



2024 Statement by members of the NGO Working Group on the Protection of Civilians

This year marks both the 25th anniversary of the UN Security Council's adoption of the protection of civilians (POC) in armed conflict agenda, and the 75th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

Rather than an opportunity to mark progress in strengthening POC in conflict, the Security Council must reckon with the reality of the shocking civilian toll of armed conflict. Despite significant effort and investment, including UN Security Council resolutions enshrining the Protection of Civilians as a global priority, 2024 has been characterised by the continued erosion of compliance with international laws and standards, in particular international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). A widening gap between legal obligations and practice now threatens 25 years of progress and leaves civilians in conflicts around the world vulnerable to the devastating consequences of these wars. The disproportionately high impact of armed conflict on women, children, people with disabilities, older people, and other potentially marginalised groups is now the norm rather than the exception.

Today, civilians continue to suffer the tragic effects of war across numerous contexts, including those with UN peace operations or where missions are in the process of drawdown or withdrawal. Warring parties - including state and non-state actors - continue to kill, maim and cause life-long psychological wounds to civilians, use sexual violence and starvation as weapons of war, and destroy critical civilian infrastructure, the environment, livelihoods and education. As conflict is increasingly fought in urban areas, the levels of harm to civilians and damage to civilian infrastructure increases exponentially, especially when parties to conflict use explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA). In all cases, the physical, psychological and reverberating effects of violence often continue to impact civilian lives and livelihoods for generations after the conflict has ended.

We are standing at the threshold, witnessing a deliberate undermining of the collective commitments established to limit the barbarity of war, combined with a lack of accountability when international laws and standards are disregarded. In addition, survivors are often left without justice or redress. If this accountability gap is not addressed urgently, we risk barrelling further down a path of no return.

As NGOs working in conflict zones around the world, while we seek to strengthen rules and mechanisms to prevent and address civilian harm in armed conflict, the scale of harm and humanitarian need is now far outpacing our ability to respond. Reversing the tide is not only a legal and moral responsibility but is central to maintaining international peace and security and to making progress on essential shared global goals.

The world has changed considerably in the last 25 years. Armed conflicts have become increasingly complex, urbanised, and asymmetric. Meanwhile, emerging threats such as the use of new technologies and artificial intelligence, mis- and disinformation, and the presence of non-state security actors, including private military and security companies, as well as climate change, continue to change the way armed conflict is fought and the nature and scale of risks to civilians in conflict. A re-commitment to POC is more urgent than ever.

This responsibility to prevent and end armed conflicts, regulate how they are fought and hold the perpetrators of violations accountable sits with armed actors, states and with the bodies designed to maintain international peace and security - all of which are currently failing in their duties. States must not only respect their own legal obligations and commitments, they should also use their leverage to ensure that all parties to a conflict, and those supporting them, respect international norms and standards, including POC. Those with power must ensure all civilians, including humanitarians, journalists, human rights defenders and peacebuilders, are not a target.

Major arms exporting States have a role to play in encouraging compliance with these international norms and standards. By ending the supply of weapons, ammunition, and parts and components to contexts where there might be an overriding risk of the commission of violations of IHL and IHRL, States will not only fulfil their obligations under the Geneva Conventions and international customary law to ensure respect for IHL, but also contribute to preventing the suffering of civilians.

Ahead of this year's UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians, we collectively urge UN Security Council members, the UN Secretary-General, and all UN Member States to take full advantage of the opportunity of these important anniversaries to inject renewed urgency into ensuring the implementation of international laws and standards, and UNSC Resolutions, for the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

We urge these priority actions:

1. At the national level, states must take meaningful action to improve civilian protection in conflict.

This should include reinforcing guidance, policies, strategies, legislation and mechanisms at the national level to strengthen protection of civilians; building commitments to POC and international law into global military partnerships, ensuring arms transfers do not occur when there is an overriding risk they might contribute to serious IHL or IHRL violations; using national systems or the legal principle of universal jurisdiction to prosecute those committing abuses and violations of IHL; endorsing initiatives aimed at strengthening civilian protection in conflict including the EWIPA Political Declaration and Safe Schools Declaration; and engaging with communities, civil society and local peacebuilders as key partners in strengthening POC, promoting the value of locally-led protection for effective and sustainable POC outcomes and recognising the agency of civilians and local communities in their own protection.

2. At the global level, states must take urgent steps to end impunity and promote accountability.

This should include commitment from P5 members to support the proposal to suspend the veto in the UN Security Council in cases of mass atrocities; criminal prosecutions for IHL violations in international courts; ensuring current and future peace operations in all their forms

have the guidance, budget and resources to meaningfully strengthen POC; and strengthen the international mechanisms for holding both state and non-state actors accountable for violations, including against children under the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda, and for violations under the Council's Women Peace and Security resolutions, particularly including conflict related sexual violence. Further we recommend the creation of a working group comprised of current and former Council members to develop a set of proposals in consultation with civil society on how to improve implementation of UNSC Resolutions related to POC - a first step should be agreement to implement a 6-month follow up discussion on the SG's Annual Protection of Civilians Report to look at progress made and gaps that remain on challenges outlined in the report.

3. States should recommit to POC in the face of emerging challenges.

This should include ensuring IHL, IHRL and POC are prioritised as core tenets of global multilateral governance in the forthcoming Pact for the Future; strengthening and implementing legal accountability mechanisms and other safeguards around the use of new technologies in armed conflict, a treaty to prohibit and regulate autonomous weapons systems by 2026 as recommended by the UNSG in the New Agenda for Peace; strengthening and implementing international, regional and national legal and regulatory frameworks governing Private Military and Security Companies, including mechanisms for transparency, oversight, accountability and redress for civilian harm; and establishing an Environment, Peace, and Security (EPS) agenda to better protect civilians from conflict-linked environmental harm and the impacts of the environment-climate-conflict nexus.

Signed by,

Action Against Hunger
Amnesty International
Article 36
CARE
Center for Civilians in Conflict
Concern Worldwide
Control Arms
Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect
Human Rights Watch
Humanitarian Policy Group / ODI
International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW)
International Rescue Committee
Legal Action Worldwide
Nonviolent Peace Force
Norwegian Refugee Council
PAX
Plan International
Save the Children
Watchlist for Children and Armed Conflict
World Vision