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Protection of civilians in armed conflict

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to the request in the statement by the President of the Security Council of 21 September 2018 ([S/PRST/2018/18](#)). It also responds to the Council's requests for reporting on specific themes in resolutions [2286 \(2016\)](#), [2417 \(2018\)](#), [2474 \(2019\)](#), [2475 \(2019\)](#), [2573 \(2021\)](#) and [2730 \(2024\)](#).

2. In 2024, civilians, including women and children, continued to bear the brunt of armed conflict, suffering death, injury, forced displacement, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence and other losses. The destruction of civilian infrastructure caused disruptions to electricity, healthcare, water and sanitation services, education and livelihoods, depriving many persons of the essential services needed to survive. The number of people who were forcibly displaced reached new highs. Medical personnel were harmed and facilities were damaged, leaving patients without care. Humanitarian workers and United Nations personnel faced violence, access impediments and shortages of essential supplies. In many countries, including Cameroon, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Sudan, other situations of violence, such as civil unrest, intercommunal clashes over land and water and criminal activity also caused death, injury and destruction. The state of the protection of civilians in 2024 is reviewed in section II of the present report.

3. More than 120 armed conflicts endured and the use of new technologies proliferated while blatant violations and permissive interpretations of international humanitarian law took an immense human toll. Inconsistent standards, assertions of exceptional circumstances and hollow calls for compliance undermined respect for international humanitarian law. Such conduct strikes at the very heart of international humanitarian law, which seeks to limit human suffering precisely when there is armed conflict. It defies the very agreement concluded by States stipulating that the requirements of humanity must set limits on conduct in war, including the use of certain tactics and weapons that cause unacceptable harm. These principles remain true today and must be upheld. In section III of the present report, the dangers posed by new technologies used in warfare and worrisome trends in compliance with and attitudes towards international humanitarian law are examined. The full protection of civilians called for in the previous report of the Secretary-General ([S/2024/385](#)) is also elaborated on in that section.



II. Global state of the protection of civilians

A. Widespread harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure

4. In Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, the Occupied Palestinian Territory which encompasses the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, and elsewhere, civilian death and injury were prominent, including in urban areas where heavy explosive weapons were used and as a result of unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices. In the Sudan, frequent artillery shelling and air strikes in densely populated areas, attacks directed against civilians and sexual violence were reported. Civilians were killed and injured from the use of explosive weapons in Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere.¹ The United Nations recorded more than 36,000 civilian deaths in 14 armed conflicts in 2024.

5. Landmines and explosive remnants of war continued to endanger civilians and impede their movement and livelihoods, as well as the returns of displaced persons in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. In South Sudan, explosive ordnance contaminated over 22 million m² of land. In Nigeria, civilian casualties from explosive ordnance rose by 8 per cent compared with 2023. The use of cluster munitions was reported in Lebanon, Myanmar and Ukraine.

6. An increase in the use of larger bombs with a high explosive yield in densely populated areas contributed to a rise in civilian casualties in several conflicts. In the Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024, Member States committed themselves to restrict or refrain from, as appropriate, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas when their use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects, including essential civilian infrastructure, schools, medical facilities and places of worship, in accordance with international law. This is an important alignment with the 2022 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. In October 2024, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement adopted its Movement Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to the Humanitarian Impacts of War in Cities, for the period 2022–2027, reflecting a shared recognition of the human cost of urban warfare and a commitment to improving the protection of civilians.

7. In Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, the Niger, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, there were reports of torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, hostage-taking, enforced disappearance, sexual violence and forced displacement. People detained in Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Occupied Palestinian Territory were reported to have died from extrajudicial executions, torture or inadequate healthcare. Conditions of detention were described as deplorable – overcrowded and squalid, with poor ventilation, spoiled food and unsafe drinking water leading to waterborne disease. In Gaza, 98 persons taken hostage from Israel in October 2023 were still being held hostage at the end of the year, amid reports of ill-treatment, including deprivation of food, water and sanitation, and reasonable grounds to believe that hostages may be subjected to ongoing sexual violence, as well as psychological abuse and killings in captivity. Thousands of Palestinians were deprived of their liberty, most without charges or

¹ Action on Armed Violence, “Explosive Violence Monitor 2024: Initial Data”, 14 January 2025.

trial, with reports of ill-treatment, torture, sexual violence and inadequate medical care.

8. Armed conflict has also led to enduring trauma. Bereaved survivors faced a higher risk of depression, anxiety and stress disorders, suicidal ideation, substance abuse and disease. Gender discrimination and exclusion has hampered girls' education and women's livelihoods and participation in civic life.

