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Lebanon: Israel's White Phosphorous Use Risks Civilian Harm

Airburst Munitions Used Unlawfully in Populated Areas



Artillery-delivered white phosphorus munition being airburst over Kfar Kila, a Lebanese border village with Israel, as seen from Marjayoun in southern Lebanon, November 22, 2023. © 2023 Hussein Malla/AP Photo

(Beirut) – [Israel's](#) widespread use of white phosphorus in south [Lebanon](#) is putting civilians at grave risk and contributing to civilian displacement, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch verified the use of white phosphorus munitions by Israeli forces in at least 17 municipalities across south Lebanon since October 2023, including 5 municipalities where airburst munitions were unlawfully used over populated residential areas.

White phosphorus is a chemical substance dispersed in artillery shells, bombs, and rockets that ignites when exposed to oxygen. Its [incendiary effects](#) inflict death or cruel injuries that result in lifelong suffering. It can set homes, agricultural areas, and other civilian objects on fire. Under

international humanitarian law, the use of airburst white phosphorus is unlawfully indiscriminate in populated areas and otherwise does not meet the legal requirement to take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm.

“Israel’s use of airburst white phosphorus munitions in populated areas indiscriminately harms civilians and has led many to leave their homes,” said [Ramzi Kaiss](#), Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Israel forces should immediately stop using white phosphorus munitions in populated areas, especially when less-harmful alternatives are readily available.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed eight south Lebanon residents and verified and geolocated 47 photos and videos from south Lebanon posted on social media or shared directly with researchers indicating the use of white phosphorus munitions. In five municipalities, photos and videos show airburst munitions containing white phosphorus landing on top of residential buildings in the southern Lebanese border villages of Kafr Kila, Mays al-Jabal, Boustane, Markaba, and Aita al-Chaab.

The mayor of Boustane said that two people from the village had to be rushed to the hospital as a result of asphyxiation from inhaling white phosphorus smoke following the attack on October 15. “These are civilians, who were both in their houses,” the mayor said. “One was a member of the municipality, and the other was a farmer.”

People told Human Rights Watch that the use of white phosphorus in populated areas in south Lebanon contributed to the displacement of residents from several villages at the Lebanon-Israel border.

Lebanon’s Ministry of Public Health said that, as of May 28, exposure to white phosphorus had injured at least 173 people since October. Human Rights Watch did not obtain evidence of any burn injuries resulting from the use of white phosphorus munitions but heard accounts indicating possible respiratory damage.

“The most severe effects of white phosphorus are the dermal or skin effects, which can include second and third degree burns that can lead to very significant, deep necrotic and full thickness burns,” said Dr. Tharwat Zahran, a medical toxicologist and assistant professor of emergency medicine at the American University of Beirut. “Exposure to white phosphorus smoke could [also] lead to acute upper respiratory damages including shortness of breath, fast breathing, [and] coughing, but it could also have delayed effects, [including] chemical pneumonitis, which might require hospitalization and respiratory support through a machine.”

Israel’s widespread use of white phosphorus in south Lebanon highlights the need for stronger international law on incendiary weapons, Human Rights Watch said. [Protocol III](#) of the Convention on Conventional Weapons is the only legally binding instrument dedicated specifically to incendiary weapons. Lebanon is party to Protocol III, while Israel is not.

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Protocol III applies to weapons that are “primarily designed” to set fires or cause burns, and thus excludes certain multipurpose munitions with incendiary effects, notably those containing white phosphorus. In addition, it has weaker regulations for the use in “concentrations of civilians” of ground-launched incendiary weapons – like the ones used in Lebanon – than air-dropped incendiary weapons, even though they produce the same horrific injuries.

“Concentrations of civilians” is defined broadly to encompass populated areas ranging from villages to refugee camps to cities. Human Rights Watch and many countries have long called for [closing these loopholes](#) in Protocol III and creating international norms that better protect civilians from the harm caused by incendiary weapons.

At a national level, Israel should prohibit all use of airburst white phosphorus munitions in populated areas because it puts civilians at risk of indiscriminate attacks. There are available alternatives to white phosphorus in smoke shells, including some produced by Israeli companies, such as the M150 smoke projectile, which the Israeli army has used for its forces in the [past](#) as an obscurant, a means of hindering the visibility of its forces. These alternatives can have the same effect and dramatically reduce the harm to

civilians.

Lebanon should promptly file a declaration with the International Criminal Court (ICC), enabling the investigation and prosecution of grave international crimes within the court’s jurisdiction on Lebanese territory since October 2023.

“Stronger international standards against the use of white phosphorus are needed to ensure these weapons do not continue to endanger civilians,” Kaiss said. “Israel’s recent use of white phosphorus

in Lebanon should motivate other countries to take immediate action toward this goal.”



