WATER AND CONFLICT:  
Addressing water insecurity issues in fragile and conflict-affected countries

Event Summary

On 20 October 2023, the Governments of Slovenia, Switzerland, and Mozambique, together with PAX and the Geneva Water Hub, organised a hybrid side event to the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, entitled “Water and conflict: Addressing water security issues in fragile and conflict-affected countries”.

Detrimental impact of armed conflicts on water, environment and public health continue to affect millions of people around the globe. Therefore, the objective of the event was to address the most pressing challenges around the vulnerability of water resources in armed conflicts, providing policy recommendations to improve the protection and management of water ecosystems and water infrastructure in fragile and conflict-affected countries. It featured the presentation of the findings from the 2023 report on the rights to water and sanitation as a tool for peace, prevention and cooperation by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, with additional research from civil society actors and international organizations on the relationship between water, conflict, climate, and the environment.

Opening remarks by the event co-sponsors

H.E. Ambassador Adrian Hauri, Deputy Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UN, opened the event by drawing attention to the dire humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of the water crisis, which are disproportionately felt by the poorest and the most vulnerable people living in fragile and conflict settings. Ambassador Hauri shared that around 800 million people live today in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, and stressed that water insecurity and scarcity are both drivers and consequences of fragility. To address the water insecurity challenges, Ambassador Hauri highlighted the need to uphold the international humanitarian law that protects the environment and water infrastructures; strengthen the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector in conflict-affected contexts; build better synergies between development and humanitarian actors; and break the root causes of water insecurity. Ambassador Hauri recalled protection of civilians as one of Switzerland’s priorities at the Security Council and called on more states to sign the Call to Action for survival and resilient WASH launched at the UN Water Conference in March.

H.E. Ms. Saša Jurečko, Deputy Permanent Representative of Slovenia to the UN, stated that the water, peace and security agenda is one of the top priorities of Slovenia’s water diplomacy, as Slovenia advocates for consideration of water in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts; protection of water resources and water infrastructure in armed conflicts in accordance with International Humanitarian Law; climate resilient post-conflict recovery; and environmental peacebuilding. Ms. Jurečko underscored that the approach to these issues must be rooted in the human rights-based and gender-responsive approach with a goal of leaving no one behind. Fair, equitable and sustainable access to water and sanitation is the backbone of the communities’ resilience. Ms. Jurečko emphasized the importance of a system-wide approach to water, highlighting the need for a UN system-wide strategy on water and sanitation, the imminent appointment of the UN Special Envoy for Water and the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2573 as the means to mainstream the role of water in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities.
Keynote address by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation

Special Rapporteur, Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, presented the key findings from his new thematic report for the UN General Assembly on the rights to water and sanitation as a tool for peace, prevention and cooperation. Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo shared that while around 60% of the population is living in the 153 countries that share river basins and aquifers, 2 billion people worldwide lack access to safe water. The Special Rapporteur thus emphasized the importance of moving from the traditional approach of water management on the national level towards ecosystem and human rights-based approaches at the basin scale; from competition over water resources to shared responsibility for the sustainable management of ecosystems and climate change risks for the benefit of all. Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo encouraged states to promote agreements and joint institutions at river basin levels and stressed the importance of transboundary public participation involving affected communities and most vulnerable populations. He also raised the need to develop binding obligations in transboundary agreements for upholding human rights to clean water and sanitation and called on the UN Security Council to pay more attention to transboundary water management issues.

Panel discussion

Ms. Natasha Hall, Senior Fellow with the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, set the scene for the discussion by outlining the aggravating situation of water insecurity worldwide, mentioning the Middle East as one of the most illustrative examples. She recalled that half of the global population does not have access to basic sanitation, while a fourth of the population struggles with access to safe drinking water. Ms. Hall stated that armed conflict exacerbates the water scarcity problem and underscored the urgency of addressing the issue. She then opened the floor for presentations by the panelists, with the first group of speakers providing insights regarding the water insecurity challenges in relation to specific country examples, and the second group of panelists covering humanitarian and legal aspects of protecting water resources in conflict.

Regional perspectives on water insecurity

Mr. Wim Zwijnenburg, Humanitarian Disarmament Project Leader at PAX, presented the finding from PAX’s forthcoming report on water security challenges in north-west Syria, around the basin of transboundary Orontes River. This river has been severely affected both by the conflict and climate-induced droughts, which has led to the decrease of water levels in several reservoirs that are key for irrigation. Moreover, as a result of the weak environmental controls and oversight, the quality of water resources in the region has severely deteriorated due to industrial pollution of surface and ground water resources, putting at risk nearly 1 million people in the area. Repeated attacks on water infrastructure facilities by the Syrian regime and the Russian air forces have further degraded water insecurity and public health, while IDP camps put additional pressure on local environmental conditions. Mr. Zwijnenburg called on the international community to take measures to prevent and minimize the harm to civilians affected by the conflict-induced water crisis, including through building strong international legal principles and norms around the protection of water in relation to armed conflict as part of a wider Environment, Peace and Security Agenda.