9. In Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Israel, Lebanon, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, there was significant damage to civilian objects and critical civilian infrastructure, such as shelters, health facilities, energy infrastructure, fuel storage sites, water sources and infrastructure, crops, telecommunications towers, schools, universities, homes, markets, food storage facilities, granaries, farmlands and religious sites. This damage disrupted life-saving services, disrupted livelihoods, increased risks of disease outbreaks, deepened humanitarian needs and eroded community resilience. In Gaza, nearly 70 per cent of all structures had been damaged or destroyed by the end of 2024.

10. In Ukraine, there were more than 300 reported attacks on electricity infrastructure, causing nationwide power outages and heating and water supply disruptions, and putting millions of persons at risk during the colder months. In Yemen, strikes on power stations led to electricity outages, while the capacity of vital port facilities was also impaired, jeopardizing the humanitarian and commercial imports on which the country depended. In the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, hostilities led to the prolonged shutdown of the Tishrin Dam, depriving over 413,000 persons of electricity and water for weeks. The electricity blackout in Gaza continued throughout 2024.

B. Aggravated suffering

Forced displacement

11. By mid-2024, approximately 122.6 million people worldwide remained forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, violence and human rights violations. This was an increase of 5 per cent, or 5.3 million people, compared with the end of 2023.²

12. The highest number of new forcible displacements in the first half of 2024 occurred in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Sudan, Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The estimated number of people internally displaced within Gaza reached 1.9 million – approximately 90 per cent of the population. Most had been forced to flee multiple times since October 2023, with nowhere safe to go, and lived in cramped, unsanitary shelters, tents and bombed-out buildings, or on the street. Over 1.6 million people were newly displaced within the Sudan, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons to 10.5 million. This was the largest internal displacement ever recorded.³ In Myanmar, close to 1 million people were newly displaced within the country in the first half of 2024. Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, the Philippines, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine also triggered new displacements.

13. Displaced persons lacked adequate shelter, food, health services, employment, civil documentation and education. They were especially vulnerable to risks of

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Mid-Year Trends 2024* (Geneva, 2024).

³ Ibid.

eviction, gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. In several instances, displaced persons were harmed or killed in displacement sites, including in Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Gaza. Ongoing conflict made displacement more protracted and hindered voluntary and dignified returns, posing an obstacle to durable solutions.

Food insecurity and water scarcity

14. In 2024, more than 280 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification phase 3 and above) in 59 countries and territories, many of them in armed conflict. Throughout 2024, food insecurity persisted in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, often alongside water scarcity. The causes of food insecurity ranged from violence in markets to the killing of farmers and vendors, looting of supplies and destruction of infrastructure. In many places, conflict-related hunger was exacerbated by harsh climatic conditions and weather phenomena, such as dry spells and flooding, resulting in the loss of food, seed, animals and assets, disrupting food production and livelihoods and driving up food prices.

15. In the Sudan, more than half the population – about 25 million people – faced acute food insecurity, with 755,300 of them facing catastrophic conditions. Famine was identified in displacement camps in North Darfur and projected to spread.⁴ Hostilities and intercommunal land disputes impaired food production and access to agricultural land and drove massive displacement, affecting small-holder farmers, pastoralists and fishers. The destruction of water treatment plants and distribution networks left millions without reliable access to safe drinking water and exposed civilians to waterborne disease. Attacks damaged the Marawi Dam, disrupting the electricity supply necessary to operate water stations and wells and leaving at least 2.5 million people in Khartoum struggling to gain access to safe water.

16. In Gaza, up to 86 per cent of the population faced crisis or worse levels of food insecurity (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification phase 3 and above).⁵ Heavy vehicle tracks, razing, shelling and other conduct significantly damaged agricultural infrastructure, including wells, farms and warehouses. Food prices soared due to severe supply restrictions, lack of regulatory oversight and looting incidents. In December 2024, water production was about a quarter of pre-October 2023 levels. In Lebanon, fighting disrupted farming activities across 130,000 hectares, or nearly a quarter of cultivable land. The burning of tens of thousands of olive trees, fruit crops and agricultural land, coupled with restrictions preventing farmers from having access to their land, impaired the country's agricultural sector and caused a 40 per cent drop in cereal production. At least 45 water facilities were destroyed and 14 utility staff were killed while maintaining water systems.

17. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, fighting destroyed farmlands, contaminated them with explosive remnants of war and drove people to abandon them. Combined with the killing and kidnapping of farmers, pastoralists and fishers, the looting of livestock and crops, attacks on markets, land disputes, route closures and the heavy taxation of agricultural goods, this disrupted food availability and drove up prices. In Mali, looting, the destruction of granaries and markets, blocked routes and the contamination of land with explosive remnants of war, all compromised food availability. In Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, violence disrupted agriculture and

⁴ See https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Sudan_July2024.pdf.

