May 2025

Protecting the Environment is Protecting Civilians

Recommendations for UN Member States for the 2025 PoC Annual Debate

On May 22, the UN Security Council will convene for the annual debate on the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in armed conflict, during which Member States will reflect on the UN Secretary-General's 2025 PoC Report. In conflict areas worldwide, civilians continue to bear the devastating environmental consequences of armed conflicts, which directly and indirectly affect civilians' health, safety, and livelihoods. It is therefore crucial for Member States to acknowledge these impacts in statements and interventions during the debate, and to strengthen international policies around the protection of the environment and people depending on it.

Environmental and climate threats to civilians in conflicts

Over the past year, environmental harm from armed conflict has remained a pressing protection concern. Intense bombing and shelling of urban areas in various conflict areas (including Ukraine, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, and Gaza) has resulted in massive destruction of residential houses and industrial facilities, generating millions of tons of hazardous debris that pose acute and long-term environmental and health risks.

The destruction of water, sanitation, and healthcare infrastructure is contributing to public health risks linked to the spread of communicable diseases due to a lack of access to clean water and solid waste pollution. The dumping of raw sewage into rivers and coastal environments—caused by destroyed water infrastructure—exacerbates environmental degradation, while waste burning contributes to air pollution and respiratory diseases, particularly in displacement camps and informal settlements.

The continued destruction of fossil fuel infrastructure, including its deliberate targeting, leads to environmental pollution and conflict-related greenhouse gas emissions from burned oil and gas. Conflict-linked oil spills and leakages of toxic substances into soil and water expose civilians to toxic hazards and deprive them of their subsistence resources. Furthermore, millions of civilians in conflict and post-conflict settings are endangered by explosive ordnance. Besides their direct threat to human life, the explosive remnants of war severely disrupt livelihoods reliant on agricultural production and exacerbate food insecurity.

Armed conflicts also lead to a breakdown in environmental governance, mitigation, and resilience capacities to counter the impacts of environmental harm and climate risks. At the same time, the climate crisis compounds conflict-related vulnerabilities and challenges, while climate emergencies impede humanitarian action and fuel further displacement and insecurities for conflict-affected populations.

Call to action

To shield civilians from these impacts, it is imperative to better protect the environment in armed conflicts and enhance mitigation and remediation of conflict-related environmental harm. The UN Secretary-General has repeatedly highlighted environmental damage as a compounding source of civilian harm in the previous PoC reports, calling for a more holistic protection approach. The 2024 report, in particular, called for advancing accountability for environmental damage in armed conflicts and for the establishment of a crime of ecocide at the international level. The 2025 report will, for the seventh consecutive year, spotlight the environmental dimensions of conflict and their impact on health and human security.

At the policy level, efforts have been made by Member States to address environmental and related vulnerabilities for civilians in armed conflict. This includes the UN Security Council's resolutions such as 2417 (2018) and 2573 (2021) that aim at enhancing the protection of food systems and critical civilian infrastructure; UN General Assembly resolutions that incorporate environmental dimensions of conflict and/or weapons' use, including those adopted within its First Committee; and UN Human Rights Council resolutions, including 46/7 (2021) that underscores negative effects of conflict-linked environmental degradation on people in vulnerable situations. Within the UN Environmental Assembly, resolutions 2/15 (2016), 3/1 (2017) and 6/12 (2024) recognize the grave impacts of conflict-related environmental degradation on human health, well-being, and livelihoods, underscoring the utility of collecting environmental data for informing environmental assistance and recovery efforts in conflict-affected areas to mitigate those impacts. Other initiatives championed by Member States – such as the 2022 Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA) or the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflict – also seek to strengthen the protection of civilians through enhanced safeguards for the environment and civilian environmental infrastructure in times of armed conflict.

Besides Member States-led efforts, UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights and Toxics have sounded the alarm on the adverse effects of conflict-linked pollution and toxic remnants of war on people's lives and health in thematic reports from 2007, 2016, and the forthcoming 2025 report, with policy recommendations on how to address them. Furthermore, international normative frameworks developed over the past few years - such as the ICRC's Updated Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict and the International Law Commission's Principles on the Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts (ILC's PERAC Principles) - are instrumental in designing better protection measures. There have been also notable sectoral developments, such as the development of environmental standards and guidance in the demining field, to minimize environmental damage and its reverberating impacts on civilians in post-conflict settings. Lastly, growing momentum around advancing accountability for environmental damage, including within the International Criminal Court (ICC) and through an international campaign to recognize ecocide as an international crime, is also encouraging.

