

United Nations



Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARK LOWCOCK**

**Remarks to the Security Council on “Protection of civilians in armed conflict:
indispensable civilian objects”**

New York, 27 April 2021

As delivered

Good evening, Mr. President. Good afternoon, good morning, everybody.

The whole world is grappling with the biggest crisis of our lifetime. Our only battle today should be with COVID. Now is the moment to end all other conflicts. But wherever violent conflict persists, we must strengthen the protection of civilians.

Over the last 30 years, there has been some progress in the compliance with international humanitarian law to protect civilians and the objects that they rely on to survive, like food and medicines, hospitals and water installations.

But it has not been enough.

In the last two decades, we have seen the emergence of transnational terrorist groups who totally reject the laws of war. Groups that use their nihilistic ideologies to justify unspeakable violence against civilians. They don't even pretend to subscribe to the basic humanitarian norms. They regard civilians, including aid workers, as legitimate targets.

At the same time, big military powers are reorienting their military planning, training and spending to deter and defeat enemy States.

And when States and armed groups disrespect or undermine international humanitarian law, other States and non-State actors regard it as an invitation to do the same.

So I am deeply concerned about what this means for our ability to protect decades of hard-won progress.

I want to set out the impact of these trends in four critical areas.

Firstly, food.

David Beasley, Qu Dongyu and I briefed you on the destructive link between conflict and food security last April.

The impact of armed conflict on food security can be direct, for example, through the destruction of food stocks and agricultural assets.

Attacks on food drive people to move and they disrupt food systems and markets, leaving few people able to afford food or access to water and fuel to prepare food.

Last year, in Nigeria, an attack on a rice farm in the outskirts of Maiduguri killed more than 110 farmers.

Pillaging of food and livestock was widely reported in South Sudan between 2013 and 2020.

In Yemen, air strikes and shelling have hit farms, markets, food storage sites and fishing boats.

And even now, we hear reports of agricultural inputs and infrastructure in Ethiopia's Tigray region being systematically destroyed in that conflict.

Any attacks on food supplies and food infrastructure are unacceptable. I have been reporting to the Security Council on the risk of conflict-induced famine since 2018. And we across the UN, together with NGO partners and the Red Cross – and you will hear from Peter Maurer in a few moments – have recently warned of the risk of famine looming in Yemen, South Sudan, north-east Nigeria and elsewhere if urgent action is not taken.

Secondly, water.

In January 2016, ISIL cut off the water supply to Aleppo governorate in Syria, affecting some 2 million people.

Boko Haram is known to have poisoned water sources like wells and streams, making water use dangerous for both people and livestock.

Cutting off safe water supply during conflict causes sanitation and health crises. Even one incident that disrupts the water supply can have enormous consequences for health.

Evidence shows that even a single brief disruption to a drinking water supply – lasting just a day – can heighten the risk of contracting waterborne disease like cholera. And that particularly affects very young children, for whom infection presents the greatest risk of death.

Water and sanitation services are often hit in armed conflicts. In Ukraine and in Libya, fighting has damaged water infrastructure and hindered the maintenance of facilities, leading to cuts in supply and shortages.

Deliberately interrupting or shutting down a water supply is also used as a tactic of war.

In South Sudan, SPLA soldiers stole pumps that were used by local people in Mboro town to pump water from boreholes, depriving those people of access to water for both consumption and sanitation.

Thirdly, medical care.

Violence, attacks and threats against medical care significantly weakens the ability of health systems to function.

What I have found particularly hard to stomach are the systematic attacks on medical facilities in Syria.

The World Health Organization counted 250 such attacks between 2018 and 2020 alone.

About 1,000 health-care workers have been killed in those attacks there over the last 10 years.

Besides being acts of pure cruelty, these attacks have devastated the Syrian health system. My predecessors and I have regularly appeared before you in this Council to call out these violations and to plead on behalf of people trapped in the fighting.

In Burkina Faso, ambulances have been burned and health facilities looted. In Mali, equipment and medicine has been destroyed or looted and vehicles hijacked.

Attacks like this have also affected the COVID response. In Libya last year, for example, air strikes and shelling damaged hospitals treating COVID patients. In Yemen, quarantine centres have been damaged in hostilities.

And as a result of frequent attacks like this, medical staff flee and facilities are often forced to close, leaving millions of people without access to health care.

Those facilities that remain open face acute shortages of staff, medicines and supplies. At the end of June last year, only half of 113 hospitals in Syria that were checked were fully functioning. In March last year, up to 70 per cent of the health workforce there had left the country.

Fourthly, we see horrific instances of the use of rape and other sexual violence in the pursuit of political and military goals, and the intentional destruction of the infrastructure that supports survivors.

That is what we saw as part of the deliberate effort to force hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people out of Myanmar in 2017. I will never forget some of the stories women I met in Cox's Bazaar told me of their experience – of systematically organized rape by men in uniform in front of families and children. That is also what we have seen in the last six months in northern Ethiopia. The rapes there have not stopped. They are deliberately and systematically organized, targeted, ethnically based, and they are intended to terrorize, humiliate and brutalize.

Mr. President,

It is not only what is targeted in a conflict, but where and how it is targeted that can produce horrific results.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas exposes large numbers of civilians to the risk of death or injury. When such weapons were used in populated areas last year, 88 per cent of people killed and injured were civilians, compared to just 16 per cent in other areas.

The use of explosive weapons in urban areas also has a devastating toll on essential infrastructure and services.

A study last year in Yemen showed how the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas has disrupted every resource and system in the country, including water and power supplies, hospitals and sanitation systems.

Fewer people want to return if their supplies of vital services have been destroyed. Fewer people can.

In an increasingly digitized world, cyberattacks also pose a threat to essential infrastructure.

As the Secretary-General has noted, the number of cyberattacks – with their associated impact on health care, electrical and water infrastructure – could become increasingly widespread.

Disruption to electricity grids, for example, can deprive huge numbers of people of electrical power.

Mr. President,

There are three ways to strengthen the protection of civilians and objects indispensable to their survival.

The first is to enhance compliance with international humanitarian law.

That can be done by improving the identification of these indispensable objects and regularly updating and complying with “no-strike” lists that include them.

At the same time, we need to continue to leverage political dialogue, sanctions and arms transfer decisions to ensure respect for the law and the protection of civilians and the objects they depend on to survive.

The second thing that could be done, as the Secretary-General has often emphasized, is to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

There are some good practices already being followed in this area, for example, in Afghanistan and Somalia, where multinational forces’ use of certain air-delivered weapons has been restricted, or their use of artillery and other indirect fire munitions has been limited.

In 2017, my office – OCHA – published a compilation of military policy and practice to reduce the humanitarian impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

And the third point is that, unless there is accountability, miscreants will draw the lesson that serious crime pays. Essentially, what's not punished is incentivized.

If war crimes go unpunished, things will get worse. So ensuring accountability for serious violations of international humanitarian law is one of the greatest challenges we face in strengthening the protection of civilians. It's especially important to ensure accountability for serious violations when those violations are themselves a tactic and a deliberate choice made by perpetrators.

As the Secretary-General has said, "our power in the UN is a power of persuasion, is a power of speaking up ... denouncing what needs to be denounced. But we cannot order countries to do what they must do."

The world does have a robust legal framework governing parties' behaviour in war. We have a growing body of good practice to put it into motion.

What we need now is the political will from Member States and all parties to armed conflict to respect the rules and do the right thing.

Thank you, Mr. President.