



**Season 3 Episode 4**  
**The State of Protection: A Conversation with CIVIC and PAX Leadership**  
*Episode Transcript*

**Disclaimer:** This podcast contains content that may be alarming to some listeners. Listener discretion is advised. As always, the views, thoughts, and opinions expressed by our guests are their own, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of CIVIC or PAX.

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**Rolien:** I think that it also shows the problem of the international rights-based order that has been undermined and it has been undermined by double standards and by countries getting away with totally ignoring the rules we agreed upon all together internationally to protect everybody. By allowing that and by the UN Security Council, for instance, to be totally paralyzed by the veto rights of China, Russia and the USA, which means it cannot take any stand in any case of large-scale atrocities.

**Teaser Clip:** Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

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**Annie:** Hello everyone and welcome back to the Civilian Protection Podcast. I am Annie Shiel, U.S. Advocacy Director at Center for Civilians in Conflict or CIVIC. And today's episode is going to be a special one for a couple of reasons. First, while I am normally joined by my wonderful co-host from PAX, Marc Garlasco, you will notice that he is absent from the podcast today. And that is because Marc has recently exited PAX to take on a new challenge. We will miss him dearly and we want to thank him for all that he has done for the podcast, for PAX, and for our broader community. And as always, if you would like to join us in saying thanks to Marc, you can reach us at [civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com](mailto:civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com) and we will be sure to pass it along.

Another reason that this episode is going to be different is that it is going to be the last one in the series, at least for a while. We have had three wonderful seasons in which we explored all kinds of topics related to conflict and the protection of civilians. From following the stories of civilians trying to get accountability and amends for the harm done to them; to exploring protection issues in UN peacekeeping; to the nexus between conflict, climate, and the environment. We have been grateful to speak to experts and activists in Iraq, Yemen, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, to name just a few. And so a big thank you to all of our listeners who have come with us on this journey, as we have sought to elevate the experiences of civilians living in conflict.

**[Audio from previous episodes on the Civilian Protection Podcast]**

*This escalated dramatically on October 7, when Hamas attacked, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 200 people hostage. The Israeli response has been extremely fierce, with bombardments on Gaza and the ground offensive, as of this episode's recording date reportedly killing over 13,000 Palestinians, including 5,500 children. [...]*

*The 120,000 or so residents of Nagorno-Karabakh have been living under an effective blockade. It led to a steadily deteriorating humanitarian situation. There was a growing alarm, especially over the summer, of shortages of food, of fuel, of medicine. [...]*

*Since that coup of 2021, there has been a sort of very steady but very significant decline in people's living conditions. And this war has exacerbated that massively, of course. I mean, Khartoum, it is not, I think, an exaggeration to say - though it is very disheartening to acknowledge - that the Khartoum that we knew is gone. [...]*

*US assistance has repeatedly gone to countries committing human rights violations and civilian harm, including war crimes, and has helped to fuel conflict and violence. And even when a US weapon is not used directly in an airstrike, US weapons transfers and other assistance to governments committing harm also sends a really clear political signal that the US is okay with what those countries are doing. [...]*

*We also receive reports that the Russian army entering communities behaves very badly. They are looting houses, they are robbing people, they are harassing people, they are breaking into people's homes. That is how people are living now in occupied territories. I think Mariupol's case is one of the worst right now, as we all know it has been sieged, blocked and people cannot get any help. [...]*

*Imagine that now we are speaking about those victims as numbers. That is the horrifying thing, Marc. They do not see us as humans, they see us as stories. We are not stories, Marc. We had dreams, we had hopes, we had lives, we lost everything.*

#### **[End to compilation of past episodes]**

**Annie:** And so to end the series, at least for now, with a special episode, I am excited to welcome two very special guests, CIVIC's Interim Executive Director, Udo Jude Ilo, and PAX's Executive Director, Rolien Sasse, for a conversation about the state of civilian protection today, the challenges faced by our organizations and our field, and hopefully some reasons for hope and optimism. Rolien, Udo, thank you so much for joining me.

**Udo:** Thank you for having me.

**Rolien:** Thank you.

**Annie:** I want to start by having you both introduce yourselves to listeners. Who are you? What drew you to civilian protection work? And what gets you out of bed every morning?