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White Phosphorus Use in Armed Conflict

White phosphorus can be used as a military tool to obscure, mark, or signal, or as a weapon to smoke out enemy forces. Concerns over its use in populated areas are amplified given the indiscriminate technique shown in videos of air-bursting white phosphorus projectiles, which spread 116 burning felt wedges impregnated with the substance over an area between 125 and 250 meters in diameter, depending on the altitude and angle of the burst, exposing more civilians and civilian structures to potential harm than a localized ground burst.

White phosphorus ignites when exposed to atmospheric oxygen and continues to burn until it is deprived of oxygen or is exhausted. Its chemical reaction can create intense heat (about 815°C/1,500°F), light, and smoke.

White phosphorus that contacts people can burn down to the bone. Fragments of white phosphorus can exacerbate wounds even after treatment and can enter the bloodstream and cause multiple organ failures. Already dressed wounds can reignite when dressings are removed and the wounds

are reexposed to oxygen. Even relatively minor burns are often fatal. For survivors, extensive scarring tightens muscle tissue and creates physical disabilities. The trauma of the attack, the painful treatment that follows, and appearance-changing scars lead to psychological harm and social exclusion.

Rocket and missile attacks and armed clashes between the Israeli military and various Lebanese armed groups, including Hezbollah, have continued since October 8, the day after the Hamas-led attack by Palestinian armed groups in southern Israel killed about [1,200 people](#), mostly civilians, according to the Israeli government. As of May 29, at least [36,171 Palestinians](#) have been killed amid heavy bombardment and military operations in Gaza by Israeli forces since October 7.

Human Rights Watch has documented the Israeli military's use of artillery-fired [white phosphorus in south Lebanon and Gaza](#) in October 2023, in addition to previous hostilities in Gaza, including in [2009](#).

Human Rights Watch previously verified the use of artillery-fired [white phosphorus](#) munitions in south Lebanon on October 10 in two locations near the Israel-Lebanon border and in Gaza City. On October 12, the Israeli military spokesman [denied the use of](#) white phosphorus munitions in south Lebanon and in Gaza during a CNN interview.

On October 30, Amnesty International found that an October 16 attack on the Lebanese border village of Dhayra using white phosphorus munitions was an “[indiscriminate attack](#) that injured at least nine civilians and damaged civilian objects.” The attack included use of US-supplied white phosphorus munitions, according to the [Washington Post, which carried out its own investigation](#).

The Israeli military said that its main smoke shells do not contain white phosphorus, but [stated](#) that “similar to many Western armies, the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] also has smoke shells that contain white phosphorus ... and the choice to use them is influenced by operational considerations and availability compared to alternatives.” The military further said that such munitions “are intended for smokescreens, and not for an attack or ignition.”

The dispersal of felt wedges from white phosphorus munitions, as observed in photos and videos reviewed by Human Rights Watch, are consistent with artillery-fired projectiles reportedly used by the Israeli military in both [Gaza](#) and south [Lebanon](#).

As of May 29, Israeli attacks in Lebanon since October 2023 have reportedly killed at least [88 civilians](#), in addition to more than 300 fighters, [according to media reports](#). Attacks in Israel by Hezbollah and armed Palestinian groups in Lebanon since October 2023 have reportedly killed at least [11 civilians](#) and 14 soldiers. More than [93,000 people](#) have been displaced from their homes in south Lebanon and at least [80,000 people](#) have been displaced from northern Israel.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch researchers reviewed over 100 photos and videos posted on social media and shared by journalists, news agencies, and residents of south Lebanon, in addition to footage shared directly with researchers. Researchers identified use of white phosphorus munitions in 47 of these photos and videos, then geolocated those photos and videos to confirm their locations and, when possible, precisely identify the area where the burst felt wedges impregnated with white phosphorus had landed.

Human Rights Watch also spoke to eight south Lebanon residents, including the head of the union of agricultural workers in south Lebanon, a schoolteacher, two photographers working in the region, a rescue worker with the Lebanese Civil Defense, and the mayors of Kafr Kila, Mays al-Jabal, and Boustane. Human Rights Watch also spoke to a medical toxicologist in Beirut.

On May 22, Human Rights Watch sent a letter with findings and questions concerning the use of white phosphorus to the Israeli military but has not received a response.

Documented Use in Populated Areas

Through its analysis of verified videos and photos, Human Rights Watch identified the use of white phosphorus munitions in 17 municipalities across south Lebanon since October 2023. This includes five municipalities where airburst munitions were used over populated areas. In videos and photos posted on social media or published by news agencies from the villages of Boustane on October 15, from Kafr Kila on November 12, January 14 and January 31, from Mays al-Jabal on November 12, from Markaba on March 4, and Aita al-Chaab on April 3, burning felt wedges visibly landed directly on top of residential buildings.

Human Rights Watch was unable to determine whether there were military targets in areas where Israeli forces used white phosphorus munitions in south Lebanon.

