

Bellingcat was established in 2014 as a global, collaborative platform for investigations based on open-source data. Over the last 7 years, our researchers have scoured through tens of thousands of images and videos from war-torn countries, including Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen. Our main focus has been to verify, through methods such as geolocation, chronolocation and contextual research, visual evidence of the use of weapons – whether conventional and chemical – against civilians. Evidence gathered and verified by Bellingcat has already served as basis for prosecutorial investigations in the case of the shooting down of Malaysian airliner MH17, and in the killing of a Georgian asylum-seeker in Berlin in 2019. Using the war in Yemen as a test case, we developed a robust methodology of verification, preservation of chain of custody, investigation and archiving of incidents of harm caused to civilians. These methods were tested thoroughly and deemed acceptable for use in courts by an English common law judge.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February this year, Bellingcat directed all of its resources to gathering, verifying and preserving evidence of harm to civilians in the conflict. We engaged the same verification methods previously tested in the Yemen case. These include a robust system of evidence gathering by a dedicated team that is firewalled from Bellingcat's editorial team, to ensure the integrity of the evidence and to avoid any potential bias in data gathering. Each reported incident is logged, validated, described and archived, with attribution of weaponry used and origin of attack being added to each case wherever possible to determine through open-source means. The purpose of this evidence gathering is to provide a dataset of pre-validated incidents of civilian harm to judicial bodies that will likely investigate cases of war crimes – such as the ICC, and prosecutors of individual countries invoking universal jurisdiction on war crimes – such as Germany, Spain, and likely the Netherlands. The goal of this project is not to replace the investigative procedures to be run by these bodies, but to speed up the process of verification – and in turn to significantly shorten the time to serving justice to the victims and their families.

In just 19 days of war, Bellingcat has recorded more than 350 incidents that caused harm to civilians. Of these, just over 10% appear to be egregious cases of violations of the laws of war, with unwarranted targeting of residential buildings, and in some cases even hospitals and maternity wards, and with indiscriminate use of inhumane munitions – such as cluster bombs - in or near residential areas. While Bellingcat has not completed the process of attribution of origin of attack, most of these attacks appear plausibly attributable to the Russian side of the conflict. (In some of the cases, the Russian government has even unapologetically taken credit for the attacks on civilians.)

Under the time constraint of this testimony, I will focus on just five of the most egregious cases of civilian harm that have been verified and archive by us:

1. The intentional missile strike of Mariupol's maternity hospital on 9 March 2022. Many of you have seen the haunting images of the aftermath of the strike, which left X dead and XX wounded - surreally, further casualties were prevented as the Russian government had indicated the previous day that its forces planned to strike a maternity hospital in Mariupol under the unsubstantiated claim that it served as a recruiting station for a Ukrainian volunteer battalion.

Verified video:

https://twitter.com/OlenaIvantsiv/status/1501603358687256581?s=20&t=8f1TR_Tw_gB1pp4Kkmarmbg

2. The airstrike on Chernihiv residential areas on 3 March 2022. At least 8 dumb bombs causing indiscriminate and uncontrollable death were dropped into the middle of a residential area, killing about 50 people.
Verified video: <https://twitter.com/TWMCLtd/status/1499349949158416384>
3. The strike on Kyiv TV tower on 1 March 2022 which also killed three civilians and hit the nearby holocaust memorial.
Verified video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovmPJ01m_jk
4. Air strike in Kharkiv on 1 March 2022 which may have been targeting an industrial area, but hit a residential block of flats, killing dozens of civilians
Verified video: <https://twitter.com/clashreport/status/1500377845675311105>
5. Widespread use of cluster munitions, especially in Kharkiv, which have repeatedly impacted civilian areas. Countless civilian casualties, all foreseeable when using cluster munitions near residential areas.
Verified video:
<https://twitter.com/EmmettLesterSan/status/1499444045164138501?s=20&t=tobBaKGYkLF2Br2cClyorw>

These are only five of the nearly 40 cases of indiscriminate – or intentional targeting of residential areas that has caused multiple civilian casualties (we are attacking the full list of incidents tracked by Bellingcat up to this moment). We believe many of these will likely be investigated as possible war crimes.

However, not all potential war crimes are easily captured on camera and uploaded to social media by first-hand witnesses. We have also received private videos and photographs, as well as direct witness reports, parts of which we have been able to verify, that may likely constitute war crimes. These include photographs of bodies of civilians with clearly visible signs of torture and mutilation, which were geolocated and timestamped to areas and times where troops from the *Spetsnaz* units of Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov had been located. These photographs were made available directly to Bellingcat by witnesses who could not upload them to social media for fear of being tracked down and reprisals. In other cases, witnesses interviewed by us told of intentional killings by members of these same Chechen units of civilians of villages who had seen the route of these armed units - likely in order to eliminate witnesses who might report such movements to Ukrainian armed forces. We will make such evidence also available to international investigators.

The Russian invasion in Ukraine has only lasted 19 days but has already caused thousands of civilian casualties – through Russia's indiscriminate use of old-fashioned but powerful dumb bombs, the use of cluster munitions to target residential areas, the shelling of towns with imprecise MRLS missiles, and the targeted killings of civilians by at least certain parts of the the invading forces. Investigating these potential war crimes will take years. However an early awareness of the enormity of the civilian casualties is the only way to engage the international community to pressure Russia's authorities into stopping this cruel war. Bellingcat will continue to validate and make public each reported instance of harm to civilians, and has launched today a special civilian-harm tracking website, at <http://ukraine.bellingcat.com>

