight (1,393 for the period 2018-2024), but the discussion in this report is limited to incidents in which explosive weapons use impacted markets.
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12 Save the Children. 2019. "Blast injuries: the impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict." https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/blast-injuries-impact-explosive-weapons-children-conflict.
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14 It is important to highlight that this figure represents an approximation of the number of casualties, and the actual figures are likely much higher due to the limitations of casualty counting procedures.
15 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 91955.
16 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 92608.
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18 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 90143.
19 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 97490.
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21 IPC (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification). 2025. "Acute food insecurity situation for 1 July-15 August 2025 and projection for 16 August-30 September 2025." August. https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159696/?iso3=PSE; IPC. 2025. "Famine Review Committee: Gaza Strip." https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Gaza_Aug2025.pdf.
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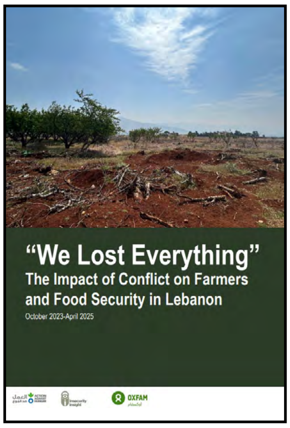
24 AP News. 2025. "Driven to starvation, Sudanese people eat weeds and plants to survive as war rages." 28 June. https://apnews.com/article/sudan-south-kordofan-darfur-hunger-aid-food-7ba4ef69a3c24ef72fddd37329857368.
25 Incidents in which the platform used to deliver the explosives was not recorded are not included in Figure 4.
26 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 93100.
27 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 93075.
28 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 107362.

29 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 91369.
30 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 97363.
31 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 97030.
32 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 98910.
33 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 96923.
34 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 87598.
35 Drones can either drop explosives or fly into targets and explode, destroying themselves when hitting the target.
36 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 9875.
37 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 97086.
38 The Wagner Group was a private military company with close links to the Russian state that carried out operations in several African countries in support of local governments/regimes. It was largely dismantled after its founder's death in August 2023, and its role was taken over by an organisation with similar links to the Russian state known as the Africa Corps.
39 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 99031.
40 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 99031.
41 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 107382.
42 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 107353.
43 Additional Protocol I to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, art. 52(1).
44 ICRC, IHL Databases, Customary IHL (CIHL), rule 9, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl.
45 Additional Protocol I to the 1949 Genevan Conventions, art. 14.
46 Ibid., art. 54(1).
47 ICRC, CIHL, rule 54.
48 Ibid., rule 53.
49 1907 Hague Regulations, art. 43; see also Fourth Geneva Convention, art. 64.
50 1907 Hague Regulations, art. 55.
51 ICRC. 1987. "Commentary of 1987", para. 2123. https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/title/commentary/1987.
52 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 11.
53 See EWIPA Political Declaration, secs. 2.3.
54 See EWIPA Political Declaration, secs. 3.1 and 3.2.
55 Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. May 2025. "Endorsement." https://ewipa.org/endorsement.
56 Geneva Call's Deeds of Commitment are mechanisms designed for armed groups or de facto authorities through which they pledge to respect humanitarian norms stemming from IHL and international human rights law, and to be held accountable for this pledge. To date, Geneva Call has developed five Deeds of Commitment, which deal with a total ban on anti-personnel mines and cooperation in mine action, the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict, the prohibition of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and towards the elimination of gender discrimination, the protection of health care in armed conflict, and the prevention of starvation and conflict-related food insecurity.
57 Geneva Call. 2021. "Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for the Prevention of Starvation and Conflict-related Food Insecurity." https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Official-DoC-Preventing-Starvation-And-Adressing-Conflict-Related-Food-Insecurity.pdf.
58 Geneva Call. 2024. "Acte d'engagement auprès de l'appel de Genève pour la prévention de la famine et la lutte contre l'insécurité alimentaire liée aux conflits." March. https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DoC-Famine_NDC-R_2024_signed_FR.pdf.
59 ICRC, CIHL, rule 7; see also rules 8 and 9.
60 Ibid., rule 11.
61 Ibid., rule 10.
62 Ibid., rules 11 and 12.
63 Ibid., rule 12.
64 Ibid., rule 14.
65 Ibid., rule 15.
66 Ibid., rule 16.
67 Ibid., rule 17
68 Ibid., rule 19.
69 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 92007.
70 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 97357.

