

Mr. President,

BE aligns itself with the statement of the European Union and its Member States, as well as with the statement of the Group of Friends of Protection of Civilians, both of which will be submitted to you in writing.

The entire world is grappling with the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. But **COVID-19** is not the “great equalizer”. On the contrary, it exacerbates already existing weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our societies. The most vulnerable, already disproportionately impacted by conflicts, often without access to health care or humanitarian assistance, now face the devastating consequences of the pandemic.

Belgium systematically calls attention to the plight of **children**, who are the invisible victims of COVID-19. Neglecting generations of children in situations of armed conflict is setting those societies up for failure even after the conflict ended.

COVID-19 accelerates the vicious circle of **violence and instability**: its alarming health, humanitarian and socio-economic impact could aggravate political instability and existing conflicts and thus worsen the protection risks for civilians. Humanitarian and medical workers are attacked and stopped from reaching the most vulnerable. Reports on the increase of hate speech and gender based violence are also of concern.

The international community must act. The Security Council must assume its responsibility and focus on our strengths as Council. Mr. Secretary-General, you have encouraged us to do exactly that by **calling for a global ceasefire and humanitarian pause**, as well as calling upon governments and other actors to engage closely with UN Resident Coordinators and humanitarian actors to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance. Belgium fully supports your efforts.

In your most recent report on the Protection of Civilians you provides us with a **sobering account of the lack of compliance with IHL**, the failing protection and the toll these failures take on civilians in most of the countries on the Council’s agenda. Mr. Maurer mentioned in his briefing last year the risk of actors using the absence of convergence in the Security Council as a free ride for military operations without limitations and without accountability. This risk is now increasing as parties to conflict might take advantage of situations where the pandemic is absorbing everyone’s attention.

Mr. President,

The **fight against impunity** for the most serious crimes is a primary responsibility of every State. This fight is one of Belgium’s priorities and one of the shared values of the EU. Belgium, as well as the EU, continues to support international justice and accountability mechanisms, including the work and independence of the International Criminal Court, and urges all UN Members to do the same. We also call upon States to facilitate the development of mutual legal assistance in order to investigate and prosecute these crimes, including by facilitating the extradition of suspects.

At the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Belgium pledged with the EU member states and Red Cross National Societies to **strengthen the implementation and dissemination of IHL**. To do this, training is key. We commend the Department of Peace Operations and co-authors on its **new POC Handbook**, representing a valuable practical guide for all peacekeepers. We also hope this POC Handbook, outlining very clearly the whole range of “armed as well as unarmed” civilian protection strategies, can provide a good basis for **further reflection on integrating POC in future more light weight or agile peace operations**. Indeed, peace operations will need to become more structured in their approach to protecting civilians during transitions and changes in United Nations presence. UN Special Political Missions can also play an important role in protecting civilians.

Dissemination of IHL and protection of civilians is impossible without **engaging with non-state armed groups**, as only through dialogue can information be shared, compliance encouraged and humanitarian access negotiated. This means making sure that **counter-terrorism measures** do not hinder this engagement and, thus, **do not impede principled humanitarian action**.

Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. Maurer, we commend the increased attention in the POC report as well as in reports of ICRC for the **particular vulnerability of conflict-affected populations to the consequences of climate change**. Indeed the world’s eight worst food crises are all linked to both conflict and climate shocks, and therefore it is our responsibility as Security Council to gain a better understanding of these linkages.

Lastly, Mr. Secretary-General, a crisis of this scale calls for clear **leadership**. Just like the nations of the world look to the WHO for guidance in fighting the pandemic, they look to the United Nations to galvanize international solidarity. As a member of the Council, Belgium stands behind you, Mr. Secretary-General, and support your efforts to ensure the protection of civilians, especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.