

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator Mark Lowcock Remarks at Event on the margins of the General
Assembly: Civilians Under Fire: Humanitarian Protection and Respect for
International Humanitarian Law**

United Nations Headquarters, New York, Wednesday 26 September, 8:30 – 10:00,

As delivered

Thank you for putting on this event.

The reason I'm grateful is because the single biggest cause of humanitarian suffering in the world arises from the way belligerents behave in conflict - from their failure to comply with the laws of war.

But beyond that, the single biggest constraint to our ability to relieve that suffering also arises from that same behaviour by belligerents.

For me, this is the top issue.

We've been trying to think a lot about it, and I gave a 40-minute version of what I'm about to say in five minutes.

What we'd like is to engage in a conversation with you. Especially about solutions.

We need to start by analyzing the nature of the problem if we're going to have productive solutions.

Firstly, wars last twice as long as they did years ago as military victories are harder to achieve and negotiated settlements often don't stick.

Secondly, these conflicts are increasingly played out in urban settings, where the civilian population is highly concentrated.

Thirdly, we have seen an explosion in the number of armed groups, which makes it difficult to negotiate with the relevant parties.

Fourthly, we are seeing the emergence of trans-national terrorist groups, like Daesh and Al-Qaeda, whose ideologies reject the laws of war.

Fifthly we see military and economic warfare go hand-in-hand. Some businesses rely as part of their business model on chaos and conflict and anarchy. Illegal miners or drug smugglers or people smugglers need that chaos to prosper. We need to understand that.

These characteristics of modern conflict have created five humanitarian challenges.

First, the deliberate targeting and killing and maiming of civilians.

Secondly, prolonged humanitarian need. The average length of humanitarian appeals has risen from four years in 2005 to seven years by 2017.

Third, record levels of displacement - not just refugees but also internally displaced people – accompanied by a mass destruction of livelihoods.

Fourth, this displacement and destruction of livelihoods exacerbates hunger and disease.

And the fifth element – aid workers have increasingly come under attack. Last year as you know, 139 aid workers were killed in the line of duty. The World Health Organisation has reported 232 attacks on healthcare facilities since the beginning of this year.

So, the fundamental thing we need to do is to change the behaviour of belligerents in conflict.

I want to commend the report the ICRC wrote on the roots of restraint in war, because one of the things it tells us is that there are things we can do about this problem.

There's no need for a message of despair.

Firstly, we must make sure combatants – both State and non-State armed groups - know their obligations under the law. In fact, the lack of knowledge is a much bigger problem than we have recognized.

Secondly, we need to make sure IHL norms are more consistently integrated into military doctrine, standard operating procedures and rules of engagement.

Thirdly we've seen if armed groups are encouraged to adopt internal policies or codes of conduct, that can have a "self-disciplining" effect. NGO Geneva Call has good examples.

Fourthly strengthening civil-military coordination can help improve compliance with laws of war.

And effective deconfliction systems can help as well. The deconfliction system in Yemen is not perfect, but it's been an important part of the architecture in allowing aid operations to continue.

Then as the Secretary-General's said in his report on the Protection of Civilians, we do need greater integration of protection of civilians into policy frameworks. We need stronger action plans to end the recruitment of children, and stricter arms export controls linked to IHL, to reduce the risk of exported arms being used in breach of IHL.

And then we need to deal with the accountability issues. This is at the heart of things.

The Security Council has a very important part to play. This is a challenging period, but it plays an important role.

So does the ICC.

Effective accountability takes time. And it requires evidence.

So, there are a range of things we can do. It's instructive to recall that most States have signed up to limitations in the way that wars are conducted.

Remember the St. Petersburg declaration of 1868 which basically said the only legitimate purpose for the military in war is to deal with the military on the other side.

We need to get closer to that original precept.

Thank you.