

2020 UNSC Open debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts
Joint Statement by the **Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians** in Armed Conflicts
27 May 2020

Mr. President,

1. This statement is issued on behalf of members of the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians in armed conflict (PoC): Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, France, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Uruguay. The Group of Friends thanks the Estonian Presidency of the Security Council for organizing today's open debate. We also thank today's briefers for their statements.
2. This debate takes place in unprecedented times. A year ago, we were celebrating the 20th anniversary of the PoC at the Security Council and committing to strengthening the protection agenda for the years to come. Today, protection challenges are as acute as ever, and PoC remains even more crucial in times of COVID-19. The pandemic poses a threat to human security and exacerbates the vulnerability of people living in conflict situations. It magnifies existing protection challenges. The primary responsibilities to protect civilians lie with the parties to armed conflict, this includes facilitating a safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access. In that regard, measures to combat COVID-19 must not negatively impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection. We must also be watchful for measures that increase the vulnerability of certain groups or that unnecessarily limit the ability of UN missions' personnel to fulfil their mandates.
3. The Group of Friends welcomes and continues to support the UN Secretary-General's call for an immediate global ceasefire in armed conflict in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. We call on the Security Council to endorse this call without delay.

Mr. President,

4. The Report of the Secretary-General provides a bleak picture of the state of PoC. The number of civilian deaths and injuries remains appallingly high, as does the number of displaced persons, often forced to flee multiple times. In that regard, we take note of the Secretary-General's establishment of a High Level Panel on Internal Displacement. Indiscriminate attacks occur with horrifying frequency, having devastating consequences on the civilian population, in particular on children. In this regard, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the two Optional Protocols to the International Convention on the rights of the Child, we reiterate the importance to protect children during armed conflicts, also by guaranteeing unimpeded access to humanitarian actors. Conflict-related sexual violence persists, often as part of a broader strategy. All too often, the wounded and sick as well as the medical and humanitarian personnel and their facilities are intentionally attacked. Given the importance of independent reporting, the decrease of journalists reporting from conflict zones, due to the high degree of insecurity, is of grave concern.
5. The Secretary-General has emphasized that civilian suffering could be significantly reduced if international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law were respected. We recognize the Security Council's consistent calls for all parties to observe their obligations under IHL, and urge immediate compliance. Member States, as well as parties to armed conflicts, are obliged to respect and ensure respect for IHL, in all circumstances. National implementation of IHL is the cornerstone of this important source of law, therefore we commend the resolution by the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent on national implementation of IHL, and support the Secretary-General's enhanced focus on national implementation of PoC.
6. Consequently, we also echo the Secretary-General's recommendations to ensure accountability for violations of IHL. Our international legal framework on PoC is sound, the challenge lies in its implementation. The Group of Friends welcomes the adoption by the Assembly of States Parties to the International Criminal Court of an amendment to the Rome Statute to include the war crime of intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in non-international armed conflicts. We call on States Parties to the Statute to ratify or accept the amendment. Fighting impunity is of paramount importance to ensuring that violations do not go unpunished and to delivering justice to victims.

Mr. President,

7. The GoF wishes to highlight the active role played by the Council since the last open debate by welcoming the adoption of resolution 2474 on missing persons and 2475 on persons with disabilities. We urge Member States to implement all the appropriate measures necessary to clarify the fate of the missing and to fully co-operate with all relevant actors, especially the ICRC. As resolution 2475 is crucial for a better protection of persons with disabilities, we also call on the Secretary-General and the Member States to strengthen their efforts in its implementation. Despite progress, the GoF would like to comment on the risks and opportunities to the protection of civilians identified in the Secretary General's report.
8. First, we remain gravely concerned at the humanitarian harm being caused during active hostilities in populated areas. The nature of armed conflict in urban areas poses acute challenges for the protection of civilians, and more can be done to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law during armed conflict and advance the protection agenda. Strict application of IHL rules and principles, including those of precaution, humanity, distinction, necessity and proportionality, is required by all parties to conflict. In that regard, the GoF takes note of the consultation process to develop a political declaration to enhance the protection of civilians in urban warfare, including from the humanitarian impacts that could arise when explosive weapons are used in populated areas.
9. Second, new technologies are changing human interaction profoundly, including in times of armed conflict. Digital technologies have helped protecting civilians in situations of armed conflicts and have offered a range of opportunities for more efficient clarification in cases of missing persons, as well as in casualty recording. At the same time, these technologies have also been misused thus exacerbating violence. The Group of Friends stresses the necessity to respond to the malicious use of digital technology and call on all Member States to use these new assets in compliance with their existing obligations under international law, among them the UN Charter, IHL, and human rights law. In this regard, the GoF would also like to emphasize that malicious cyber operations on medical facilities, as currently experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, can neither in times of peace nor armed conflict, be considered acceptable.
10. Third, we note the increased attention given in the Secretary-General's report to the civilian suffering linked to the environmental impact of armed conflict and climate change. Armed conflicts can contribute to significant environmental degradation that in turn affects the population. Environmental damage in conflicts should therefore be more visible in the humanitarian reporting. We thus call for a better understanding of the matter.
11. Fourth, the Group of Friends notes that May 29 is the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers. We welcome and celebrate the focus on Women and Peacekeeping. The Group recalls that women peacekeepers deployed in civilian, military and police roles, including leadership positions, have a significant impact in the pursuit of peace and protection of civilians, and we encourage the full, effective, and meaningful participation of women in UN Peacekeeping Operations. We pay tribute to the service and sacrifice of all peacekeepers, particularly in implementing mandates to protect civilians.
12. The Group of Friends reiterates the importance that we attach to the full and effective implementation of protection of civilians mandates by relevant UN Peacekeeping Operations, and we encourage safe, meaningful, and effective engagement with local and affected communities in this regard. The Group takes note of the 2019 UN DPO Policy on the Protection of Civilians, as well as the recent launch of the Handbook on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping Operations. We stress that the Security Council must ensure that UN Peacekeeping Operations have clear and realistic mandates, and that the General Assembly must allocate resources to them that are consistent with the mandate. We also encourage UN Peacekeeping Operations to take into account gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue in the implementation of their mandates, and to deploy gender advisers. We further underline the importance of peacekeeping personnel receiving extensive and adequate pre-deployment and supplementary in-mission training in order to implement protection of civilians mandates appropriately. The Security Council should support the inclusion of POC mandates in relevant UN Peacekeeping Operations as an integral part of comprehensive political strategies, in coordination with the Secretariat, troop- and police contributing countries and the host state. Finally, we call for performance and accountability in the implementation of protection of civilians mandates, in line with Security Council Resolution 2436.

Mr. President,

13. As the UN marks its 75th Anniversary, the protection of civilians - or the lack thereof – continues to have a huge impact on the priorities of the organization in its 3 pillars. More consistency and political will are needed in the overall efforts to enhance protection of civilians and implementation of the law and political commitments, both by member States, parties to conflict and at the level of the Security Council. The Group of Friends is committed to doing its part and to contribute to global-level advocacy to enhance the protection of civilians in armed conflicts.

Thank you.