



Protecting the environment is protecting civilians: The humanitarian dimensions of the environment, peace and security agenda

Event Summary

On May 26, 2021, the Governments of Belgium, Costa Rica, Niger, Viet Nam, and Switzerland, in partnership with the Environmental Peacebuilding Association (EnPax) and PAX, convened a virtual side event entitled, “[Protecting the Environment is Protecting Civilians: The humanitarian dimensions of the Environment, Peace and Security \(EPS\) agenda](#)”. The event took place as one of eleven virtual side events during the annual “[PoC Week](#)” on the margins of the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. This event built on discussions exploring the links between the Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflict (PERAC) and Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (PoC) agendas during a side event on the margins of the 2020 UNSC open debate on PoC, as well as several high-level debates and side events exploring climate, environment, and conflict in the UN Security Council and General Assembly in 2020 and 2021.¹

Unfortunately, civilians in conflicts around the world have continued to suffer the detrimental impacts of conflict-related environmental damage throughout the last year. Direct and indirect impacts of military operations on environmental infrastructure vital to civilians have had deadly impacts and continue to pose potentially long-term risks on civilian lives and livelihoods. The UN Secretary-General (UNSG) has continued to raise the risks and impacts on civilians’ health and human suffering associated with conflict-related environmental damage in his last three reports to the Security Council on the Protection of Civilians, but more can and must be done to protect the environment in armed conflict in order to better protect the civilians that depend on it. UN Member States and experts from leading organizations and institutions met to discuss opportunities to improve recognition, monitoring, and assessment of these risks in order to find solutions to improve responses and protection strategies.

Opening remarks: Protecting the environment is vital to protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure

H.E. Mr. Dinh Quy Dang, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam to the United Nations opened the event stressing that protecting environment is a "legal and moral obligation on all of us" and expressing concern over indiscriminate attacks on environmental infrastructure as a method of warfare. He underscored the importance of including the environment in post-conflict reconstruction to build sustainable peace and noted that Viet Nam believes the protection of the environment is closely linked with the protection of civilians. Ambassador Dang highlighted the importance of monitoring, analyzing, and improving the preventive measures for environmental dimensions of armed conflicts and reiterated Viet Nam's commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 2573 on the Protection of Objects Indispensable to the Survival of the Civilian Population, unanimously [adopted](#) by all Council

¹ High-level UNSC debates on climate and security in [July 2020](#) and [February 2021](#) and the humanitarian effects of environmental degradation and peace and security in [September 2020](#); UNGA75 high-level side event on the humanitarian impact of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks in [September 2020](#).



Members in April 2021. Furthermore, the ambassador stated that he was hopeful that this important Resolution will contribute to improving the upholding of international humanitarian law (IHL) and protections for civilians in armed conflict by broadening the international community's perspective to look at the wider direct and indirect impacts of armed conflicts on civilians.

Next, **Mr. Niandou Auogi, Minister and Permanent Representative of Niger to the United Nations** elaborated on the importance of addressing the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts, particularly the natural resources that people depend on for their survival. He specifically highlighted the current situation in the Sahel region and how environmental degradation, combined with climate risks, can have harmful impacts on civilians. Mr. Auogi expressed concern that environmental protection is often put "on the backburner" by parties to the conflicts. He noted that this is why Niger, during its term in the UNSC, has prioritized discussions on the need for upholding of the IHL rules on the protection of the natural environment and the need for the promotion of coordination between governments and humanitarian actors in mitigating harmful effects from conflicts to protect civilians. In this aim, Mr. Auogi noted that Niger sees this discussion as timely and encourages States to move this discussion further.

Panel: Exploring the humanitarian dimensions of Environment, Peace and Security

The panel began with a presentation by **Ms. Johana Bretou-Klein, a Researcher at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)**. She presented findings from a study, entitled "Protecting Lives, Livelihoods, and the Environment in Humanitarian Operations", which explores the nexus between the protection of the environment and protection of civilians, and was commissioned by the Joint Environment Unit (JEU) of UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Ms. Bretou-Klein highlighted that the environment has been an invisible issue during conflicts as it has been more closely associated with development in the reconstruction and stabilization phases in post-conflict areas. She noted how the research she and her colleagues at the LSE conducted had explored how environmental dynamics in conflicts affect civilians, and how the humanitarian system can better address these dynamics to reduce risk through sharing best practice guidance. She elaborated on the findings of the research that helped to demonstrate the direct and indirect environmental damage as a result of conflict, the linkages with the protection of civilians, and how external factors such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic can accelerate existing damage and vulnerabilities. She called for durable solutions, including suggestions such as: improving data collection and monitoring for evidence-based decision-making; ensuring the inclusion of local communities to strengthen resilience; mainstreaming the environment in operational planning and assessments; and promoting awareness and training on the protection-conflict-environment nexus.

Mr. Chris Harland, Deputy Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Delegation in New York, began his presentation with a clear message: "By protecting the environment in armed conflict, we protect civilians." His intervention consisted of three key areas: how protection of the environment is linked with the protection of civilians; how IHL protects the natural environment; and lastly, suggestions on how to strengthen such protection. He explored the impacts of conflicts on soil, water, biodiversity, and the built environment, noting that the consequences of such impacts for the civilian population are "many, severe, and complex", and they further exacerbate climate security risks. However, Mr. Harland also noted what he called a "renewed momentum to ensure the environment is protected in



war", particularly in the growing number of high-level UN events on the topic, as well as international efforts to define the international crime of ecocide and the [International Law Commission's Draft Principles on PERAC](#). Lastly, Mr. Harland also highlighted the ICRC's own updated [Guidelines on the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict](#), exploring the opportunities they can provide to armed actors to protect the environment in armed conflict thereby also protecting the civilians dependent on it. He also stressed the importance of dialogue with non-state actors, particularly ensuring they are aware of the rules of war. Lastly, he stressed that cooperation among all stakeholders is key to fighting such an existential threat facing our planet.

