

## Concept Note Protection of Civilians Week

Side-Event to the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians

### "Sparing Water from Armed Conflicts for Enhanced Protection of Civilians – A Launch of the Global Alliance"

**Date:** Thursday, 23 May 2024, 10:30 – 12:00

**Location:** Conference Room 11, UN HQ, New York & [UN Webcast](#)

**RSVP:** <https://forms.gle/5sFr78bVSDEWv1jF8>

The UN Security Council will convene the Annual Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in May 2024. This year, the meeting will mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of the protection of civilians theme on the agenda of the UN Security Council.

As Member States reflect upon the Secretary General's annual report on the protection of civilians, the impact of armed conflict on freshwater and water-related installations deserves close attention. The report in 2023 cautioned about the dire and reverberating consequences:

*»The destruction, damage and disruption – sometimes deliberate – of water services, combined with the impact of climate change and years of disrepair, left millions without safe water, causing contamination, the outbreak of deadly infectious diseases and the risk of malnutrition.«<sup>1</sup>*

Resolution 2417 (2018) and 2573 (2021) adopted by the United Nations Security Council demonstrated robust political commitment to enhancing the protection of critical civilian infrastructure and facilitating humanitarian assistance during armed conflict. However, this commitment has not reflected on the situation on the ground.

Recognizing the need for increased international mobilization on the protection of civilian infrastructure during armed conflict, the Republic of Slovenia, the Swiss Confederation and the Geneva Water Hub, in collaboration with partners, have laid the foundation for the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts. The Alliance advocates for respect and implementation of international law to protect freshwater and related installations at the international, regional and domestic levels. The Global Alliance also strives to raise awareness about the direct and indirect impacts of armed conflicts on water resources and infrastructure, as these impacts have profound consequences on the environment and across a spectrum of interlinked sectors directly affecting civilian populations.

On Thursday, 23 May 2024, the side event "Sparing Water from Armed Conflicts for Enhanced Protection of Civilians" will offer Member States, UN agencies, international organizations, academia and civil society representatives an opportunity to learn about the protection of civilian infrastructure during armed conflict and engage with representatives of the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts.

*This event is co-organized by Slovenia, Switzerland, and Geneva Water Hub and co-sponsored by Costa Rica, Jordan, Indonesia, Mozambique, Panama, the Philippines, Senegal, Viet Nam, UNICEF, PAX and Geneva Call.*

<sup>1</sup> See Protection of civilians in armed conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023, §§ 75.

## TENTATIVE AGENDA

### Opening remarks

- **Ambassador Božena Forštnarič Boroje**, Director-General for Multilateral Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia
- **Ambassador Adrian Hauri**, Deputy Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations
- **Ambassador Domingos Estêvão Fernandes**, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Mozambique to the UN
- **Ms Caroline Pellaton**, Operations Director of the Geneva Water Hub

### Interactive discussion

- **Ms Lucia Elmi**, Director of Emergency Programmes Division, UNICEF
- **Mr Christopher B. Harland**, Deputy Permanent Observer and Deputy Head of Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross to the United Nations
- **Brig Gen Prof Godard Busingye**, LL.D, Uganda Armed Forces
- **Ms Areva Paronjana**, Expert on Famine and Food Insecurity in Emergencies, Geneva Call
- **Mr Wim Zwijnenburg**, Project Leader, Conflict and Environment, PAX

### Q & A session

#### Interventions from supporters of the event from the floor:

- **Ambassador Mahmoud Daifallah Hmoud**, Permanent Representative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the UN
- **Ambassador Markova Concepción Jaramillo**, Permanent Representative of Panama to the UN
- **Ambassador Dang Hoang Giang**, Permanent Representative of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam to the UN
- **Ambassador Hari Prabowo**, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Indonesia to the UN

**Moderated by: Ambassador Tanja Miškova**, Ambassador-at-Large for Water Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia

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## BACKGROUND

Sparing and ensuring access to water is a matter of survival in conflict zones.<sup>2</sup> Water is essential for human survival and the international community has pledged in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (SDG6). Safeguarding the well-being of civilian populations in fragile and conflict-affected situations entails preserving freshwater resources, protecting water and water-related infrastructure, and ensuring the continuity of essential services.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of armed conflict on freshwater, water-related installations and other essential services (e.g. health care, sanitation, electricity and education) is severe and long lasting, and poses grave humanitarian,

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<sup>2</sup> See ICRC, '[Having access to water is increasingly a matter of survival in conflict zones](#)', *News Release*, 21 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See UNSC, [Resolution 2573 \(2021\)](#), 27 April 2021 and [Resolution 2417 \(2018\)](#), 24 May 2018, § 1; UNSC, [Protection of civilians in armed conflict](#), Report of the Secretary-General, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023, §§ 72-89 and Protection of civilians in armed conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/381, 10 May 2022, §§ 10-12.

development and environmental challenges. While all civilians are affected by disruptions in access to water and sanitation during conflict, children, women, and older persons, are particularly vulnerable.

