

Syria: Evidence Shows Cluster Bombs Killed Children Human Rights Watch 27 November 2012

Compelling evidence has emerged that an airstrike using cluster bombs on the town of Deir al-`Assafeer near Damascus killed at least 11 children and wounded others on November 25, 2012. The Syrian government should immediately cease its use of this highly dangerous weapon, which has been banned by most nations.

“This attack shows how cluster munitions kill without discriminating between civilians and military personnel,” said Mary Wareham, arms division advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. “Due to the devastating harm caused to civilians, cluster bombs should not be used by anyone, anywhere, at any time.”

According to video footage and testimony from local residents, at least 11 children were killed in the strike on Saraya neighborhood in the eastern part of Deir al-`Assafeer. Two residents told Human Rights Watch that the cluster bomb strike occurred as a group of at least 20 local children were gathered in a field where they usually play. (...)

Cluster bomb remnants and local testimony indicate that one bomb landed in the field where the witnesses said the children were playing, a second bomb landed on a house less than 50 meters away, and the third bomb landed in farmland approximately 150 meters from the field. (...)

The witnesses said that there is no base for the rebel Free Syria Army (FSA) near or around the area. “There is no FSA equipment, machinery or anything else around the fields or near the farmlands,” one resident told Human Rights Watch. Another said: “There were no FSA vehicles or machinery visible. FSA soldiers do not live in residential areas.” Human Rights Watch has not been able to confirm independently the presence or otherwise of any fighters but the large number of children playing outside at the time of the strike would be consistent with the absence of any fighting in the immediate area. (...)

“All governments, including Syria’s allies, should condemn Syria’s continued use of cluster bombs as these weapons are subject to a ban under international law due to the harm they cause to civilians,” said Wareham. “A much stronger response is needed to convince the Syrian government to stop using cluster bombs.” (...)

A majority of the world’s nations have comprehensively banned the use of cluster munitions through the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which came into force on August 1, 2010. Syria is not a party to the convention and did not participate in the 2007-2008 Oslo Process, which led to creation of the treaty that bans cluster munitions and requires clearance of contaminated areas and assistance to victims. A total of 77 states are party to the convention, while another 34 have signed but not yet ratified.

Cluster munitions can be fired by rockets, mortars, and artillery or dropped by aircraft. They explode in the air, sending dozens, even hundreds, of submunitions or “bomblets” over a wide area. These submunitions often fail to explode on initial impact, leaving duds that act like landmines and explode when handled. (...)

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