During his presentation, **Mr. Dominick de Waal, Senior Economist at the World Bank**, illustrated the important role of data and information on early warning signs for the protection of water and sanitation in conflict, which he highlighted were products of and had impacts on the environment, as well as are essential for civilian health. He presented recommendations highlighted in a joint report recently [published](#) by the World Bank, UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund), and the ICRC on the protection of water and sanitation in urban areas in protracted crises in the Middle East and North Africa region. Mr. de Waal outlined new as well as existing persistent problems noted in the report, including: a lack of data-sharing; regional water insecurity fueling displacement and instability, as well as inter-communal and host-migrant tensions; lack of access to and destruction of essential water infrastructure; and unstable energy supply and pricing. He called for increased collaboration between humanitarian and development actors in seeking to protect water and sanitation in conflict situations.

Finally, **Mr. Wim Zwijnenburg, Conflict and Environment Project Leader at PAX**, outlined three key areas of environmental harm in relation to armed conflict, namely: the use of explosive weapons in populated areas; the destruction of natural resources and environmental infrastructure; and the connection between conflict, water security and the protection of civilians. Through an examination of various case studies from ongoing conflicts, he demonstrated how innovative research methods can contribute to improved monitoring through remote sensing in areas impacted by environmental damage in conflict areas. The case studies also highlighted the exacerbating effects of conflicts on the growing climate crisis through destruction of vital natural resources and a collapse of governance tasked with mitigation. Mr. Zwijnenburg gave several key recommendations on what can be done to better prevent and mitigate conflict-related environmental damage and its impacts through: building better analysis and information sharing; holding regular UN Security Council briefings on environmental dimensions of armed conflicts; and implementing existing legal frameworks. Mr. Zwijnenburg further urged UNSC members to explore building an overarching Environment, Peace and Security umbrella agenda across the UN system in order to ensure better coherence, coordination, efficiency, and efficacy.

Featured respondents: The close connection of climate change, conflict and environment

Following the panel presentations, representatives from co-sponsoring Member States, Switzerland and Costa Rica, took the floor with responses and questions posed to the panelists. In his remarks, **Mr. Adrian Hauri, Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations**, examined the progress made since the first PoC Week side event on this topic in 2020. He underscored the important ways in which the Security Council has explored the topic, including looking at the humanitarian impacts of environmental degradation, as well as the links between climate and security in



debates, resolutions, and UN mission mandates, He noted that environmental degradation is not only a consequence, but can also be a root cause of conflict, like climate change, negatively impacting peace and development, as well as the safety and security of civilians and civilian infrastructure in affected communities. As the Chair of the Group of Friends on PoC, Mr. Hauri expressed Switzerland’s encouragement to the Security Council to continue to integrate the protection of the environment and climate change in its deliberations and decisions, and called on all States to uphold IHL and the protections provided to the environment in armed conflict as outlined in the ICRC’s updated military guidelines.

H.E. Ms. Maritza Chan Valverde, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations, explicitly underscored Costa Rica’s recognition that the protection of the environment during armed conflict is the protection of civilians, highlighting the nexus between the environment, peace, and security. She further stressed the importance of prioritizing a comprehensive human security approach to the protection of civilians before, during, and after conflicts. With this in mind, she noted that Costa Rica joins in the call to consider the protection of the environment as a core component of a comprehensive PoC agenda, particularly as conflict-related environmental damage “comes at greatest expense to civilian health, livelihoods, and cultural heritage.” Ambassador Chan made special note of the particularly dangerous impacts on food insecurity, pollution from toxics and chemicals, and the illegal use of natural resources such as water sources as a weapon of war. She urged States to view the protection of civilians from “the widest possible lens” and to take urgent action in order to ensure to lead by example and prevent further future destruction.

Closing remarks: The close connection of climate change, conflict and environment

Following a brief question and answer segment, **H.E. Mr. Philip Kridelka, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations**, closed the event with final remarks. Ambassador Kridelka noted that the many examples raised during the event demonstrated the increased risks conflict-linked environmental degradation and climate change pose to already vulnerable and overstretched conflict-affected communities. He highlighted the nexus between climate, environment, and conflict, in which existing cleavages and conflict drivers are exacerbated by conflict-related environmental impacts and climate change. With this in mind, he noted that Belgium focuses its climate financing in the least developed countries, and prioritizes climate-sensitive development activities in affected contexts such as Palestine, the Central African Republic, and the Sahel region. Ambassador Kridelka noted Belgium’s prioritization of the protection and humanitarian aspects of such challenges, noting “the environment is often an overlooked casualty of conflict”, yet the direct damages and risks to civilians, civilian infrastructure, and agricultural areas have devastating and deadly implications. He further argued that the international community must ensure environmental protection and climate-sensitivity is integrated into humanitarian and development work in fragile contexts, including prioritizing localized and flexible resilience-building programming. To conclude, Ambassador Kridelka ended his remarks reiterating that, in sum, protecting the environment is protecting civilians.