⁵ See <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1157985/>.

forced farmers to abandon their land, contributing to a decline in food availability and increasing the cost of food. In the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, the contamination of land with explosive remnants of war, the destruction of irrigation systems, supply chain disruptions and rising food prices all exacerbated food insecurity, while the destruction of key water stations and limited fuel supplies for water pumping stations aggravated water scarcity. In the Central African Republic, a rise in sexual violence led women and girls to abandon working in the fields, leading to food shortages and rising food prices. In Nigeria, women were more likely than men to face severe hunger and have poor food consumption patterns.

18. Pursuant to its resolution 2417 (2018), the Security Council was alerted to the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity in the Sudan and Gaza. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Nduma défense du Congo-Rénové signed the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment on the Prevention of Starvation and Addressing Conflict-Related Food Insecurity. A coalition of Member States and organizations launched the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts to strengthen the protection of fresh water and related infrastructure.

Medical care

19. In 2024, violence against medical personnel and facilities caused the destruction of vital health infrastructure and the disruption of medical care, leaving thousands without access to necessary treatment. In 20 conflict-affected countries, more than 870 healthcare workers were killed, more than 770 were injured, more than 100 were kidnapped, and around 300 were threatened or assaulted.⁶ The highest numbers of medical workers killed and injured were in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, followed by Ukraine and Sudan. Kidnappings of medical personnel were most prevalent in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Myanmar and Nigeria, while Ethiopia reported the largest number of health workers displaced by violence. Attacks on medical personnel were also reported in Mozambique, Niger, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and elsewhere, exacerbating the challenges faced by healthcare workers and patients.

20. Health facilities were frequently struck and at times misused for military purposes, exposing patients and medical staff to harm. This conduct resulted in death and injury and severely weakened healthcare systems, leaving hospitals inoperable and populations without medical services. More than 900 healthcare facilities were damaged or destroyed in the same 20 countries,⁷ with the World Health Organization documenting incidents affecting patients, transport and medical supplies. In Gaza, the World Health Organization reported more than 300 reported attacks that damaged or destroyed health facilities, with 19 of 36 hospitals and 86 healthcare centres out of service in December 2024. Destruction or damage to health facilities was also observed in Ethiopia, Myanmar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine. In the Central African Republic, mobile clinics and primary healthcare centres came under attack and, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the bombing of hospitals resulted in the death of patients, including children. In parts of Myanmar, humanitarian organizations had to suspend medical activities due to hostilities and severe restrictions on their access, leaving communities without healthcare. In Lebanon, dozens of health workers and patients were killed and health facilities damaged. Attacks on healthcare personnel of facilities also affected populations in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mozambique and elsewhere. Ambulances and other means of medical transport were damaged in Lebanon, Ukraine, the Occupied Palestinian

⁶ Figures provided by Insecurity Insight (<https://insecurityinsight.org/>).

⁷ Ibid.

Territory and elsewhere. In Colombia and Ethiopia, parties to conflict used ambulances as a cover, exposing them to attack.

21. The destruction of healthcare facilities and violence also exacerbated medical shortages. In Ethiopia, insecurity and movement restrictions hampered the delivery of medical supplies. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, hospitals faced severe shortages of medicine. In Mozambique, widespread misinformation on cholera further disrupted critical health services and left people in need without essential healthcare. In a positive development, the Collectif des mouvements pour le changement-Force de défense du peuple, an armed group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, signed the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Health Care in Armed Conflict.

The natural environment and climate change

22. Armed conflict continued to degrade the environment in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, with severe impacts on ecosystems, agriculture, local communities and livelihoods. In the Red Sea, off the coast of Yemen, strikes on tankers and cargo vessels caused oil spills over hundreds of kilometres, endangering marine life and the environment. In the Syrian Arab Republic, attacks on industrial sites, oil refineries and fuel storage facilities caused widespread pollution and oil spills, contaminating land, air and water sources, impairing agricultural production and generating health risks.

23. In Gaza, bombing has left millions of tons of debris and hazardous material containing human remains and harmful substances. In addition, hundreds of thousands of tons of solid waste were piled up. In the West Bank, over 25,000 trees were damaged or destroyed, including from cutting, burning, uprooting and the spillage of sewage. In some cases, land was rendered uninhabitable for plants and wildlife.