**Rolien:** My name is Rolien Sasse and I have been the Executive Director of PAX since February of last year. My interest in civilian protection really stems from many years of first-hand experience with immense suffering and long-term damage that violent conflict causes in societies. One of the examples is that I have lived for seven years in Cambodia and I was there just at the end of the civil war. I could observe around me the devastation of the country mentally, politically, economically, and also in terms of the long-term impact of landmines and unexploded ordinances. And it is disturbing to note that this is continuing on and on, and it is only increasing at the moment. In that sense, I think it is in a way almost a privilege, among all this tragedy, to be in a position that allows you to do something and to have in some way a positive impact to contribute to a more peaceful world, which is what we all would like to achieve.

**Udo:** My name is Udo Jude Ilo. I am Nigerian. I work with CIVIC. I have been the interim Executive Director now for about ten months. So, if you know anything about Nigeria, when they mention Nigeria, you hear about Boko Haram, you hear about all the civil strife and violence across the country. I was born just years after the civil war in Nigeria where more than two million of my people were killed in that civil war, for which there was never accountability, including my uncle, who trained and brought up

my father. So I grew up with that sense of injustice that my country never did right by those who suffered in that civil war. We just moved on.

And of course, my career took me to study law, primarily because of that sense of injustice and the need to work towards the protection of human rights. I worked in Nigeria, worked on the continent in Africa, and was saddened every day by gross and heartbreaking stories of violence, of conflicts, of which a lot of times the response has always been kinetic. So, violence for violence. Deep within me, I have come to learn that there is more to resolving conflicts and supporting people in conflict than just arms. And CIVIC provided the right kind of vehicle, the right kind of platform to begin to think about civilians in conflicts and the powerful agency that they possess, and how we can - as a collective - support that agency everywhere in the world to make sure that their voice is defining how they are protected. So, that is my journey to this place.

**Annie:** Thank you both. And as you both noted, you have both become leaders of your organizations in really turbulent times for civilians, to say the very least. Udo, as you noted, you took over as CIVIC's interim Executive Director last year, and Rolien, you noted that you took over PAX in February of last year. How do each of you see the state of civilian protection today and what are some of the conflicts that you are watching and engaging in most closely?

**Udo:** One of the things CIVIC is very particular about is ensuring that there are no forgotten conflicts. All over the news is Gaza. All over the news is Ukraine. But you do not get to hear a lot about Sudan, you do not get to hear a lot about Somalia. And so for us at CIVIC, as much as we understand the importance and significance of some of the big conflicts, we also very much focus on the little conflicts, if I may call it that, or the forgotten conflicts. To make sure that the life of a child in Sudan is as important as the life of a child in Ukraine, as the life of a child in Gaza, and the life of the children in all of these places, as the life of my child as a parent of my child living in the Netherlands.

That is what we are working for, and that is what we are watching out for, to make sure that the world treats all these conflicts with the same kind of attention and the same kind of protection for civilians who are caught up in them.

**Annie:** Rolien, what about you?

**Rolien:** I totally agree. On the one hand, it is horrible to see the devastation and the increase in civilian casualties as if civilian lives do not count. And I think everywhere people have this sense and talk about it. But this is the life, like you say, of my child and this child should not be exposed to this kind of level of violence.

My fear is that as the numbers increase and are so high, we start talking about numbers. Like 30,000 people killed in Gaza. Last week, 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed, according to the Ukrainian government, in the war since the Russian invasion. These are 30,000 times a life with a history and a story, and we should not forget that. And then, as you say, in Sudan: 18 million people, a third of the whole population of Sudan being in acute food insecurity and in constant fear of violence and death. It is often forgotten also because at some stage people do not know anymore what to do. And then they sort of do not want to talk about it anymore and we should continue to talk about it.

So, I think with PAX, one of the things we do is to continue to raise the alarm about what we see. We do that on Gaza and on Ukraine, but we also do that on Sudan, on Yemen, the DRC, countries in the Sahel. There are so many regions where things are going on, and as Udo says, there is so little attention in the media for it. But people in every corner have a right to be protected and should not be exposed to this kind of violence that we can see. And I think, yes, we are following all these conflicts, but unfortunately, it is very hard for some of them to ask for attention.