Children depend on safe drinking water for their survival and physical and cognitive development. Yet the lack of access to water can expose children to various other protection risks during conflicts. For instance, in the context of disrupted access to water in the vicinity of the homes, children often need to walk long distances to collect water, interrupting their education and exposing them to harm, including the risk of sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> Other adverse effects include increased risk of child labour as a larger part of the family's income is dedicated to purchasing water, which is typically more costly during armed conflict. In that context, attacks on water and sanitation services deprive children of their health and survival.<sup>5</sup>

The availability and quality of water services also affect women and men in different ways. Women and girls remain primarily responsible for domestic chores, child rearing and caring for older persons and persons with disabilities in many parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> Women and girls' access to water impacts entire families and communities.

During military operations, freshwater, including rivers, lakes, groundwater and related ecosystems, often come under heavy pollution. Attacks on water-related installations (the structures and systems designed and built to manage, distribute, treat, or utilise water resources) are often used by armed elements as a means or method of warfare in conflict situations, a trend that can be exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. This trend intensifies in protracted conflicts.

When armed conflict moves into urban areas, it exposes interconnected civilian infrastructure to damage or destruction, in particular with the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area, and disrupts the provision of essential services. During attacks, decades of investments in the water and sanitation sector can disappear in seconds<sup>7</sup>. The long-term reverberating effects of attacks on or damages to water-related installations include contamination, spread of deadly infectious diseases, malnutrition, and other environmental hazards that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups.<sup>8</sup> These cascading effects also exacerbate conflict-induced food insecurity by disrupting food production and distribution.

Water and sanitation systems rely on electrical power, provided by power plants, distribution/transmission lines and substations, or, in the absence of a grid electricity supply, by generators and fuel. Attacks or shutdowns of power supplies during conflict can therefore fundamentally disrupt water and sanitation services for civilians. When power systems are attacked and wastewater treatment facilities are affected, untreated raw sewage can flow to low-lying areas where it may contaminate surface water bodies, infiltrate groundwater or even mix with piped water supply.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of sparing water from armed conflicts extends beyond its delivery; it encompasses the vital aspects of livelihood, well-being, and dignity for civilians.<sup>10</sup> Addressing the challenges faced by civilian populations during armed conflicts not only alleviates their hardships but contributes significantly to achieving lasting peace, stability, reconciliation, and development.

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<sup>4</sup> See UNICEF, ['Reimagining WASH-Water Security for All'](#), Report of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), March 2021, §§ 3.

<sup>5</sup> See UNICEF, ['Water Under Fire \(Volume 3\) - Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children'](#), 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See UNICEF, ['Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene \(Special Focus on Gender\)'](#), Report of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2020-2022, §§ 15 .

<sup>7</sup> See UNICEF, ['Water Under Fire \(Volume 3\) - Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children'](#), 2021, page 2.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Talhami, M., & Zeitoun, M. (2021). The impact of attacks on urban services II: Reverberating effects of damage to water and wastewater systems on infectious disease. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 102 (915), 1293 – 1325.

<sup>9</sup> See UNICEF, ['Water Under Fire \(Volume 3\) - Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children'](#), 2021, page 16.

<sup>10</sup> See Protection of civilians in armed conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023, §§ 2, 8, 9, 26 and 78-81.

## Objectives of the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts

The objective of the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts is to galvanise efforts at all levels to protect water and water-related installations from the consequences of armed conflicts. To that end, it will marshal the commitment and expertise of its members towards a defined set of goals, notably, promoting and ensuring respect for international law protecting freshwater, water-related installations and other essential services. It will provide a roadmap to disseminate existing legal tools and to better inform on the long-term consequences of 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. It will further focus on preventive measures, and collaboration to reduce or mitigate civilian harm from armed conflicts.

### Objectives of the event

- This event will highlight the direct and indirect impacts of attacks on or damages to freshwater and water-related installations and protection challenges thereof.
- It will identify good practices, lessons learned, as well as possible new / better standards to protect freshwater and related installations during and after armed conflicts.
- It will present the relevance of the Alliance and its key activities that may contribute towards strengthening the Protection of Civilians and enhance the implementation of international humanitarian law and human rights law at the international, regional and domestic levels.
- It will reflect upon strategies and approaches, including “water ceasefires”, to ensure the rehabilitation of water services and reconstruction of water infrastructure during and after armed conflicts.
- It will provide an opportunity to secure commitments for the protection of water and water related installations during conflict and for preventative measures to mitigate civilian harm.

### The discussion will be guided by the following questions:

- How to promote a better understanding of the impacts and long-term consequences of attacks on water and sanitation installations?
- How to promote the use of existing tools and mechanisms to ensure a more systematic implementation of legal frameworks including the principles and norms of International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and International Water Law during and after armed conflicts?
- How can States, international organizations and civil society play a role in reducing the gap between existing legal frameworks and the international, regional and domestic mechanisms, which ensure their implementation? How may the use of these mechanisms contribute to strengthen the application of international norms and principles during and after armed conflicts?
- How can the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council enhance the implementation of existing legal frameworks protecting freshwater and related installations during and after armed conflicts?
- How to ensure pre-conflict preparedness and protective processes to shield water infrastructure and essential services through the inclusion of resilience-building measures? How to strengthen collaboration among diverse partners and actors from the peace, development and humanitarian communities in these efforts?
- What are the existing good practices and lessons learned that can lead to better protection of freshwater and related installations during and after armed conflicts?