24. Climate change exacerbated conflict-related vulnerabilities and needs. Recurrent climate shocks, such as floods and droughts, severely affected Cameroon, Chad, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and elsewhere. In Somalia, floods across 13 districts led to the loss of livestock and cropland and damaged infrastructure, such as roads, schools and shelters, exacerbating the effects of ongoing conflict. In Cameroon, the worst floods in four years affected nearly 450,000 people and strained limited resources. In the Syrian Arab Republic, floods and extreme heatwaves damaged shelters and strained water systems, compounding humanitarian needs. Prolonged droughts reduced agricultural yields and exacerbated food and water shortages.

25. The crime of ecocide was incorporated into the updated Environmental Crimes Directive of the European Union and introduced into national legislation in a number of countries, serving as a reminder of the need to establish a crime of ecocide at the international level.

C. Persons at specific risk

Persons with disabilities

26. In Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, the Niger, the Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, persons with disabilities faced barriers to healthcare, water, sanitation, food, education and employment. These barriers included physical obstacles, lack of information or understanding of the conflict and risks, lack of access to specialized care, assistive devices and rehabilitation services,

financial challenges and safety concerns. Women and girls with disabilities faced heightened risks of harassment, gender-based violence and exploitation.

27. In Gaza, the absence of evacuation warnings in accessible formats, coupled with the destruction of communication networks, the vast destruction of housing and civilian infrastructure and the resultant rubble, curtailed the movement of persons with disabilities, including persons with hearing impairments, and exposed them further to death and injury. One assessment showed that 83 per cent of persons with disabilities had lost their assistive devices. Children with disabilities lost assistive devices and struggled without adequate access to healthcare, sanitation and education.

28. In Somalia, over 72 per cent of surveyed persons with disabilities had no access to humanitarian assistance due to a lack of information, physical inaccessibility and the fear of physical or verbal attacks. In Cameroon, about 40 per cent of the persons with disabilities surveyed reported that they did not have access to water sources due to physical barriers, such as long distances, road conditions and a lack of infrastructure that would allow them to pump water independently. In the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, displacement camps and transitional shelters remained largely inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Assessments determined that 59 per cent of persons with disabilities reported difficulties with mobility, while 48 per cent faced challenges with self-care.

Children

29. In Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Myanmar, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, children were killed and injured, notably as a result of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The recruitment and use of children in hostilities continued, as did child abductions. In Ukraine, children were separated from their parents and legal guardians, forcibly transferred or deported and left unable to return. Schools were used for military purposes, including in Colombia, Ethiopia and Gaza. Attacks on schools increased, notably in Ethiopia, Myanmar, the Sudan, Ukraine and Gaza, depriving children of education and compounding their vulnerability. Damage to and the destruction of educational facilities in Ukraine rose by 96 per cent. In Gaza, 12,035 schoolchildren and 492 teachers were killed, more than 19,300 students and 2,600 teachers were injured, according to the Ministry of Education, and at least 88 per cent of school buildings were damaged. All schoolchildren in Gaza (more than 650,000 students) lost an academic year, while 65 per cent of children in Lebanon were out of school during the hostilities. One million children were out of school in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. Overall, more than 52 million children in countries affected by conflict were estimated to be out of school. In Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and elsewhere, children were detained on the basis of their or their relatives' alleged ties to parties to the conflict and some were reportedly ill-treated.

Victims of sexual violence

30. Conflict-related sexual violence persisted, including in the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In 2024, the United Nations-verified some 4,500 cases of sexual violence. Women and girls represented 93 per cent of victims. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Somalia, the United Nations verified a significant increase in sexual violence against children. Sexual violence in detention centres was reported in Myanmar, the Sudan, Ukraine,

the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. Survivors continued to face significant barriers to healthcare, psychosocial, legal services and access to justice, including because of limited availability, mandatory reporting requirements, fear of retaliation and social stigma. Some communities faced image-based abuse, doxing and other sexualized cyber threats.

31. As part of a new initiative by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, patrols were established to strengthen the prevention and deterrence of conflict-related sexual violence. The United Nations and the Federal Government of Somalia established one-stop survivor centres to enhance access to critical services. Ukraine adopted legislation to provide reparations to survivors of sexual violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the non-State armed group Nduma défense du Congo-Rénové Guidon faction signed the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict and towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination.

Journalists

32. In 2024, 53 of the 82 killings of journalists recorded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization occurred in countries affected by armed conflict, a sharp increase from previous years (35 of 71 killings of journalists recorded in 2023; 25 of 87 journalist killings recorded in 2022; and 20 of 55 journalist killings recorded in 2021). International journalists were prevented from entering Gaza, where 20 journalists were killed – the highest number in any war in decades – followed by the Sudan, where 8 journalists were killed. Journalists covering armed conflicts also experienced harassment, assaults, arbitrary detention, disappearances and threats.