**Annie:** I want to narrow down a little bit on some of the conflicts that both of you mentioned, starting of course with Gaza, where as you both noted, the situation is absolutely catastrophic for civilians and that harm is ongoing often with the support of countries that we advocate to and are based in, like the US, like the Netherlands. So I wanted to ask more about how you both have been approaching that? I know that PAX has been involved in a court case on this. And so I wanted to ask a little bit more about how you approach this conflict and that kind of advocacy.

**Rolien:** With regards to Gaza, of course PAX is appalled by the position of the Netherlands and some of its allies, like the USA and Germany, who have given unconditional support to Israel from the very start and therefore have become in our eyes complicit to the violence that is caused to the people in Gaza. PAX's opinion is that the Netherlands should end its military support to Israel. And for that reason, together with Oxfam [Novib] and The Rights Forum, PAX started a court case against the Netherlands to end the export of spare parts for the F-35 fighter jets. It was quite revolutionary that the appeal judge confirmed our concerns and ordered the Netherlands to end these exports. And they were ended after seven days.

Unfortunately, the Dutch state, rather than reconsidering its position and deciding that it should not become complicit in this violence, has instead gone into further appeal with the highest court in the Netherlands. And we wait for this trial now to start. But I think this verdict by the appeal court is an important signal, not just for the government of the Netherlands, but also for other countries, that protection of civilians should always take center and is always more important. That is explicitly what the judge said: you can never have other interests put above civilian protection.

**Udo:** I mean, to Rolien's point, I think it is pretty clear that the people who provide the arms for what is going on in Gaza and indeed in other conflicts where there is indiscriminate harm to civilians, are as complicit as those who are pulling the trigger, frankly. Here in CIVIC part of our engagement in the United States has, in my view, it has been genius because we are not saying anything that the United States has not committed to. In fact, the Conventional Arms Transfer policy which this government passed and adopted for itself, they are breaching it every time they send arms to Israel. So this is about: follow your own rules. We are not approaching them to say, 'Oh, there is this golden standard somewhere.' These are your own rules: follow them and protect civilians. That has been part of our approach, engaging the United States government with its own rules to say: 'Be law abiding.' Because this is us calling out the United States to be law abiding to their own policies and regulations.

The second thing we have tried to do is to influence the global conversation about the integrity of the international humanitarian law framework. And the fact that this whole approach of, 'If it is my friend, it is okay. If it is not my friend, then it is not okay.' You know, the implementation and enforcement of these rules is undermining the whole system and delegitimizing the whole framework of international humanitarian law. And these are not academic exercises; these are the lives of people. And that is also the point we try to make in every engagement. We are not debating the fine letters of international humanitarian law. That is not the point. We are talking about a little girl dying in Gaza. We are talking about little boys dying. We are talking about children. We are talking about civilians whose only crime is to wake up in the morning, getting killed. We are looking at the intensity of this conflict, where more than 30,000 people have been killed in about five months. I do not think any military objective justifies this level of fatality, especially on the side of civilians. So our message to the world around this conflict and other conflicts is that the primary role of government, the primary role of the global system is to protect the dignity of human life. Every time one civilian dies in any of these conflicts, we undermine that dignity.

**Annie:** The next conflict I wanted to talk about is Ukraine, which of course is a place where both CIVIC and PAX have done extensive work, including before the most recent escalation and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. So can you speak a little bit about how your organizations are approaching Ukraine and how that approach has evolved over time as conflict continues to wage on?

**Udo:** First I want to acknowledge the heartache all of us are having when we hear about the bombs dropping in Ukraine, in Kiev, knowing that we have got colleagues there and not knowing their fates. It is this whole horror of dreading the early morning phone calls almost on a daily basis because you have got colleagues in the field who are facing this danger. And of course the inspiration that they have become for all of us in CIVIC because every day they wake up and go to work regardless of the danger. So, it is just important to acknowledge the sacrifices they are making as well as acknowledge the sacrifice that all Ukrainians are making at this time.

