



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on March 1, 2022

Reports: Russia Using Cluster, Vacuum Bombs Against Ukrainian Civilians

The war in Ukraine is reportedly getting uglier day by day. As the blitzkrieg planned by the Russian military failed, the country appeared to be willing to bring several types of widely prohibited weapons capable of creating mass casualties to the battlefield.

On Monday, Ukraine accused Russia of launching vacuum bomb attacks, which constitutes a war crime.

Speaking with reporters at the U.S. Capitol, the Ukrainian ambassador to the United States, Oksana Makarova, [said](#), “They [Russians] used the vacuum bomb today.... The devastation that Russia is trying to inflict on Ukraine is large.” Makarova did not specify where the bombs were used.



AP Images
Kharkiv, Ukraine, after shelling by Russian forces

According to a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report [quoted](#) by Human Rights Watch, this is the type of effect vacuum bombs have on people:

The kill mechanism against living targets is unique — and unpleasant.... What kills is the pressure wave, and more importantly, the subsequent rarefaction [vacuum], which ruptures the lungs.... If the fuel deflagrates but does not detonate, victims will be severely burned and will probably also inhale the burning fuel. Since the most common FAE (fuel-air explosives) fuels, ethylene oxide and propylene oxide, are highly toxic, undetonated FAE should prove lethal to personnel caught within the cloud as most chemical agents.

Vacuum bombs are [said](#) to be the most powerful non-nuclear explosives used in warfare. Their use is [prohibited](#) by Geneva Convention since they are “deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects.” Russia is one of the signatories of the said treaty.

So far, there has been no official confirmation that vacuum bombs have been deployed in Ukraine.

CNN reporter Frederik Pleitgen tweeted a video of the alleged transportation of the weapons in question near the Ukrainian border Saturday, [saying](#), “The Russian army has deployed the TOS-1 heavy flamethrower which shoots thermobaric rockets.”

Catherine Philp, a diplomatic correspondent for British outlet *The Times*, [tweeted](#) on Friday, “Rather grim intelligence briefings today on fears that Russians frustrated by unexpected resistance will unleash thermobaric weapons and indiscriminate shelling on Kyiv in a bid to break through with horrific consequences for civilians.”



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Philp added that Russia has previously used such weapons in Syria, and added, “We are looking at war crimes.”

“Unleashing thermobaric weapons and the mass concentrated use of heavy artillery will cause the indiscriminate, unnecessary and unwarranted slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent people,” U.K. General Sir Richard Barrons told *The Daily Mail*.

In addition to that, [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) both said that Russian forces appeared to have used widely banned cluster munitions in civilian areas.

Amnesty International said cluster bombs hit a preschool in northeastern Ukraine on Friday that was being used to shelter civilians, killing three people, including a child, and injuring another child.

Secretary-General of Amnesty International Agnès Callamard said, “There is no possible justification for dropping cluster munitions in populated areas, let alone near a school.”

Human Rights Watch reported a Russian ballistic missile carrying a cluster munition struck just outside a hospital in Vuhledar, a town in Donetsk region. The attack killed four civilians and injured another 10.

The organization said it verified photographs posted to social media or sent directly by hospital staff that show damage from the attack, including two dead bodies, as well as the remnant of the weapon that was allegedly used, a 9M79-series Tochka ballistic missile with a 9N123 cluster munition warhead.

Arms director of Human Rights Watch Steve Goose urged Russia to “stop using cluster munitions and end unlawful attacks with weapons that indiscriminately kill and maim.”

A cluster munition [refers](#) to a form of air-dropped or ground-launched explosive weapon that releases or ejects smaller submunitions lighter than 20 kg designed to kill personnel and destroy vehicles. “In addition to the initial impact of the attack, there is a risk that some of these smaller explosives will not be detonated on the spot, and will later be found by civilians in these areas, increasing the risk of casualties, especially children,” per Meta News. Use of the cluster bombs has been prohibited by an international treaty since 2010 and has been ratified by more than 100 countries. The list does not include Russia, the United States, or Brazil.

Russian military command was unimpressed by Goose’s call, and on Monday allegedly used the bombs in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, killing at least eleven civilians and wounding dozens of others.

According to a *National Review* [report](#), “the shelling was reportedly aimed at residential areas and included the use of cluster munitions, which release submunitions or bomblets considered especially dangerous to civilians since they are difficult to confine to a specific target.”

The munitions have reportedly destroyed a school in the city center.

“Graphic images and video revealed streets littered with the bodies of dead and badly wounded civilians, with other images showing spent BM-21 Grad rocket cartridges laying in the streets and having fallen through apartment roofs,” [reported](#) *The Daily Mail*.

The Biden administration said if the reports of Russia targeting civilians with cluster bombs confirmed, then Russia would be considered guilty of war crimes.

“If that were true, it would potentially be a war crime. Obviously, there are a range of international fora that would assess that, so certainly we would look to that to be a part of that conversation,” White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [said](#) on Monday.



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On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin [ordered](#) his country's deterrence forces, including nuclear weapons, be put on higher alert, citing "unfriendly actions" taken by the West in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The move was largely seen as an escalation of the conflict and denounced by Western officials.

After initially promising not to target Ukraine's civilian population, Russia broke its promise and shifted to a new strategy of pummeling civilian areas in an attempt to demoralize Ukrainian resistance, *The Wall Street Journal* [reports](#).

As of Tuesday, at least 136 Ukrainian civilians have been killed, including 13 children, and 400 have been injured since Russia invaded Ukraine last week, per the United Nations.



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