Missing persons

33. Cases of missing persons remained a critical concern. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered 56,559 new missing persons cases and followed more than 254,000 cases. The number was greater than in 2023 (when the ICRC had registered 40,000 new missing persons cases) and high in a number of armed conflicts, in particular the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Israel, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. According to the Palestinian Civil Defence, at least 10,000 people were missing under the rubble and presumed dead. The United Nations estimated that 1,000 Palestinian workers and patients from Gaza who were in Israel on 7 October 2023 remained missing. In the Syrian Arab Republic, tens of thousands of people were unlawfully detained or held incommunicado. In most cases, their fate and whereabouts remained unknown. In Colombia, 4,862 cases of missing persons were recorded. The Unit for the Search for Persons Deemed Missing in the context of and due to the armed conflict found 141 missing persons alive. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2,880 cases of enforced disappearances were reported. The Sudan also saw a significant increase in enforced disappearances.

D. Humanitarian action and peace operations

Humanitarian action

34. Wherever there was human suffering, humanitarian personnel did their utmost to respond and alleviate it. But in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, humanitarian organizations faced immense challenges due to violence, bureaucratic and administrative impediments, and/or shortages of essential supplies,

including food, medicine and fuel. Political considerations often interfered with humanitarian operations. Counter-terrorism measures and other political decisions also undermined principled humanitarian action.

35. Aid workers, mostly staff serving their own communities, persevered despite brutal violence. 2024 was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian personnel. More than 360 humanitarians were killed in 20 countries.⁸ This number includes at least 200 humanitarian personnel killed in Gaza, some in their homes and others at work. In the Sudan, 54 humanitarian personnel were killed, all recruited locally. Ethiopia had its deadliest year, with 23 humanitarian personnel killed and many more injured. In Lebanon, 15 humanitarian personnel were killed. National and local aid workers remained the most vulnerable. Arrests and detention of humanitarian personnel remained a major concern.

36. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan and elsewhere, attacks harming humanitarian convoys and compounds forced agencies to suspend operations. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, attacks on and the looting of humanitarian warehouses disrupted humanitarian operations. In Gaza, access denials, hostilities, road destruction, unexploded ordnance and looting impeded humanitarian aid. In Somalia, looting of food aid led to the suspension of a United Nations-led operation, affecting 52,000 people. In the Sudan, multiple attacks harming humanitarian facilities resulted in \$20 million in losses. In Myanmar, World Food Programme supplies were looted and its warehouse storing emergency food to sustain 64,000 people for one month was burned. In Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Ukraine and elsewhere, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war disrupted aid delivery.

37. Bureaucratic and administrative measures also impeded humanitarian operations. In the Sudan, over 60 per cent of surveyed humanitarian organizations faced delays. Checkpoints blocked food supplies for over three weeks in June, affecting 850,000 people. In the Central African Republic, a new law regulating non-governmental organizations imposed recruitment limits, operating authorizations and taxation. In Lebanon, authorities imposed increased scrutiny on humanitarian activities, delaying programmes and restricting certain populations from receiving assistance. In the Niger, a ministerial decree mandated armed escorts in areas of military operations, severely impairing humanitarian activities; continued advocacy led to lifting this requirement for humanitarian staff travelling in official vehicles in designated areas. Israel adopted legislation that, if implemented, could prevent the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East from continuing its essential work in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

38. Disinformation campaigns spread lies that cost lives. The spread of harmful information further eroded trust in humanitarian actors, reducing operational effectiveness and placing humanitarian personnel at risk. Widespread misinformation and disinformation campaigns targeting humanitarian organizations were reported in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. In Ethiopia, humanitarian actors engaged with social media to successfully remove threatening online posts targeting aid workers.

39. Sanctions and counter-terrorism measures have inadvertently added to humanitarians' hurdles. States' counter-terrorism and anti-money-laundering

⁸ Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Cameroon (far north), Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Niger, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, "2024", Aid Worker Security Database, available at www.aidworkersecurity.org/.

legislation exposed humanitarian organisations and personnel, their suppliers, banks and service providers to obligations and legal risks, leading to private sector de-risking, with an adverse impact on humanitarian operations. For instance, export and sectoral restrictions affected humanitarian supply chains in the Syrian Arab Republic. In the Sahel and elsewhere, States imposed measures curtailing resource transfers to areas where non-State armed groups operate.

40. The Security Council's decision in resolution [2761 \(2024\)](#) to maintain the humanitarian exemption established in resolution [2664 \(2022\)](#) regarding the Al-Qaeda/ISIL (Da'esh) sanctions regime and additional humanitarian exemptions in European Union sanctions is welcomed.

