

Call for an Alliance to spare water from armed conflicts

We call for a unified *alliance to spare water from armed conflicts for better protection of civilians*.

Motto: *Spare water for humanity!*

Objectives

The *global alliance to spare water from armed conflicts* will galvanise efforts to protect the human dignity of the population affected from armed conflict or economic sanctions. The alliance will marshal the commitment and expertise of its members towards a jointly defined set of goals, notably, but not only, promoting and ensuring respect for international law protecting freshwater, water-related installations and other essential services collated under the [Geneva Principles on the protection of water infrastructure \(Geneva Principles\)](#), the [International Law Commission's principles on protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts](#) and the [ICRC Guidelines on the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict](#). The alliance will provide a roadmap to disseminate existing legal and technical tools for the protection of freshwater and related installations from armed conflicts. It will also harness expertise from the development and humanitarian sectors to identify action which can increase resilience in times of conflict and post-conflict situations. The alliance will be committed to protecting water from the consequences of armed conflicts and economic sanctions.

Rationale for the Alliance

The impact of armed conflict and economic sanctions on freshwater, water-related installations and other essential services (e.g. health care and electricity) is severe and long-lasting, and poses grave humanitarian, development and environmental challenges. Freshwater (including rivers, lakes and groundwater and related ecosystems) are often heavily polluted by military operations. Water-related installations (the structures and systems designed and built to manage, distribute, treat, or utilise water resources) are often used as a means or method of warfare by parties to armed conflicts, a trend that can be exacerbated by climate change. Direct and reverberating effects of armed conflict and economic sanctions on the delivery and access to freshwater have deadly and potentially long-term effects on the civilian populations, particularly regarding livelihood and health, and possibly driving displacement and instability. Those effects concern the destruction of small or large installations such as wells, water distribution systems or dams, degradation of the service systems (such as electricity supply, chemicals supply chain, lack of personnel, or fuel supply), or pollution of freshwater. Armed conflicts often delay or hinder repair or maintenance activities of water infrastructure generally leaving water systems and sanitation services at breaking point, in turn impacting other sectors, such as food production, health care and education. As a result, the population is frequently exposed to contaminated water and vulnerable to waterborne

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diseases, [including cholera and diarrhoea](#). As eloquently put by [UNICEF](#), ‘unsafe water can be just as deadly as bullets.’

Over time, the cumulative impact of reverberating effects in protracted crises is proven to be highly destructive and most difficult to recover from. This is even more relevant in protracted urban conflicts, aggravating the vulnerability of water systems, as services in urban environments are interconnected and highly vulnerable to market and supply disruption. The same is true for economic sanctions placed on countries, when crucial spare parts cannot be imported and brain-drain hampers maintenance. In this perspective, it is important to link the efforts of development actors with that of humanitarian actors, in order to facilitate resilience and peacebuilding activities.

Moreover, attacks and economic sanctions affecting water systems pose severe threats to Sustainable Development Goals, including the goal to ‘ensure access to water and sanitation for all’. Damages or destruction of water systems not only undermine the full enjoyment of human rights, including the right to life, but also undermine efforts for lasting peace.

Furthermore, pollution of freshwater during or because of armed conflict is another source of concern. Pollution can occur from damages to water infrastructure and water-related installations or by contamination from wastewater. Other types of pollution, such as the destruction of industries or pollution linked to the use of weapons or landmines, could cause environmental degradation of freshwater resources. At times, freshwater can also be deliberately polluted or poisoned, and supply lines sabotaged to intimidate the local communities, force them to flee or join the warring parties.

Action

The members of the Alliance will determine the activities of the alliance. Potential areas include:

- Promote understanding of the far-reaching consequences of attacks and military use of freshwater and water-related installations on the populations and the environment.
- Propose actions that parties to armed conflicts can take to further strengthen the protection ensured by international law, including dissemination of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), engaging armed non-state actors, promoting good practices and lessons learned.
- Promoting the implementation of [Resolutions 2417](#) (2018) and [2573](#) (2021) adopted by the Security Council, the [Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas \(2022\)](#) and other relevant instruments.
- Initiating a process for an inter-governmental political ‘*Declaration for sparing water from armed conflicts*’ which provides states the opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to spare water in armed conflicts, to deter its use as a means or method of warfare.
- Develop an analysis of the potential roles of the United Nations General Assembly, Security Council and Human Rights Council in promoting the protection of water and in facilitating preventive ‘operation and maintenance’ of water and water-related infrastructure in times of conflict for humanitarian and development actors. In particular, provide a review of sanctions regimes in armed conflict and analyse the need for systematic humanitarian exemptions.

The Geneva Water Hub is contacting a core group of key stakeholders wishing to join the initiative.