For us, we approach our programming in Ukraine from the point of view of humility: that those who are most affected by this conflict know what is most important for them. And so our community protection groups, which we have got in a number of oblasts [Ukrainian administrative regions], is just our approach to supporting the initiative of these communities to better prepare for their protection. And that engagement in our view has evolved in two ways. One is that those community protection groups

are now self-sustaining. We are no more involved in the running of that community protection group because now they can do it themselves. Some of them are even receiving support from the government at this point because of the effectiveness of the work they have been doing: helping people within the community, engaging with the military and the security agents in the community to better coordinate and collaborate to ensure that people get optimal protection in these areas. And so the second evolution for us is that we are also experimenting with a subgrant where we give little resources to some of these community protection groups to help them carry out projects that they deem important and critical at that particular time. So as we are there, some of this engagement for us is changing. And we are realizing that there are other ways in which we can be much more impactful, like providing this grant and allowing the communities to run with it.

The second aspect of our engagement is, of course, our engagement with the military. We have been part of civilian protection training with the military in-country, but also working with a number of NATO countries. We are providing support in the area of POC for some of the security personnel of the Ukrainian forces. And again, the message is about centering the protection of civilians in their military operations.

Then the third component of it, of course, is the policy advocacy, which is within the country and outside of the country. Within the country, of course, the POC policy for Ukraine, we will be very much involved in pushing for that. We have got a good relationship with the military leadership in the country and we are working with them to see how some of these policies can be better implemented so that it becomes a bit more systemic.

And of course at the global level bringing attention to some of the important issues in Ukraine. One of which of course is the research we just concluded on misinformation and disinformation trying to show how these troubling elements have undermined the safety and security of civilians in Ukraine.

**Rolien:** In Ukraine, you can see that civilians and civilian infrastructure continue to be attacked on a daily basis by Russia. It is causing direct harm and also psychological trauma and fear. I remember visiting Ukraine last year and going to different places and many people expressed that it is this uncertainty and this fear, not just for the rockets, but also for a potential future Russian occupation that is really causing a lot of stress among communities. It affects the Ukrainians in the country first of all, but even refugees and IDPs who are in safe regions but who do not know what is ahead of them. That was very touching because wherever you went, even in places that appear to be rather safe and sunny and quiet, under the surface there is a lot of fear. It also shows the resilience of Ukraine to continue to face these problems.

And about PAX's work: PAX has been in Ukraine working for ten years now. Initially it focused very much on building this resilience in communities, making sure there is support for trauma, making sure there is peaceful, non-violent conflict resolution among communities because the war is causing a lot of stress and it also causes tensions, among others, between IDPs and host communities, between people who have supported originally different sides of the conflict and still are in some places. So, it is very important to maintain this peace at the community level and to support people there.

Another area is that while Ukraine is fighting for its existence and also its democracy and freedom to live their lives the way they want, it is a danger that among the centralized, militarized community, society is the exact democracy that is under threat. We work with a lot of Ukrainian organizations and what they work on is to monitor and strengthen these democratic forces in the countries to make sure that it is not just about winning or losing a war, it is about winning a peace and making sure this peace is really in an open society where it is peaceful for everybody.

Now, one of the things I asked them is, 'What do you think is most important for us as PAX?' And of course they really value the support, but as you said Udo, I really recognize that over time the support of PAX in the country is most important as solidarity rather than always as a support because these organizations and these people are very well able to manage their projects and know what they need to do. But it is very important that they feel the solidarity and see that we are there with them and acknowledge their right to protect themselves, but also to be their voice in other countries, such as in the Netherlands and in Brussels at the EU office. Because they say, 'If there is no voice in other countries, people will forget us. They will move on because there will be another crisis somewhere else.' And that is of course the concern of people in every country at war and in a crisis: That they will

be left alone and that we will not see them anymore and therefore they are just becoming a victim of what is happening around them, they lose control and they lose this international support.

**Annie:** Thank you both for that. I will also just put a plug to say you can listen to more on Ukraine, including hearing from our courageous Ukrainian colleagues, in the last two seasons of the Civilian Protection podcast in seasons one and two.

I want to bring us now to West Africa, where we have seen a series of coups by military juntas; the decision of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali to leave ECOWAS; as well as Mali ordering out the longstanding UN peacekeeping mission in its country, MINUSMA, to exit. What do you expect these developments will mean for civilians in the region? And how are your organizations approaching this?

