Over the past few years, hospitals, schools, and homes have been bombarded with explosive weapons in in many countries. “A dangerous complacency is developing whereby such attacks are starting to be regarded as the norm,” warned Joanne Liu of Médecins Sans Frontières and Peter Mauer of the International Committee of the Red Cross. “They are part of the tapestry of today’s armed conflicts where civilians and civilian infrastructure are targeted, and marketplaces, schools, homes and health facilities are ‘fair game’.”

We have been watching this “tapestry” of war expand for years in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and many other places around the world. Civilian casualties are mounting; homes and lives are being destroyed; people are fleeing their cities and towns and countries. And this is only one of many unacceptable practices that delegates at First Committee must address.

Arms transfers that facilitate this kind of violence and destruction, leading to violations of human rights and international human law, are another crucial issue facing the Committee, especially two years on from the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty. Continued failures in preventing the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons or in ending the...
production, trade, and use of prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions must be addressed. The technologies of remote warfare such as armed drones and autonomous weapons, as well as weapons causing severe humanitarian harm such as depleted uranium and incendiary weapons, need more consideration.

And of course, nuclear weapons must be banned. It is the expectation of the majority of governments and civil society groups that this session of First Committee will consider and adopt a resolution to begin negotiations of a new international legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons. Such a process will provide the best opportunity we have had in decades to end the privileged status afforded to nuclear weapons and those that possess them or include them in their security doctrines against the interests of humanity, democracy, justice, and sanity.

The profits of war must end and the instruments of violence must be banned and eliminated. First Committee provides an excellent space for this work, bringing together diverse voices to discuss the challenges we all face.

This briefing book provides an overview of the state of play on some of the most pressing issues that should be addressed at this year’s First Committee. It also outlines recommendations from some of the key civil society groups working on these topics.

The civil society organisations, coalitions, and campaigns participating most actively at First Committee have argued consistently that we can and must advance human security and social and economic justice through disarmament and arms control. We call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of states and organisations most responsible for it.

The groups that have contributed to this briefing book work on many different issues and weapon systems from a variety of perspectives, but they all share one thing in common: the desire for more effective, transparent, and inclusive diplomatic work at the United Nations. We believe that most delegates seek true progress and the enhancement of human security. We hope that this briefing book will provide inspiration and alternatives as delegates engage in the important work ahead.