71 2018-2024 EWIPA and Markets Data, incident number 91014.
72 CNN. 2024. "'These people were looking for something to eat'. Israeli strike kills 5 at Gaza market." 29 October. https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-iran-palestine-gaza-war-10-29-24-intl-hnk.
73 Taback, N. & Coupland, R. 2007. Analysing armed violence: the Taback-Coupland model. Retrieved from https://disarmamentinsight.blogspot.com/2007/09/analyzing-armed-violence-taback.html
74 Tilly, C. 2002. Event catalogs as theories. Sociological Theory, 20(2), 248-254. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9558.00161
75 Data Responsibility – The Centre for Humanitarian Data.
76 UNIDIR (UN Institute for Disarmament Research). 2022. "FAQ on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas." https://unidir.org/files/2022-04/UNIDIR-EWIPA_FAQ.pdf.

Other resources by Insecurity Insight

Almost a year since a ceasefire was agreed, many farmers in Southern Lebanon are still denied access to their land due to displacement, ongoing Israeli attacks, and soil contamination, a joint report by Action Against Hunger, Oxfam and Insecurity Insight found. The impacts of the war coupled with almost daily Israeli attacks and occupation have wiped out farmland and destroyed crops and essential food infrastructure.The report details the immediate and long-term impacts of repeated and ongoing attacks on Lebanese agricultural land and food production. It found the destruction of key centres of food production and distribution has deepened the economic challenges faced by communities, resulting in lasting disruption to the agricultural sector and rural economy.



Armed drones are an escalating threat in humanitarian settings, with their use expected to grow. Once rare, they are now a defining feature in modern conflicts. Adapting to the growing threat of drones means rethinking security risk measures in high-risk contexts. This practical guide by Insecurity Insight brings together current best practice and is available in **Burmese**, **English** and **French**. Individual resources:

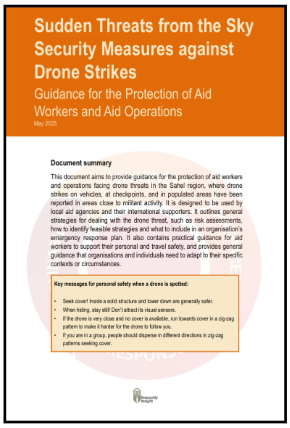
Outside When a Drone is Spotted: **Arabic**; **Burmese**; **English**; **French**

Inside a Building During a Drone Attack: **Arabic**; **Burmese**; **English**; **French**

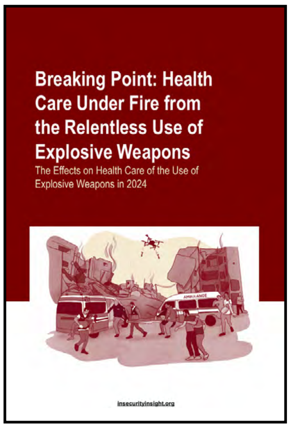
Responding to Drone Attacks on Aid Work: **Burmese**; **English**; **French**

Traveling in High-Risk Areas: **Burmese**; **English**; **French**

Adapted for the protection of health services based on case studies on Myanmar in **English** and **Burmese**.



Violence impacting health care reached unprecedented levels in 2024, with the use of explosive weapons in populated areas emerging as a dominant and devastating trend. Health care is directly impacted when explosive weapons damage or destroy hospitals, health centres, and ambulances, or when they kill or seriously injure health workers and patients. These weapons cause indirect harm through their cumulative and reverberating effects on civilian infrastructure. This **second edition** of Insecurity Insight's *The Effects on Health Care of the Use of Explosive Weapons* discusses new trends in and impacts on global health care systems in 2024. The data cited in this report can be downloaded **here**.



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Acknowledgements

This report was produced by Insecurity Insight. Major sections of the report were written by Christa Callus and Christina Wille.

The report was reviewed by Dowd Caitriona, Fuhrman Sarah, Tripp Emily (Executive Director at Airwars) and Young Katherine.

This document is published by Insecurity Insight.

This document is funded and supported by the European Union (EU). The opinions expressed in the report do not in any way reflect the position of the EU who are not responsible for the content expressed in this document.

As an H2H (humanitarian-to-humanitarian) association, Insecurity Insight supports the work of aid agencies; the providers of health care, education, and protection services; and other civil society organisations by providing publicly available information that humanitarian organisations can use to design evidence-based policies to guide their activities and operations. We collect and analyse data about violence against civilians and the damaging and destruction of vital civilian infrastructure in order to strengthen civilian protection and the delivery of aid in contexts affected by armed conflict.

Insecurity Insight. 2025. Shattered Stalls, Shattered Lives: The Human Cost of Bombing Marketplaces: The Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and Their Impact on Food Security (November 2025). Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. https://bit.ly/EWIPAMarkets2025

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Funded by the European Union