**Rolien:** The recent developments in the Sahel are a clear example of the shifting global power and the reduced influence of, for instance, European countries, Western countries in different regions. And you can observe an increase of the influence of Russia, but also of China and the Gulf States. And of course, these are non-democratic states who have less concerns about civilian harm and the rule of law, or at least have less open societies where there is civic space for organizations and people to raise their voice in support of people who are under threat and in opposition to what their government is doing. Because definitely Western countries have done a lot of harm as well and are definitely complicit in a lot of acts, but there has been this civic space to raise the alarm, to go to court and to oppose. You can see now that a lot of countries that have great influence in the region do not have this civic space, which means it is even harder to influence policies, influence their acts in the region. That creates a higher risk for civilians in conflicts than we already had.

**Udo:** You make a very critical point about the broader framework of the governance space and how all of this is not happening in a vacuum, really. It is not happening in a vacuum. There is a history to this. And so, for me, there are three things: One is the work we do in protecting civilians is not immune from politics. The global politics, the regional politics, the country politics affect the capacity of NGOs and people in civil society to protect and improve the protection of civilians. If you look at what has happened in the Sahel, it has a link to the problem that happened in Libya when the country collapsed and you had this massive influx of arms from Libya into the Sahel. Most of these non-state actors became powerful enough to start challenging the states and to pose an existential threat to those states. And the citizens of the state that are being challenged are not so enthused by the quality of their own government. Because historically in these areas, there has been failure of governance. So, there is poverty, there is unemployment, and so when unemployment meets extremism and extremism meets the steady supply of arms, you get this situation where the whole place is chaotic. The response to what is both a governance and a security problem has been more of a security response. And it has been progressively inefficient to tame the spread of violence and harm to civilians.

And so to your point, Rolien, I am not very optimistic because the fundamental problem that created the conflict that we see in that region has not been addressed: The flow of arms has not been addressed; the quality of governance has not been addressed. And now we have layered it up with a government that is not accountable to the people because it is a military regime. It was not elected. It is not answerable to the electorates. It makes it a bit of a toxic mix in my view.

The second point is that the regional body, which is ECOWAS, is also struggling with legitimacy and credibility questions. And so ECOWAS is not seen as a good-faith broker in all of these conflicts. And you have got now an axis of dictatorial governments in the Sahel that have all banded together, providing a counter force to whatever influence ECOWAS can exert in that region.

The final point I want to make is that we have also gotten to a point where both the international community and the regional body is realizing that the only way out of this lockdown is consultation and negotiation. And so these countries, all the sanctions against them have been lifted by ECOWAS. This is not the time where you say: 'I do not want to talk to this country because they are not democratic.' These are the *de facto* leaders of this country. If you are going to solve the problem, it has to be through them. And so the international community perhaps may begin to think of a better rapprochement on how we can get these countries to come back into the fold, to listen more to some of these principles that we talk about, to focus on protection of civilians. Because what we have seen: the moment most of the like-minded countries exit, the non-like-minded countries step in. And so we are seeing the impact of the Wagner Group, for instance, in these places, which reminds us that

nature naturally abhors a vacuum, and that should be of interest to us, both as civic activists, both as those working in the space, that countries that ascribe to the values that we talk about, should not walk away at this time from the Sahel.

**Rolien:** I totally agree and I think that it also shows the problem of the international rights-based order that has been undermined and it has been undermined by double standards and by countries getting away with totally ignoring the rules we agreed upon all together internationally to protect everybody. By allowing that and by the UN Security Council, for instance, to be totally paralyzed by the veto rights of China, Russia and the USA, which means it cannot take any stand in any case of large-scale atrocities: the civilians are the ones who are the victims of that. We should rebuild this international collective sense of human security and a way to have peace and not have a military option when we disagree, but to have peace. But we need to build it in a new way in a multipolar world with much more equality between different states in the world. And I think that is important: It is about engaging and not moving away, but also about not accepting that this kind of, you know, anybody can take a wild west approach of the world, but that is unsafe for everybody. If it is unsafe for one person, it is unsafe for everybody and we should agree about that. I think we have lost that sense that collective security is important for all of us.

