



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

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Intervention at

Security Council Open Debate on

the Protection of Civilians

New York, 25/05/2021

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.

We welcome the Secretary-General's report and note with great concern the alarming picture that it once again paints. Violence against civilians remains widespread, despite broad support for the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated protection concerns and continues to be used as a pretext to shrink civic and humanitarian space.

The report also provides us with a sobering account of the **lack of compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), the failing protection of medical care and the toll these failures take on civilians**. Five years after the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2286, attacks on medical workers and facilities continue unabated.

Respect for IHL is the cornerstone of the protection of civilians agenda including the protection of medical care. We call on all member states to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law including by integrating measures to protect healthcare and medical personnel in their partnered military operations; and to safeguard humanitarian space including in counter-terrorism and sanctions contexts.

The **fight against impunity** for the most serious crimes is one of Belgium's priorities and one of the shared values of the EU. Belgium 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 recognise that **comprehensive casualty recording** can provide important evidence for accountability processes, for effective investigation and prosecution of violations of international law, as well as to substantiate widespread patterns of harm.

At the same time, protecting civilians should not be solely understood through the prism of compliance with international humanitarian law. Respect for international law is just the bare minimum. **Protection of civilians is also a key component of the spectrum of assistance to affected populations and engagement of UN and other international and regional peace operations in conflict situations, in line with their respective mandates.**

In the same vein, Belgium systematically calls attention to the plight of **children**, who are the most vulnerable victims of conflicts and humanitarian disasters. Neglecting children in situations of armed conflict is setting those societies up for failure even after the conflict ended. Belgium remains committed to addressing the needs of children affected by armed conflict, facilitating access to education, and intensifying work to prevent and address grave violations against them. We therefore call for implementation of the **Safe School Declaration** and call upon all Member States to endorse the Declaration.

And lastly, the POC report also highlights the natural environment as a “silent casualty” of armed conflict. We commend the report’s increased attention for the particular vulnerability of conflict-affected populations to the adverse consequences of **climate change and environmental degradation**. Indeed the world’s worst food crises are all linked to both conflict and climate shocks. It is our common responsibility to gain a better understanding of these linkages and to protect the natural environment in armed conflict. The updated ICRC Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict provide us with the recommendations to enhance respect for IHL. Protecting the environment protects civilians.

I thank you.