41. The adoption of Security Council resolution [2730 \(2024\)](#) underscored the commitment by Member States to strengthening the protection of humanitarian personnel and United Nations and associated personnel, including national and locally recruited personnel, and their premises and assets. The Secretary-General presented concrete recommendations to the Security Council to enhance the security of humanitarian and United Nations personnel ([S/2024/852](#)).

Peace operations

42. Peacekeepers continued to protect hundreds of thousands of civilians despite rising instability and increasing threats to United Nations personnel. By maintaining its positions in southern Lebanon amid escalating hostilities, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon provided protection through its presence, monitored and reported on the conduct of hostilities, continued its critical liaison functions with the parties to the conflict, facilitated humanitarian access and coordinated with humanitarian actors on the evacuation of civilians. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) continued to protect hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in North Kivu and Ituri, and to support State authorities in holding accountable perpetrators of serious violations. In the Central African Republic, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic undertook regular integrated and joint visits with local authorities in Bria to engage communities on their protection concerns and build trust in State authorities, enhancing the Government's capacity to protect civilians. Regional dynamics and conflict affected all peacekeeping operations with mandates to protect civilians.

43. Special political missions contributed to the protection of civilians through the implementation of their mandates on human rights, child protection and children in armed conflict and sexual violence in several countries, including Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Somalia.

44. The United Nations accelerated its work with the African Union to enhance operational readiness to implement Security Council resolution [2719 \(2023\)](#), including provisions on prioritizing the protection of civilians and ensuring African Union-led peace support operations accessing United Nations assessed contributions are planned and conducted in compliance with international law. The United Nations and the African Union jointly reviewed and strengthened their policy, guidance, training and practice for protection. United Nations peacekeeping operations enhanced their own civilian harm mitigation measures and practices, particularly with respect to indirect fire as such capabilities were introduced in MONUSCO.

III. New technologies, trends in compliance and working towards the full protection of civilians

A. New technologies

45. New technologies have shown the potential to bring both great benefits and risks. Artificial intelligence has developed at breakneck speed, helping to identify food insecurity, predict displacement and detect landmines, and offering the potential to gather and analyse information to anticipate and avoid civilian harm. At the same time, artificial intelligence has reportedly been used in armed conflict to select targets and make life-or-death decisions at high speed and in high numbers, generating greater risks for civilians in armed conflict. The use of artificial intelligence in warfare raises serious concerns about compliance with international law and human oversight in decision-making because of the difficulty in predicting its output, automation bias and other factors. Humans must always retain control over decision-making functions and be guided by international law, including international humanitarian law, human rights and ethical principles.

46. The Pact for the Future highlighted the need to continue to assess the existing and potential risks associated with the military applications of artificial intelligence and the possible opportunities throughout their life cycle. The Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence has developed a blueprint for addressing the risks and opportunities that artificial intelligence presents to humanity. The Global Digital Compact adopted at the Summit for the Future translates this into action. Member States have committed to swiftly establish an Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence and initiate the Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance within the United Nations.

47. In this connection, it is vital to reiterate the 2023 appeal by the Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross to negotiate a legally binding instrument to establish clear prohibitions and restrictions on autonomous weapons systems by 2026.

48. The way in which information and communications technology (ICT) is being used in armed conflict also continues to raise concerns about compliance with international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians. For instance, ICT activities can disrupt or damage essential infrastructure and services and delete vital data even without causing physical damage to civilian objects, while its scale, speed and reach can amplify civilian harm. The use of ICT can also more readily invite a role for civilians and civilian platforms to play in armed conflict, thus exposing them to direct or incidental harm. While civilian involvement in war is not new, the ICT environment can facilitate and multiply it. There is growing recognition that ICT activities during armed conflict are governed by international humanitarian law. It is now equally critical to arrive at a common understanding of how it applies, as is ensuring an understanding of the risks that civilian involvement can entail.

49. The use of ICT also greatly magnifies the scale, speed and reach of the spread of harmful information, adding to the dangers civilians face in conflict. It can be used to polarize attitudes, fuel violence, distort facts on which people rely to make decisions for their safety, and undermine trust in and acceptance of humanitarian activities. In the Sudan, for instance, harmful information on social media has reportedly exacerbated divisions and fuelled violence and the killing of dozens of people.

B. Compliance with international humanitarian law

50. Increasing disregard for civilian life and for the rules of war developed over more than 150 years has been observed throughout many conflicts and constitutes a troubling pattern. And yet it is precisely for situations of war that international humanitarian law was designed to ensure a minimum of humanity. This is what underpins our contemporary international humanitarian law framework and must continue to serve as a compass for parties' conduct in war.