**Udo:** I remember last year at the, again, if I may reference the Munich Security Conference, part of the conversation was that you cannot really talk about a transatlantic security without talking about the security of the global South. Libya is one good example of what happens when there is a collapse of government in one part of the world: The immigrants will flow into where they feel safe. And so they will come over here. The non-state actors, the bad ones, will use that gap to create risks for everyone. And so I think this whole mutuality of our common protection is something our leaders, I do not know if they do not see it, but there is no way you can be safe if the next person is not safe. It is simply impossible. And so if we begin to approach this conversation about civilian protection from a point of enlightened self-interest, to know that any one of us, the way the world is right now, could be a civilian in conflict. You know, decades ago, nobody could have thought about war in Europe. But here we are. And so as we undermine the global world order or the principles of international humanitarian law, the danger is universal. It is not limited to somebody in Sudan. It could be anyone. That message has to be very clear. When we say what we say about protection of civilians, we are not actually talking about Ukraine. We are not actually talking about Sudan or Gaza. We are talking about ourselves. Because we are all connected. Our security is connected. What happens to the eyes, they say, happens to the nose. So I think it is just really, really important for the world to see that.

**Annie:** You both have touched on this a little bit in this conversation so far, but what do you see on the horizon in our field for the remainder of 2024? What are the key issues, maybe emerging issues that you are watching, things that are keeping you up at night? How should we look forward?

**Rolien:** We see the international order crumbling in a way and the risks increasing for civilians everywhere, and I totally agree: nobody is safe in an unsafe world, in a failing world. And there are also additional threats such as climate change, and the scramble for scarce natural resources that is driving a lot of these conflicts, and also the influence of new technology on warfare, but also on information warfare. So, it is quite uncertain territory.

I am also concerned that public responses to these threats are increasingly focusing on military responses only and not on peacebuilding. It seems as if the fear for the threats that people suddenly feel, and in Europe, people look especially at Russia, but I think it is broader. But this fear, people jump in military, you know, buying weapons, wanting to increase the arms trade, increase arms, build arms factories. Suddenly in the Netherlands, there is talk about this. Nobody is talking anymore about the importance of peacebuilding, international humanitarian law, the importance of diplomacy, and this vision of collective peace. That is really worrying me because this is only escalating conflicts further. It seems like there is a very small, narrow vision of how you can protect yourself. People should realize that weapons will not protect you if the world around you is failing and we cannot protect people in other countries; it will come back to you.

I think for us as NGOs, second, in the face of this globalization of security issues and human security issues and the shifting powers in the world, it is urgent that we as a peace movement are going to reorganize ourselves as well. We should be organized and mobilized in a more global way. So that when we can influence, we can influence at different places in the world at the same time. Influencing

in the future as NGOs will only be effective if it takes place in different centers of power across the world at the same time and we need to be as well organized as, for instance, the defense industry that is calling for more arms and more weapon production. So I think we should also look at ourselves and reconsider how we want to have a positive influence and collaborate more intensively.

**Udo:** Rolien, I cannot agree more on this part about rethinking how we engage. Because I would say that the challenges are constantly mutating, changing, and getting a bit more intricate. I do not think any organization or NGO, you know, in and of itself can really make an impact if we are not working collaboratively. I think one important message for me that I give myself and I am sharing with my colleagues and I am sharing in this podcast is that we need to find more creative and effective ways of working together so we can complement each other's efforts. I think that will be critically important in addressing some of the challenges we face.

The second thing is to your point about this whole rush for military strengthening, an arms race more or less, for countries to prepare. So, this conversation about the preparedness of NATO for an activation of Article 5, of the Common Defense Article, needs to be infused with preparedness for civilian protection. Whatever conversation NATO is having, the European Union is having about how they are going to get ready for conflict, it has to be built around the protection of civilians. And that is one important message for us in CIVIC that we have been very focused on and consistent in saying, that preparedness has to incorporate civilian protection as a core component of that plan.

The final point is the communities that we speak for, the communities that we work with, the communities that we engage. I think more than ever, it is really, really important to your point, Rolien, when you were saying that people in Ukraine want to feel solidarity as a way for them to maintain their resilience and continue going on. I think for us in CIVIC, our community engagement is really, really fundamental. We want to do as many of those kinds of engagements as possible this year, making sure we reach more communities, making sure that we are able to take the voices of these folks who are going through difficult times and bring them into the halls of power here in Europe, in America, in the UN, in the African Union, in the Arab League, just to make sure that they are not forgotten, their reality does not become another statistic. We need to humanize them and make them the center of the conversation.

