News

Civil defense members prepare to safely detonate cluster bombs in a rebel-held area in Deraa, Syria, July 26, 2017. During a Sept. 11-14, 2023, meeting in Geneva, a Holy See delegation urged nations that have not already done so to sign on to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which "prohibits under any circumstances the use, development, production, acquisition, stockpiling and transfer of cluster munitions." (OSV News photo/Alaa al-Faqir, Reuters)

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A Holy See delegation at a Sept. 11-14 meeting of nations that are parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions urged nations that have not yet done so to sign the treaty, which "prohibits under any circumstances the use, development, production, acquisition, stockpiling and transfer of cluster munitions."

The treaty also forbids assisting or encouraging anyone to engage in prohibited activities.

According to a Vatican News report, the Holy See delegation in Geneva praised Nigeria and South Sudan for becoming the latest countries to sign on to the convention -- Feb. 28 and Aug. 3, respectively -- bringing the total number to 112.

"Any additional state party to the convention represents a renewed impulse to achieve universality, further ensuring that there will be fewer victims in the future and that those who already have tragically been affected can be properly assisted," the delegation said Sept. 11.

Cluster munitions are air-dropped or ground-launched explosives that contain smaller submunitions, which increase the blast radius and the potential casualties and damage to physical structures.

"Many submunitions are unreliable and fail to explode, thus creating a potential humanitarian impact on civilians both during as well as long after the conflict ends," said a website about the convention, which requires nations that sign it to, "in accordance with national regulations, separate all cluster munitions under its jurisdiction and control from munitions retained for operational use and mark them for the purpose of destruction."

The Holy See highlighted the convention's fundamental principles, especially its "unequivocal reaffirmation of the preeminent and inherent value of human dignity

and the centrality of the human person."

It also noted that the term "universalization" in the treaty is a legal obligation for those party to it as it "has direct implications and far-reaching consequences, in particular with relation to victims' assistance, which is one of the main reasons why this convention came into existence."

"Each State Party with respect to cluster munition victims in areas under its jurisdiction or control shall, in accordance with applicable international humanitarian and human rights law, adequately provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance, including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support, as well as provide for their social and economic inclusion," the convention says. "Each State Party shall make every effort to collect reliable relevant data with respect to cluster munition victims."

The United States is one of more than a dozen countries -- including North Korea, Iran, Russia and China -- that are not party to the treaty, which came into force Aug. 1, 2010.

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In July, U.S. President Joe Biden came under heavy criticism for announcing the U.S. will provide cluster munitions to Ukraine amid Russia's invasion of that country. He called it a "very difficult decision" but defended it.

In an interview on CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS" that aired July 9, Biden said Ukraine needs the weapons to fend off Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion, and that he discussed his decision both with allies and with congressional lawmakers.

Despite Ukraine's just cause to defend itself, one Catholic expert said, the church opposes cluster munitions themselves. Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor at Notre Dame Law School who specializes in international law and conflict resolution, told OSV News that "the Catholic Church is in full support of the total ban on cluster munitions" due to its effects on civilians, including long after the conflict.

"Cluster munitions cannot discriminate between civilians and fighters," O'Connell said. "Unexploded bomblets may kill civilians weeks, months, or years after a battle."

She suggested the U.S. and its allies should dig deeper into their own stockpiles of artillery shells, because an "unlawful weapon is never permissible to use because of military necessity."

In a July 14 statement, Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, also raised concern about the use of cluster munitions.

According to the 2023 Cluster Munition Monitor report, released Sept. 5 in Geneva, civilians accounted for 95% of cluster munition casualties recorded in 2022, the latest year covered by the report's casualty statistics.

The report from the Cluster Munition Coalition said there were at least 1,172 new cluster munition casualties across eight countries in 2022: Azerbaijan, Iraq, Laos, Lebanon, Myanmar, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. Of these, 987 were killed or wounded in cluster munition attacks and at least 185 people were killed or wounded by cluster munition remnants. Children made up 71% of casualties from cluster munition remnants.

The report also found that Russia has repeatedly used cluster munitions in Ukraine since its February 2022 invasion of the country, while Ukraine also has used them to a lesser extent. Government forces in Syria and Myanmar also used cluster munitions during 2022.