51. Despite legal commitments and the lessons of history, parties to conflict have blatantly violated the rules of war, whether by directing attacks against civilians and civilian objects, launching indiscriminate attacks with inaccurate or heavy weapons, using human shields, or by carrying out torture, sexual violence and hostage-taking. The production, use or transfer of long-stigmatized and widely prohibited weapons such as chemical weapons, cluster munitions and antipersonnel mines and the first-ever withdrawal from a humanitarian disarmament treaty raised serious humanitarian concerns, pushed beyond legal boundaries, set dangerous precedents, and propagated the dangerous and outdated idea that exceptional threats and military necessity could outweigh international humanitarian law.

52. Parties have also distorted the rules of war to the point of justifying immense civilian harm instead of minimizing it. With permissive interpretations or weak assessments of who is a lawful target, what is a military objective, what is proportional incidental civilian harm, what are feasible precautions, or who poses a threat for detention purposes, parties to conflict have undercut the humanity principle at the heart of international humanitarian law. This conduct risks lowering standards well below the balance between military necessity and humanity, thoughtfully achieved through decades of international humanitarian law development.

53. This conduct has also been accompanied by inconsistent standards and influenced by political interests. States and other actors assert which attacks are lawful or unlawful not on the basis of detailed evidence or formal legal judgements but on the basis of whether the party in question was an adversary or not.

54. All States are responsible for ensuring respect for international humanitarian law, whether or not they are involved in a given conflict. This entails political dialogue, training and dissemination, influence through joint operational planning, and conditioning arms exports on compliance with international law. Some States have reviewed their arms transfer decisions and suspended arms exports due to the risk of the arms being used to commit international humanitarian law violations. In the proceedings related to *Alleged Breaches of Certain International Obligations in Respect of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Nicaragua v. Germany)*, the International Court of Justice reminded all States of their international obligations relating to the transfer of arms to parties to an armed conflict, in order to avoid the risk that such arms might be used to violate the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Genocide Convention.

55. Investigating and prosecuting international crimes is also critical to ensuring compliance with and trust in international law. While allegations of international crimes still outpace their investigation and prosecution, the pursuit of accountability has continued in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Liberia, Uganda, Ukraine and elsewhere. In the Central African Republic, a judicial investigation commission was established to investigate violations of international humanitarian law and bring perpetrators to justice. In Uganda, a former commander of the Lord's Resistance Army was tried and found guilty of 44 charges, including murder, rape, kidnapping and pillaging, and sentenced to 40 years in prison. In Liberia, the President issued an

executive order establishing the office of a war crimes court to investigate and try crimes committed during the civil wars in Liberia between 1989 and 2003.

56. Courts in France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States of America and elsewhere exercised jurisdiction to prosecute international crimes committed abroad. German, Swedish and Swiss courts instituted proceedings against former officials of the Syrian Arab Republic. A French court tried three former officials of the Syrian Arab Republic in absentia for complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity. A French court also validated an arrest warrant against the former President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar Al-Assad, for complicity in crimes against humanity. In Portugal, a former member of ISIL (Da'esh) was convicted of war crimes committed in Iraq.

57. The International Criminal Court convicted Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Mali. The Court also issued new arrest warrants in connection with the situations in Ukraine and in the State of Palestine. As the President of the International Criminal Court noted, the past year has been marked by an unparalleled increase in demand for the Court's work, along with unprecedented levels of threats, pressures and coercive measures which pose a serious threat to administering justice. The Court must be protected from external interference and pressure.

58. Angola became the first African Union member State to ratify the statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, which, once established, will play an important role in the pursuit of accountability for international crimes on the African continent. Meanwhile, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals accounted for all of the 253 people indicted for international crimes committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, exemplifying determination in securing justice for atrocity crimes.

59. The International Court of Justice indicated provisional measures in the proceedings concerning the case *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)*. The International Court of Justice also issued an advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, determining the unlawfulness of the presence of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as its policies and practices therein, and that Israel must put an end to them.

60. The General Assembly adopted resolution [79/122](#) to elaborate and conclude a legally binding instrument on the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity.

C. Towards the full protection of civilians

61. The patterns and types of civilian harm seen in contemporary conflicts cannot always be attributed to violations of international law. In his 2024 report, the Secretary-General called for reflection on what it means to protect civilians in contemporary armed conflicts and called for a more comprehensive approach to protection that has meaning for all civilians affected by conflict, even when parties are acting in compliance with the law. In practical terms, working towards the full protection of civilians encompasses the actions listed below.

