

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

Remarks to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict

New York, 25 May 2021

As delivered

Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Last year, the Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire so that the world could focus on ending the pandemic and putting people on a path to sustainable recovery.

Despite support for this in many places, deadly conflicts have continued in Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere. New ones broke out or got worse, for example, in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In many countries, conflict has made it more difficult to control the spread of the virus and care for infected people.

We have all seen multiple reports of atrocities.

In Afghanistan, a high school was attacked earlier this month, killing and injuring dozens of civilians including schoolgirls. We may hear more of that from Dr. Nemat.

In Ethiopia, we have heard shocking reports of mass rapes and killings.

In Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, the escalation of hostilities killed and injured scores of civilians and caused extensive damage to homes and vital infrastructure.

Last year, conflicts contributed to a rise in the number of forcibly displaced people, bringing the total to 80 million by mid-year.

2020 also saw a big reduction in the number of internally displaced people who were able to return to their homes.

At the same time, insecurity, sanctions, counter-terrorism measures and administrative hurdles hindered humanitarian operations.

The pandemic added new access woes, with flight suspensions, border closures, quarantine measures and lockdowns.

Mr. President,

Today my remarks will focus on five areas highlighted in the Secretary-General's annual report on the protection of civilians, which was released last week.

- The interplay between conflict and hunger
- The effects of using explosive weapons in populated areas
- Protection of the environment
- Protection of medical care, on which I note we now mark five years since the adoption of your resolution 2286
- And strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law and accountability for serious violations.

So first to **conflict and hunger**.

Last year, the threat of famine re-emerged, including in north-east Nigeria, parts of the Sahel, South Sudan and Yemen.

By the end of 2020, nearly 100 million people faced crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity as a result of conflict. That was up from 77 million the year before.

Conflict causes acute hunger in direct and indirect ways.

It displaces civilians from their agricultural land, their grazing areas and their fishing grounds.

In Nigeria last year, for example, at least 110 farmers were killed in an attack on a rice farm.

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, people have been displaced, crops have been destroyed and looted, and food and other relief has been blocked. I have written to you earlier today to provide more details on the evolving situation in northern Ethiopia.

Conflicts also disrupt commercial food systems and markets. And parties to conflict destroy food stocks. Prices rise and families are less able to buy food.

Member States, Mr. President, need to take more effective action to tackle these challenges.

That starts by finding political solutions to conflicts, by ensuring respect for the rules of war, and by addressing the economic crises that fuel and flow from fighting.

As you know, the Secretary-General has strengthened the UN's famine prevention efforts through the creation of a **High-level Task Force**. It is working to ensure coordinated, high-level attention to the countries most likely to fall into famine and mobilize support for the most vulnerable people.

Second, Mr. President, the use of explosive weapons in towns and cities.

Almost 90 per cent of the people killed when explosive weapons are used in urban areas are civilians.

That compares to less than 20 per cent when these weapons are used in rural areas.

We saw high numbers of civilian casualties resulting from the use of these weapons last year in countries including Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

These weapons also inflict a devastating toll on essential civilian infrastructure. In Yemen, they have disrupted almost every essential resource or public service, including water, electricity, sanitation and health care.

Fighting parties must change their choice of weapons and tactics.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly called on parties to conflict to avoid using wide-area explosive weapons in populated areas.

Third, the Secretary-General's report highlights the impact of conflicts on the environment.

In Iraq, air strikes destroyed agricultural land and caused wildfires, including in areas with rich biodiversity and species at risk of extinction.

In northern Syria, deteriorating infrastructure led to oil spills polluting water needed for farming, for health and basic hygiene.

The origin of many conflicts is found partly in environmental issues, especially those related to water. Water stress is growing in many places already affected by conflict. I predict that you in this Council will be dealing with more of the consequences of that in the years ahead. I will brief you tomorrow on some of these issues as they affect Syria.

Fourth, I turn to attacks on medical care. The report addresses that in some detail.

Medical personnel, transportation and facilities continue to come under attack.

Doctors and nurses are threatened, abducted and killed. Facilities and medical transport systems, including ambulances, are destroyed and damaged. The wounded and sick are denied access to care.

Last year, attacks on health care across 22 conflict-affected countries killed 182 health workers, with the highest numbers losing their lives in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Syria.

Just four days ago, a dedicated South Sudanese doctor working for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) was killed inside a health facility in South Sudan's Unity State. Almost at the same time, a few kilometres away, an IRC convoy, including an ambulance which was carrying 10 aid workers, was shot at by unknown gunmen. The humanitarian staff fortunately managed to escape the attack.

Health workers also faced kidnapping, injury, assault and intimidation.

In Myanmar, 109 incidents of violence against health care were documented in a two-month period this year, accelerating the collapse in the public health-care system when many people have needed it most.

In some conflicts, counter-terrorism measures criminalize the provision of medical care to members of terrorist-designated groups and even to people living under their control.

That has led to the detention, prosecution and imprisonment of medical personnel.

The consequences on health care can be catastrophic, depriving millions of people of life-saving care and severely reducing the treatment of diseases like cholera, measles and COVID.

When hostilities worsened in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province, over a third of health facilities were damaged or destroyed, and health workers fled. And that left thousands of people without a nurse or doctor.

So, in short, when medical care stops, lives are lost.

Some States have taken practical steps to protect medical staff and facilities and make sure the wounded and sick can receive care.

Steps like:

- Ensuring military targets are far from medical facilities
- Taking precautions including through the issuing of warnings on military action
- Refraining from using medical facilities to support the military effort

And crucially,

- Ensuring that military rules of engagement respect international humanitarian law.

Drawing on best practice, and on the recommendations made in Security Council resolution 2286, the Secretary-General calls on States and armed forces to expand on these efforts.

Parties to conflict need to improve analysis and tracking of allegations of harm.

And I reiterate our call for all humanitarian and medical activities to be excluded from counter-terrorism and sanctions measures.

Mr. President,

That brings me to the fifth point: ensuring that the behaviour of belligerents complies with international humanitarian law.

I have seen a significant deterioration in this area, both from States and from non-State armed groups in my nearly four years now as Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Unless we – the international community – focus our energies on confronting the way belligerents behave in conflict, we will see the scale of humanitarian need continue to increase just as it has over the last four years.

It is possible to make progress.

States can improve the training of their forces, they can modernize policies to avoid civilian harm, they can adopt a more consistent approach to tracking and recording civilian casualties, they can investigate incidents when they occur, and they can hold those guilty of violations to account.

International humanitarian law should be incorporated into national law, into military manuals and into rules of engagement.

States should leverage respect for IHL and the protection of civilians in political dialogue and through sanctions, and through a more responsible approach to arms sales and the offers of military training.

It is also possible in many circumstances to improve the behaviour of non-State armed groups, though it is important to recognize the very real challenges in this area, especially in respect of those groups who refute international humanitarian law and the role of humanitarian agencies as part of their twisted ideologies. We all – members States and humanitarian agencies in particular – need a more effective approach to tackling this. Many current efforts, unfortunately, are counter-productive and, in fact, exacerbate harm to civilians.

Finally, Mr. President, I want again to emphasize the crucial importance of accountability.

If war crimes go unpunished, things will get worse. Accountability for violations must be systematic and universal, because what is not punished is encouraged.

That takes political will on the part of Member States to investigate and prosecute allegations of serious violations whenever they occur.

We have the laws and the tools to protect civilians from harm in armed conflicts.

It's time that all States and parties to conflict apply them.

Thank you very much indeed, Mr. President.