However, implementation of the above international norms and initiatives is often limited, while existing international responses to conflict-linked environmental harm are often ad hoc, fragmented, and under-resourced. This leaves critical protection gaps, as evidenced by the alarming realities facing civilians on the ground. To address them, Member States should recognize the gravity of environmental impacts of conflicts on civilians and commit to advancing meaningful protections at the 2025 UN Security Council PoC open debate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UN MEMBER STATES:

- **Condemn instances of conflict-linked environmental destruction and highlight their grave consequences for civilians in national statements and interventions.**

- **Endorse key international tools aimed at improving the protection of environment and essential civilian infrastructure in armed conflicts, such as: the ILC's PERAC Principles, the ICRC's Updated Military Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict Guidelines, and the EWIPA Political Declaration, among others.**

- **Strengthen the mandates and resources allotted to humanitarian and environmental response actors to address the environmental dimensions of armed conflict in their field operations.**

- **Support the development and operationalization of a UN system-wide Environment, Peace, and Security (EPS) agenda to improve international prevention, mitigation, and response measures to address the complex interlinkages between the environment, climate, conflict and peace.**

- **Support international legal enforcement mechanisms such as the ICC, the International Court of Justice, and other judicial and quasi-judicial bodies to ensure accountability for conflict-linked damage to the environment and essential civilian infrastructure.**

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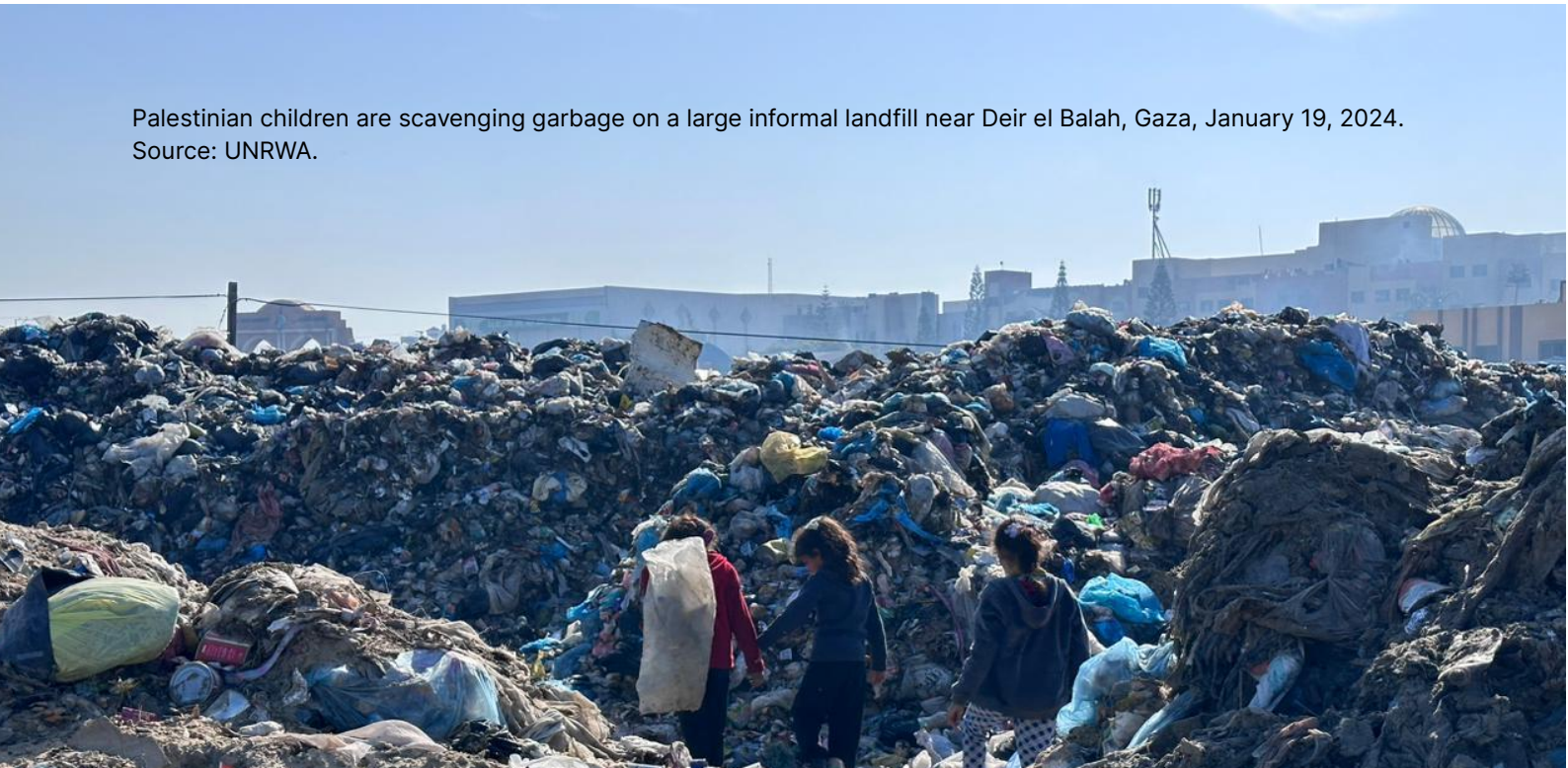

Palestinian children are scavenging garbage on a large informal landfill near Deir el Balah, Gaza, January 19, 2024. Source: UNRWA.