

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Opening Remarks at the high-level ECOSOC side event on “Approaching the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949: Achieving collective commitment to international humanitarian law and putting fundamental protections into practice.”**

*Geneva, 24 June 2019*

Well thank you very much indeed, I am delighted to be here. I must say that I think your brilliant panellists have said all of the important things that need to be said in introducing the discussion. But, let me just quickly emphasize, a few points. I mean firstly, of course, the Conventions came out of, arguably, the worst experience that humanity at scale had ever gone through in the, in the course of the second World War.

And, it is of course the case that in the light of such an experience there was a very strong desire to put in place difference arrangements for the future, and, of course, those arrangements included the establishment of the UN, and the Bretton Woods Institutions, and other Institutions as well as the Conventions. But, as time passes, and generations change, it is really important to keep reminding everybody why the Geneva Conventions were put in place and so I really welcome the focus on the Anniversary year and all of the events that have taken place like this one on that.

The conventions have three very important attributes. Firstly, and this is really remarkable, all States are party to them. Now, that is a very powerful attribute. There is no one, no State who says, “well we do not really agree with this”. Everybody claims to be party to it. Secondly, the coverage is broad, so it includes the wounded, the sick, shipwrecked combatants, prisoners of war and crucially, as Jan said, civilians. Thirdly, and this is a unique provision of each of the Conventions, the provisions aimed to protect people not just in State to State conflict, but also in conflicts that are not internationalized. In other words, they intend to bind organized armed groups as bind States. This is a very important feature of the Conventions.

We meet today at a time when we continue to face challenges in scale of respect for the Geneva Conventions and more generally international humanitarian law. As the Secretary-General of the UN said in his report last month, in some cases respect for the law in the conduct of hostilities is questionable at best and the allegations and evidence of breaches of obligations under international humanitarian law continue to mount.

It is a jarring fact that after sixty years essentially of broadly improving compliance with the Conventions and with IHL, there was never a golden age and there were always

breaches, but after sixty years of broadly improving compliance, we have during the course of this decade seen a spike in violations. That is a very jarring fact and the second jarring fact is that that is not because of weaknesses in the law, if anything, over the course of the last 10 or 15 years, the law in its various manifestations has been strengthened. Lots of additional agreements reached, not the least in the UN and the Security Council.

But what we have seen is a decline in compliance. I think one of the important opportunities we have here and in meetings like this is to be super clear that the problem is a decline in compliance and work out what are the things we can do to improve compliance. And, I offer five thoughts there.

Firstly, advocacy is extremely important. If violations are not called out, please expect to see more of them, this is Jan's point.

Secondly, training and awareness raising and information to people, particularly armed opposition groups, who may not fully know what the deal is supposed to be is very important. There are definitely some parties to conflict who behave in the way they do because they lack information.

Thirdly, we can do more things to help people fulfil their obligations to comply. I think the deconfliction example that Jan gives is a very good one. Deconfliction systems do not work all the time everywhere. I think a lot of you will know, I have some very deep concerns at the moment and I will be briefing the Security Council again tomorrow on the way the deconfliction system is or isn't working in Syria. On the other hand, they do work well in other places. As I have said before, I think the operation of the deconfliction system which my office runs in Yemen has basically been quite good, not that they have been no problems. But the deconfliction system has protected the aid operation – the world's largest aid operation – and without that system it would be impossible for us in the UN and our partners – as we are – to be reaching 10 million people every month with humanitarian assistance in the middle of quite a hot war.

Fourthly, it is really important, when there are violations, to collect the evidence and then investigate them. And that is an under-invested in activity. There are too many violations which are never pursued, never properly investigated.

Fifthly, there do have to be sanctions. There has to be a penalty for knowingly violating the law. And they can come in a variety of different ways, but unless you change the incentive framework, please do not expect behaviour to change.

The central point is that we do not need to change the law, we just need everybody to obey the law.

Thank you.