**Rolien:** What I think is beautiful to note is a kind of new force and awareness among people about the importance of civilian protection and solidarity and peace and security. I know that PAX in the Netherlands around this Gaza court case, we have massive support from civilians in the Netherlands, caring about civilians in Gaza. I can see that in other countries as well. It is a role for us to mobilize these voices. As you say, Udo, I think you are very right: It is very important to make sure that communities can raise their voice and they can be heard, and they also feel that they are heard and that people see them. At the same time, it is also an important tool to mobilize others. Because in the end, if you want to change something, we need to change it from these civilian voices upwards. We need to hold our governments to account and tell them that it is not acceptable to have numbers of people as statistics to suffer from war, but that every life counts and that this kind of aggression as we see now in many countries is just totally unacceptable and is unacceptable in any place in the world. So, I hope we can connect the voices from affected communities and from communities that are not yet affected, but do feel the solidarity and do feel it is important to help others and that protection of civilians should be at the core everywhere in the world.

**Annie:** Rolien, you just gave us a little taste of this: In such a challenging and frankly depressing field, I would love to see how we can end this conversation with a little bit of hope and maybe optimism. So what is giving each of you hope right now?

**Udo:** There are a lot of reasons to despair and feel frustrated by what is happening. You know, when you hear the casualty numbers in Ukraine, in Sudan, the numbers in Yemen, the numbers in Somalia, all across the world, the footprint of conflict is expanding. Understandably, one wants to feel a little frustrated or kind of think: 'Maybe we are not making progress.' And yes, I sometimes feel that way. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I wonder: 'Is it all worth it? Is the world even listening?'

But when you take a critical look about where we are coming from and where we are right now, in spite of all the violence, in spite of all the conflicts, I still see a lot of space for optimism. I think three things have happened in this last year in my view, one of which is that the intensity of the violence, the



intensity of the harm to civilians, has really awakened the conscience of the world. And so we have seen all these powerful demonstrations regarding Gaza. We have seen people being very vocal in calling out their governments in their behavior. So somehow the more the violence, the more sensitized and the more awakened the people get. And so to a reasonable extent, we are seeing a critical new voice, which is the public, coming to this conversation about the protection of civilians, about the respect for international humanitarian law. And that is something to build on.

The second thing that gives me a lot of hope is the passion, the resilience, the courage of colleagues who are working in the field in very dangerous circumstances. Who wake up in the morning knowing that this might be their last and it does not stop them. That kind of courage, this capacity of the human spirit to look beyond danger and to focus on helping, is something that you cannot break, is something that you cannot kill. And so as more and more people get into the field dedicated to the job of protecting civilians, of working for people in conflict, I am very much convinced that there is something here for us to hold onto in terms of a positive.

And the final point again is that the world is not getting a pass. We also see leaders who are being vocal, who have been an example. I can always mention the Prime Minister of Belgium and the role he has played in some of these conflicts. So people who are leaders across the world, whether within politics, whether within the private sector, whether within the diplomatic sector, are coming out. So, when you have all these strong voices supporting and speaking up, it tells you also that there is hope. And so from where I am seated, yes, I feel despondent sometimes, but there are a lot of glimmers of hope.

**Rolien:** I think the resilience also of people who are affected. I am amazed how people can always go on and always find hope, maybe not out of choice, maybe because they have to, because it is the only way to survive. But still, I am amazed how people get up and continue and help each other in the most difficult situations.

At the same time, I think the connection of voices in affected countries and voices in other countries in solidarity, and I see the potential of connecting all those forces as a force for good that can be global. And maybe that is another positive element: We are becoming more global and we are becoming more equal globally. And I think that is of course changing and change is always threatening to some people. But change is also a positive thing because it is really needed to become more equal globally and to become more of a global community of activists for civil protection. And I think we have an opportunity to reach that.

**Annie:** Thank you both so much.

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**Annie:** We want to thank all of you who listened, and please feel free to continue sharing your feedback or ideas by emailing [civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com](mailto:civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com). We also want to say a very big thank you to Frederick Middelhoff, better known as the Podcastguru, for his excellent production of our series over the years. And of course, a big thank you to all of the experts who took the time to speak with us and share their very valuable insights.

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