62. First, it means constantly working to reduce harm by developing and adopting policy and operational measures to strengthen civilian protection. Connected to this, it means recognizing that there is substantial space for Member States and parties to conflict to develop and adopt policies and practices that both apply international

humanitarian law obligations and go beyond them. These include policies and operational plans developed under the African Union Compliance and Accountability Framework, military tactical directives or rules of engagement within specific conflicts, such as those adopted by the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and the indirect fire policy of the African Union Mission in Somalia, and, at the international level, the Safe Schools Declaration, the Paris Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, and the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. Reference can also be made to initiatives that engage non-State armed groups to strengthen the protection of civilians, such as the Geneva Call Deeds of Commitment.

63. Second, it means understanding and responding to civilian harm from conflict in its widest sense, including by considering varying patterns of life and patterns of harm inflicted over time. This could be achieved by considering harm beyond immediate death and injury and adopting a broader public health perspective that considers the impact of conflict on physical and mental health, the disruption of health systems, the spread of disease, and environmental contamination, for example. In turn, this can inform policy responses. This requires broad and disaggregated data across all aspects of public health, including on different vulnerabilities within the civilian population and how different impacts based on age, gender and disability correlate with particular means or methods of warfare.

64. Third, working towards the full protection of civilians means invoking and relying on norms and standards that value civilians. Consideration should also be given to the role of international human rights law in armed conflict. It is equally important to view the protection of civilians in armed conflict through a human rights lens, including reflecting on how contemporary conflict impacts the enjoyment of rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to education, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and the rights to equality and non-discrimination, and to seek strengthened implementation of applicable human rights law in these areas.

65. Fourth, working towards the full protection of civilians should be a collaborative endeavour. In his 2024 report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the Secretary-General recommended that States, parties to conflict, United Nations actors and international and civil society organizations reflect on the full protection of civilians approach and how they could contribute to its further development and implementation. This recommendation still stands and could be usefully pursued through such a collaborative approach. The different processes to develop the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas or the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts could be instructive in this regard. These processes demonstrate the importance and utility of states prepared to take issues forward and a space for regular discussion allowing all interested stakeholders to contribute.

IV. Recommendations

66. The state of protection of civilians is grim and the trends are alarming. At the same time, the measures required to protect civilians are longstanding and time-tested. Protecting civilians requires strict adherence to international humanitarian law and international human rights law and the adoption of good-faith policies and practices to enhance protection. In the Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024, Member States renewed their commitment to strengthen tools to address armed conflict, including by enabling humanitarian access, protecting humanitarian personnel and United Nations and associated personnel, ending impunity for

violations of international law, and exercising control over the international transfer of conventional arms. In this regard, the Secretary-General welcomes the global initiative to galvanize political commitment to international humanitarian law, launched by Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan, South Africa and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

67. States and non-State armed groups, as appropriate, should promptly:

(a) Ratify or accede to relevant treaties and incorporate their international humanitarian law and international human rights law obligations into national laws, military manuals, codes of conduct, rules of engagement and training;

(b) Develop and review national protection policies establishing institutional authorities and responsibilities for the protection of civilians and civilian objects (see [S/2018/462](#)) and endorse and implement the political declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas without delay;

(c) Develop and improve understanding of the patterns and types of civilian harm in contemporary conflicts, including how it affects different groups, to identify effective legal, policy and operational responses to civilian harm;

(d) Prohibit autonomous weapons that function in such a way that their effects cannot be predicted, as well as those with the power and discretion to take lives without human involvement. States must also impose clear restrictions for all other autonomous weapons to ensure compliance with international law and ethical acceptability;

(e) Shield principled humanitarian operations from the political dynamics of conflict, support humanitarian engagement with all parties to conflict, take active steps to facilitate impartial humanitarian activities, fight misinformation and disinformation that harms civilians, including humanitarian personnel, generalize humanitarian exemptions to all sanctions and counterterrorism measures and promote risk tolerance regarding principled humanitarian action where such measures apply;

(f) Ensure respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including through public statements, political dialogue, training and dissemination, influence through joint operational planning, and conditioning arms exports on compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law;

(g) Consistently investigate alleged serious violations of international law, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide, prosecute perpetrators, ensure reparations for victims and guarantees of non-repetition, strengthen States' capacities and resources to investigate and prosecute, and, as appropriate, become a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and cooperate fully with it and other investigative and judicial mechanisms.

V. Conclusion

68. If, as the Saint Petersburg Declaration stated in 1868, the progress of civilization should have the effect of alleviating as much as possible the calamities of war, then it is imperative that States and all parties to conflict adhere to the long-standing, fundamental rules that have been established for this purpose. They must muster the political will and exert all their influence to reach this goal. The Pact for the Future has renewed Member States' commitment to protect all civilians in armed conflict. They must be put it into action without delay.