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Side-event: “The protection of water during armed conflicts”

Geneva 10 December 2019 (CICG, room 15, 18.30-1930)

Ambassador Yannick Roulin
Deputy Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UNOG

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

On behalf of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the co-organizers of this event, I am very honoured to welcome you all - and in particular our panellists and experts who have travelled to Geneva - to this event on the topic of the Protection of water during armed conflicts.

Introduction

The protection of water as a vital resource is paramount at all times. Armed conflicts affect fresh water in several ways: destruction and damage to water facilities, attacks against power plants providing water supplies, and the collapse of water treatments and sewage systems are some of these aspects.

Moreover, continued hostilities and protracted armed conflicts may undermine the efforts to repair, maintain and operate water pumping and treatment facilities.

The collapse of water governance institutions is an additional dimension of the consequences of armed conflicts.

Current challenges

Let me frame the challenges we face today:

First, contemporary armed conflicts have seen an increase in attacks against water infrastructure. Those attacks – deliberated or not - **have severe consequences, on the environment and most importantly on the civilian population, especially on the most vulnerable groups, such as children.**

In 1994, an International Committee of the Red Cross Expert Meeting convened in Montreux affirmed that, during an armed conflict, lack of access to safe water and public health problems stemming therefrom may kill as many people as bombs.

More than twenty years later, things got worst. In 2015, an ICRC study found that fifty million people living in urban areas are affected by armed conflicts, where the populations are more vulnerable to disruptions of essential services.

Second, water is not only a vulnerable resource in need of protection during armed conflicts, but is also increasingly weaponized and plays a role in war strategies.

This is not new: the strategic and military value of water has long been known, at least since 1503, when Leonardo da Vinci plotted with Machiavelli to divert the course of the Arno River in the war between Pisa and Florence.

However, the use of water as a weapon in wars has attained new dimensions, in the context of the increasingly protracted and urban nature of armed conflicts and the proliferation of actors, notably armed non-State actors.

Answers

Those trends are particularly worrying. **And we believe they require firm political, institutional, legal and technical answers.**

There is already a strong **legal framework** of international humanitarian law. The destruction of water infrastructure, the pollution of water resources and the diversion of a river constitute a violation of international law.

However, **IHL is not the sole relevant framework**, as we will hear in a moment from Professor Mara Tignino.

There is a **need to raise awareness and elaborate actions** to prevent and reduce the negative impacts of armed conflicts on the access to water and sanitation services.

In its 2017 report "A Matter of Survival", the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace co-convened by 15 countries, among which Switzerland, Slovenia, Costa Rica and Senegal, has recommended strengthening respect for and implementation of international humanitarian law in relation to water.

This means also monitoring the violations and taking the responsible accountable. I look forward to listening to Dr Danilo Türk, chair of the High-Level Panel, on awareness and actions.

It is also important to **increase the effectiveness of the efforts of humanitarian organizations** such as the ICRC **in delivering water supplies** to civilian populations in armed conflicts and to support their cooperation with local actors.

Closely related to these efforts, the **rehabilitation of river systems and the repair of damaged water infrastructure** should also constitute an integral part of the conversation on water and armed conflicts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, **I welcome the efforts of UNICEF and the Geneva Water Hub, a global center of the University of Geneva, in contributing to those endeavours.**

As we will hear in a moment, both organizations have issued two important documents this summer, UNICEF with its report “Water under Fire: emergencies, development and peace in fragile and conflict-affected contexts”, and the Geneva Water Hub with its “Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure”, which systematizes for the first time the main rules applicable to the protection of water infrastructure.

We have here an opportunity to concretely work on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which links the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN Sustaining Peace Agenda and the Secretary-General Agenda for Humanity.

I thank you very much for your attention and wish you all fruitful discussions on this crucial issue as well as a nice evening.