

Georgina Newman: The deadly legacy of cluster bombs

Three young children lie in Jabal Amel Hospital in Tyre, their bodies punctured by shrapnel. They are among the first victims of the ceasefire and Unicef fears many more children will die as the ceasefire continues.

Following the conflict in Lebanon is a carpet of unexploded cluster bombs. Within a week of the ceasefire four people were dead, two of them children, and scores more were horribly injured.

Children are particularly vulnerable to unexploded cluster bombs, which are about the size and shape of a drink can. Nestled inside each canister are about 80 bomblets, each with enough force to rip an adult's leg off or to slay a child.

Children who have been cooped up in dank basements or crowded schools for weeks sheltering from the bombardment are desperate to play and run around in a playground of crumpled concrete and twisted metal.

The bombs among the detritus of war make homes and villages deadly battlefields.

Speaking from Lebanon, Unicef emergency manager Dan Toole said: "Children are more vulnerable to the danger because they are attracted to things and pick them up.

"They know less and they are more compact than adults and closer to the ground - so any explosion impacts on them more greatly."

The three children fighting for life in Jabal Amel Hospital thought the bomb they picked up outside their home was a toy.

Towards the end of the 34-day war, thousands of explosives were being dropped each day on to southern Lebanon.

An alarming characteristic of the cluster bomb is its high failure rate, posing a lethal threat for months and even years to come.

"In normal warfare 10 per cent of munitions do not explode when they hit the ground," said Mr Toole. "What we don't know in Lebanon is 10 per cent of how many, although it's an enormous number. We have confirmation of cluster bombs in many sites."

In war zones the cluster bomb is a particularly potent weapon. It is designed to release small bomblets in midair, showering across a wide radius, allowing far greater explosion coverage than a single artillery shell.

Such bombs are not prohibited by the Geneva Convention but aid agencies have long campaigned for them to be withdrawn because of the high failure rate and their wide, indiscriminate dispersal pattern.

Many now lie dormant in schools, hospitals and homes. It has become a humanitarian nightmare.

Unicef child protection adviser Trish Hiddleston and her team have been issuing awareness leaflets at border crossings for people flooding out of neighbouring Syria and advising families of the danger.

"People are leaving in droves, in private cars, on buses and on foot with a mixture of relief and concern about what awaits them," she says.