The mayor of Boustane said that nearly all residents had still been living in the village when it was attacked. “During the first week of the war almost all 900 residents of Boustane were still in the village,” he said. “After two weeks, almost 700 people were left. [...] Then we had only around 14 families. [...] Gradually they kept decreasing, and now there are only four people left.”

Data collected by the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM) for the period between October 10 to 15 indicates that displacement from the village was minimal until the date of the attack. When Boustane was attacked on October 15, virtually all of the population remained in the village.

In Mays al-Jabal, the mayor of the village, Abdelmonem Choucair, said that “around 25 people, all civilians, were sent to hospitals because of white phosphorus during the first months of the war.” Human Rights Watch verified photos and videos showing white phosphorus munitions being used in Mays al-Jabal in videos and photos posted on social media on November 12 and December 5.

“The use of the white phosphorus munitions in Mays al-Jabal pushed people out of the village and turned it into a military zone,” Choucair said.

The mayor of Kafr Kila said that he estimates that at the time of the white phosphorus attack in November, about 50 to 70 percent of the residents were still living there. “People stayed in their houses, although they would leave for some time and then come back,” he said. “But from January onwards, the village started emptying out. It was the use of white phosphorus and also the direct strikes on residential houses that pushed people to leave.”

Human Rights Watch verified photos and videos shared by news agencies or posted on social media on October 17, November 12, January 14, January 31, and March 2 showing white phosphorus munitions being used in Kafr Kila.

A photographer said that after inhaling smoke from white phosphorus munitions used in an attack in Kafr Kila, he stayed in bed, sleeping, for two days. “To this day, my wife tells me I still have a cough.”

“At one point I had to get closer to the white phosphorus smoke to get out of the village because the phosphorus was on the outskirts,” the man said. “I had my windows open while driving, and the smoke went into the car. I’m not sure what happened but I’m sure that I inhaled [...] I felt my stomach turning. My throat, lungs, and stomach felt awful. I got diarrhea that night. After that I couldn’t eat for a while, for about five days or so.”

Ramiz Dallah, a photographer from south Lebanon, who shared footage he took of white phosphorus attacks on the village of Shebaa, which Human Rights Watch verified, said that after one attack in December the smoke from the shells covered portions of the Shebaa valley and the village itself.

“Many people started getting scared of buying anything from the village or from the south because they’re afraid it may have been hit with [white] phosphorus,” he said. “People didn’t want to buy produce from our village. I’ve smelled and inhaled white phosphorus when they struck Shebaa. All this smoke inside my body I don’t know what its effects are going to be on the long term.”

Dr. Zahran, the medical toxicologist, said that doctors found in some cases that “people who went to check on their houses had secondary exposure where they experienced respiratory symptoms due to inhalation of white phosphorus that was still burning and present in the impacted area.”

Israel’s Policy on White Phosphorus Use

In 2013, the Israeli armed forces [announced](#) that they were developing new smoke shells without white phosphorus. The military said that it would nonetheless use and stockpile its white phosphorus munitions until it had sufficient alternatives but said that “[d]epending on the outcome

of this development process, the new shells are intended to gradually replace the current smoke shells as the primary means employed by the IDF for screening purposes.”

The move to develop alternatives came after Israel’s [Operation Cast Lead](#) in Gaza from December 27, 2008, to January 18, 2009, when the Israeli military fired approximately 200 ground-launched white phosphorus munitions into populated areas of Gaza. Israeli forces relied particularly on 155mm M825E1 artillery projectiles, which send burning phosphorus wedges 125 meters in all directions, giving them a wide area effect. Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Israeli military used the shells only to create smokescreens. However, in March 2009, Human Rights Watch documented dozens of civilian casualties in the six incidents it researched. The white phosphorus munitions also damaged civilian structures, including a school, a market, a humanitarian aid warehouse, and a hospital.

This use of white phosphorus generated international and domestic outcry and scrutiny. In 2013, in response to a petition before Israel’s High Court of Justice regarding the Gaza attacks, the Israeli military [asserted](#) that it would no longer use white phosphorus in populated areas except in two narrow situations that it revealed only to the justices. In the court’s ruling, Justice Edna Arbel explained that the conditions would “render use of white phosphorous an extreme exception in highly particular circumstances.” Although this pledge to the court did not represent an official change in policy, Justice Arbel called on the Israeli military to conduct a “thorough and comprehensive examination” and adopt a permanent military directive.

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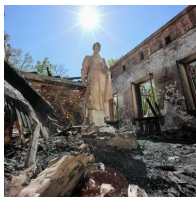
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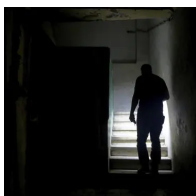
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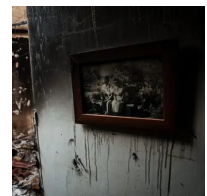
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