Historical usage of cluster munitions: a weapon to terrorize civilian populations

Jeff Lassahn
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Public details about cluster munition production, finance, trade and usage are very limited. What's known for certain is that billions of bomblets are in the arsenal of 78 countries worldwide. About half of these nations are supposed to destroy their stores under the conditions of the treaty, but the largest stockpilers did not sign. Thirty-four countries are known to have produced the weapons and sold them to dozens more.

Cluster weapons have been used by at least 20 nations and organizations, but the countries making most use of them have been the US, Israel, the UK and the Soviet Union-Russia.

The most recent confirmed use of cluster weapons took place during the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. The initial US and Western European media coverage of the conflict, strongly identifying Russia as aggressor, highlighted numerous civilian deaths from Russian cluster munitions. Recently, Human Rights Watch has shown that Georgia used Israeli-made cluster weapons, which also killed several Georgian civilians, including casualties from duds after the conflict ended.

Since their invention, the US has been by far the largest producer, stockpiler and user of cluster munitions. Reviewing American use covers nearly the entire span of their usage and undermines the claims of US wars to "spread democracy" and provide humanitarian aid.

Southeast Asia

The most massive use of cluster munitions was the US bombardment of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam from 1964-1973. According to Handicap International: "Approximately 80,000 cluster munitions, containing 26 million submunitions, were dropped on Cambodia between 1969 and 1973; and over 296,000 cluster munitions, containing nearly 97 million submunitions, were dropped in Vietnam between 1965 and 1975.

"To this day Laos is thought to be the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. From 1964 to 1973, over 414,000 cluster bombs, containing at least 260 million submunitions, were dropped in 580,000 bombing missions--equivalent to one plane load every eight minutes, 24 hours a-day, for nine years. Contrary to the tested rates, up to 30 percent of the cluster bomblets failed to detonate, leaving as many as 25 million unexploded bomblets still littering nearly 40 percent of the land in Laos."

A *USA Today* article from 2003, "30-year-old bombs still very deadly in Laos," describes the impact: "[T]hree decades after the bombing stopped, two or three Laotians are killed every month and another six or seven are maimed by unexploded ordnance left over from the war. Since the bombing ended in 1973, 5,700 Laotians have been killed and 5,600 injured by unexploded ordinance."

The article notes that "the United States, which spent $9 million a day (in today's dollars) bombing Laos for 10 years," contributed a miserly $1 million in 2002 for cleanup.

Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia

Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan have all suffered from repeated use of cluster munitions. Soviet forces used cluster weapons during their invasion and occupation of the Afghanistan from 1979-1989, and bomblets still remained when US forces dropped 248,056 more bomblets from 2001-2002. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, the International Committee of the Red Cross "reported 127 casualties, including twenty-nine deaths, as of November 2002. Eighty-seven, or 69 percent, of those victims were under the age of eighteen." [1]

In their 1999 "humanitarian war" in Yugoslavia, the US, the UK and Netherlands dropped even more cluster weapons--295,000 bomblets from 1,765 cluster bombs. HRW states that "in Yugoslavia, the strikes themselves caused the most significant casualties. Between ninety and 150 civilians died during cluster bomb strikes. These figures represent 18 to 30 percent of the total deaths from Operation Allied Force. In the year after the war's end, bomblets killed about fifty civilians and injured 101, with children being frequent victims."

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Iraq

Iraq first sustained an enormous barrage of cluster munitions during the 1991 Gulf War, when the US, the UK and France dropped 20 million bomblets from the air and fired an estimated 30 million more from the ground. HRW research from February 1993 found 1,600 civilians had been killed and 2,500 injured from unexploded bomblets: “60 percent of the victims were under the age of fifteen. In addition to being less cautious in battlefield areas, children were attracted by the colorful bomblets, which one reporter described as resembling ‘white lawn darts, green baseballs, [and] orange-striped soda cans.’”

In using cluster munitions military commanders display contempt not only towards civilians, but also their own forces. HRW found that “bomblets killed or injured more than one hundred American soldiers and killed an additional one hundred clearance workers.”

In the 2003 invasion of Iraq, America used cluster munitions as part of its “shock and awe” strategy, including in urban areas throughout the country. On April 18, 2003 US General Richard Myers claimed, absurdly, that there was only one confirmed civilian death from cluster bombs. Meanwhile, media reports were revealing dozens of deaths from single strikes.

Reuters reported that Dr. Safa al-Amaidi, director of the Najaf Teaching Hospital, said his hospital alone had recorded 256 civilian deaths from cluster bombs, with another 393 wounded. “On one night, we received 35 dead from cluster bombs,” Dr. al-Amaidi said. “After the cessation of hostilities most of the casualties were from cluster bombs.”

Just as efforts to calculate overall war deaths in Iraq have been dismissed by the US military, estimates of civilian deaths from cluster munitions are difficult to ascertain. Estimates of at least 2 million bomblets used in the first three weeks of the war, including in urban areas, make hundreds, if not thousands of casualties likely.

Human Rights Watch's report on the Iraq War clarifies little, as it only offers polite criticism of the invasion. The group’s principle findings state “US-led Coalition forces took precautions to spare civilians and, for the most part, made efforts to uphold their legal obligations. HRW nevertheless identified practices that led to civilian casualties in the air war, ground war, and post-conflict period.” [1]

Lebanon

Undoubtedly the most criminal recent use of cluster munitions occurred in Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon. In an area the size of the state of Rhode Island, HRW estimates that Israeli forces used 4.6 million bomblets--more than double the amount used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Remaining bomblets from US and Israeli attacks in 1978 and 1982 were still not completely cleared before the 2006 invasion polluted much of Southern Lebanon. Lebanon's “substantial” mine-and-munition clearing resources are struggling to clear the new contamination.

The barrage of cluster munitions was not constant throughout the war. A United Nations ceasefire was passed on August 11, 2006 and put into effect on August 14, 2006. Israel exploited this period to bombard Southern Lebanon; according to the United Nations, 90 percent of the cluster munition strikes took place in these final 72 hours. Civilian regions turned into minefields. A HRW report states “villagers and deminers discovered unexploded cluster duds inside houses, in the streets, in gardens, on roofs, on patios, and hanging from trees and fences. In Tebnine, a hospital had been struck, and the hundreds of duds strewn across the entryway trapped doctors and patients inside.” [1]

The widespread usage of highly unreliable and outdated cluster munitions appears intentional, as their estimated failure rates--25 percent, 70 percent and nearly 100 percent for some weapons--ensured a greater long-term contamination of wide areas in Lebanon. The results were devastating. Farming, the primary occupation, became impossible in contaminated areas. Fields were littered with visible and submerged bomblets, bomblet parachutes would leave bomblets stuck in olive trees.

Israel’s summer barrage caused farmers to risk their lives in autumn for the harvest, either clearing bomblets themselves or attempting to work around them. Civilians had bomblets explode inside houses and children mistook bomblets for toys. By January 2008 there were nearly 200 post-war civilian casualties and 42 civilian and military deminer casualties--including 17 deaths. In August *The New York Times* reported that 44 demining teams would have to be withdrawn because donors had failed to give $4.7 million of necessary funding.

Ali Haraz, injured by a bomblet on the main road of Majdel Selm told HRW that “When you have the war, the war is for one month and three days, but the cluster bombs are war for life.”

1. http://www.hrw.org/en/publications/reports/682/related

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