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A group of women in Beirut are seen near Mohammad Al-Amin mosque Nov. 9, 2019. (CNS photo/Andres Martinez Casares, Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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UNITED NATIONS — Efforts by the United Nations to limit the use of explosive weaponry in highly populated urban areas gained the support of the Vatican's nuncio to the world organization.

Archbishop Gabriele Caccia said civilian populations in cities must be protected in armed conflicts so that lives are not lost and daily life is not massively disrupted.

He made the comments during a U.N. Security Council meeting Jan. 25.

Saying that protocols under the Geneva Conventions extend protections for civilians in conflict zones, Archbishop Caccia said such safeguards have "proven inadequate in the face of what Pope Francis calls 'another world war ... fought piecemeal.'"

"Tens of millions of people each year now suffer the consequences of armed conflict in cities, which includes the disruption of essential services, and the risk of displacement, injury and death," Archbishop Caccia said.

He reiterated the findings of a May 2021 report from U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres that found civilians make up 90% of those killed and injured by explosive

weapons in urban settings.

Guterres also addressed the Security Council, explaining how more than 50 million people worldwide are affected conflict in urban areas and face the risk of being killed or injured.

Civilians in some situations may be mistaken for combatants and attacked, Guterres said. At other times, he added, combatants decide to use explosive weapons in crowded areas, causing long-lasting suffering for ordinary people who must deal with life-long disabilities and severe psychological trauma.

Such effects, Archbishop Caccia said in his address, call into question "whether the use of explosives is licit in such settings at all."

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Further, he continued, urban warfare can harm civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, sanitation systems and place of worship while also ravaging the local environment.

"This damage leads to outbreaks of preventable disease, hinders the provision of humanitarian assistance, robs surviving civilians of their dignity and hope, and increases the number of people forced to leave home in search of a more secure future," he said.

Those who remain, he added, often face remnants of explosives that contaminate urban settings, making it more difficult for people to return and for reconstruction to begin.

Archbishop Caccia said the Holy See welcomes and supports U.N. efforts to develop a political declaration that commits states to avoiding the use of explosive weapons with widespread effects in populated areas.

Noting that states have the primary responsibility to protect civilians from the effects of explosives, the archbishop quoted the pope in saying individuals also are bound to observe the limitations found in international humanitarian law that protect defenseless civilians and civil structures.

"It is our sincere hope that today's open debate advances measures to protect civilians in armed conflict and end the culture of impunity that has sown death and suffering among urban populations," Archbishop Caccia said in concluding his comments.

"For their sake, we pray the words expressed here today are translated into concrete action."