Ms. Simav Hasan, Advocacy and Communications Officer at Syrians for Truth and Justice, elaborated on the dire water situation in north-east Syria, where military activities remain the main driver of water insecurity besides climate change-related factors. This includes weaponization of water resources, such as recent Turkish airstrikes on power plants.
which operate water pumping stations. Ms. Hasan explained how such instances of disruption of the operation of critical water infrastructure affect local communities, who are left deprived of tap water and are forced to resort to borehole water pumping or water trucking, amid limited supplies available. She recalled the example of the Alok water station, which was rendered inoperable by military actions 36 times from October 2019 to June 2023, putting nearly a million people in al-Hasakah province and adjacent IDP camps at a disadvantage. Ms. Hasan called on states and international organisations to prevent further attacks on water infrastructure, intensify humanitarian efforts to respond to the local needs arising from the latest military escalation, and collect evidence on attacks against civilians and civilian objects by all parties to the conflict.

**Mr. Salman Khairalla, Co-Founder and Executive Director at Humat Dijlah**, addressed the issue of compounded effects of climate change and transboundary conflict on water scarcity in Iraq. Mr. Khairalla highlighted the problem of water weaponization and unfair management of water resources in the region, where neighboring countries control and exploit water to the detriment of downstream nations like Iraq. He drew attention to the lack of international treaties or agreements that would allow downstream countries to demand their fair share of water resources. Mr. Khairalla also addressed the internal challenges that Iraq is facing regarding water insecurity, rooted in the inadequate governmental water resource management programs and in the lack of comprehensive strategies to adapt to the current situation driven by climate change. He noted the importance of raising public awareness about responsible water usage at the citizen level. Lastly, Mr. Khairalla drew attention to the situation around water and energy weaponization against Gaza, noting that this conflict is one of the most pressing in terms of water-related issues and necessitates an immediate and effective action.

**Humanitarian and legal aspects of protecting water resources in conflict**

**Mr. Ernesto Granillo,** *Humanitarian Advocacy and Policy Specialist at UNICEF*, sharing insights from UNICEF’s landmark report “Water under Fire”, stated that protection of water systems is a major issue affecting children in armed conflicts, with continuous aggravation of the situation on the ground. Conflict parties often target water facilities with the purpose of exercising control over the population in highly populated urban environments, while the attacks that sabotage water networks are also becoming more common. Mr. Granillo stressed the need for channeling considerations for water and sanitation services protection into troops operation; facilitating cooperation on the use and management of water resources by the conflict parties; strengthening resilience of the water and sanitation sector; improving data collection and resource capacity; and integrating good governance of water resources and essential services in post-conflict reconstruction strategies. He also suggested that member states should create a thematic alliance for better protection of water systems in conflicts, and further recognize within the Security Council the impact that attacks on water and sanitation services have on civilians, building on the Arria formula meeting of March 2023.

**Mr. David Kaelin,** *Urban Services Adviser in the Water and Habitat department at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*, elaborated on the systematic impact of conflicts on essential services and access to water. Mr. Kaelin noted that armed conflicts leave tens of millions of people deprived of access to essential water services every year, while the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to the rising needs is diminishing. He emphasized the need to prevent the emerging water crises by strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law, which protects water resources, related infrastructure, and the natural environment. This means that in conflicts, states and non-state actors should fully respect and apply international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, while global development efforts should include better management and access to water resources for people living in...
situations of fragility or conflict. Mr. Kaelin called on states to build on crucial initiatives such as the recently adopted UN Security Council resolution 2573, the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), and discussions on essential services within the Arria formula meeting of March 2023.

Dr. Mara Tignino, Lead Legal Specialist at the Geneva Water Hub and Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Law and Institute for Environmental Sciences of the University of Geneva, outlined existing opportunities and gaps in legal aspects of water protection and management in conflict. In this context, the UN Security Council resolutions can be of great relevance to the formation of international customary law, as evidenced by the UNSC Resolution 2573 condemning the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. International human rights law is another legal framework that ensures an additional protection to the rights of individuals and communities by binding both states and non-state actors to refrain from limiting equal access of population to water, polluting water or destroying water services and infrastructure. Dr. Tignino argued that war crimes and crimes against humanity include "crimes against water," and that more attention is needed on the prevention of and accountability for them. Dr. Tignino announced the establishment of a new Alliance to spare water from armed conflict on November 22-23 in Geneva, with the support of Slovenia and Switzerland.

Interventions from the floor

Following the panel discussion, the floor was opened to interventions from the event participants. A representative of Israel mentioned the recent attack on Israel and shared an example of reported misuse of water infrastructure by Hamas for weapons acquisition, calling for more attention to data from the ground and for holding the responsible parties to account.

The former Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands inquired about the prospects for the follow up to the 2023 UN Water Conference with respect to the UN system-wide approach to dealing with pressing water issues. In response, Dr. Mara Tignino suggested putting forward the Water Action Agenda with its many proposals. Ms. Saša Jurečko stated the objective of building a broader alliance around the water issues.

A representative of Ukraine stressed the relevance of the topic of water insecurity for Ukraine in view of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and the crimes committed against the environment, including the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam.

Unfortunately, the floor was closed before all those requesting the floor could contribute to the discussion. In a written submission, a representative of the Russian Federation highlighted the existence of numerous water conventions that are open for joining, including the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, questioning the need for any new international approach, and rejecting research findings from one of the event’s presentations that alleged that the Russian armed forces targeted water infrastructure and civilians in north-west Syria.