

United Nations Security Council Arria Formula Meeting

Freshwater Resources and Related Infrastructure under Attack Protecting Water in Armed Conflict – Protecting Civilian Lives

Date: Friday, 23 May 2025, 3.00 – 6.00 pm

Place: CR-1, UN Headquarters

Briefers

- **Ms Mirjana Spoljaric Egger**, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross
- **Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Director-General of the World Health Organization
- **Mr Ted Chaiban**, Deputy Executive Director of the UN's Children's Fund
- **Ms Mehwash Ansari**, Regional Head of Programme for Africa, Geneva Call

Introduction

With 120 active armed conflicts globally, 2025 paints a grim picture of daily life for millions of civilians worldwide. Trapped in warzones, forced from their homes, and deprived of essential needs such as food, water, medical care and protection, they bear the brunt of violence, hunger and fear. With an ever increasing number of armed conflicts, underfunded humanitarian operations and a lack of access to those most in need, the suffering of civilians remains an urgent crisis demanding the UN Security Council's attention.

One of the most devastating consequences of armed conflicts is the impact on water and sanitation services. When wells are poisoned, pipelines bombed, water pumping stations disabled, freshwater resources contaminated and access to clean drinking water cut off, water turns into both a weapon and a casualty of war. The destruction, damage and disruption – sometimes deliberate – of water and sanitation services not only threatens the immediate survival of civilians while leaving millions without safe drinking water¹, it also exacerbates long-term public health crises and the spread of waterborne disease. It fuels preventable food insecurity and malnutrition and forces people to flee their homes, triggering displacement.

Access to clean water is a fundamental human right and a matter of survival, in particular in conflict zones. Stronger protection of freshwater resources and related infrastructure in armed conflict is urgently needed.

¹ Report of the Secretary-General, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023.

The impacts of armed conflict on the provision of water, namely on freshwater resources and related infrastructure can take various forms. Attacks can directly affect infrastructure and supplies or prevent essential staff from managing, operating or repairing infrastructure. In urban areas, the risks are even higher, as damage from explosive weapons to interconnected infrastructure amplifies the consequences on the provision of water. In protracted conflicts, the cumulative effects of repeated attacks on already damaged water-related infrastructure can lead to an irreversible collapse of the water and sanitation services. Additionally, water infrastructure is also misused for military purposes, further disrupting essential services.

Finally, the arbitrary denial of humanitarian access might prevent the humanitarian workers from operating, maintaining or repairing infrastructure related to the provision of water and sanitation as well as block the passage of supplies needed for repairs. These obstructions may not only violate international humanitarian law obligations but also prolong suffering and displacement, making long-term recovery even more challenging.

For millions, attacks on freshwater resources and related infrastructure bring dehydration, malnutrition, public health outbreaks, and the collapse of livelihoods and entire communities.

While these attacks affect all civilians, certain groups are particularly vulnerable. Children, women, older persons, and persons with disabilities, especially, endure the brunt of disruptions through dehydration, malnutrition, waterborne diseases, displacement, deprivation of health care, education and other basic services, and ultimately protection, dignity and survival.

In many regions, women and girls are primarily responsible for water collection, child rearing, and caring for older persons and persons with disabilities, all of which become more dangerous and burdensome during conflicts.² Lack of access to nearby freshwater sources forces them to walk long distances, which can leave them exposed to harm, including the threat of sexual and gender-based violence.³

When water becomes scarce or expensive, civilians are forced to rely on unsafe water or leave their homes in search of a new source. Families are forced to divert their income to purchasing water and away from other essential needs such as education and health, increasing the risk of child labour and exacerbating social inequalities.⁴

These crises not only result in immediate suffering, but also undo decades of development, with lasting consequences for the protection, dignity and survival of the civilian population and the environment.

² UNICEF, 'Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene [Special Focus on Gender]' (2020-2022), 15.

³ UNICEF, 'Reimagining WASH-Water Security for All' (2021), 3.

⁴ UNICEF, 'Water Under Fire [Volume 3] - Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children', 2021.

Objectives of the meeting

The basic principles and rules of international humanitarian law and international human rights law are clear. Therefore, the persistence of attacks on or affecting freshwater resources and related infrastructure is not due to a lack of legal protections.

International humanitarian law unequivocally prohibits indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks and attacks that target civilian objects. Objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including but not limited to drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, receive special protection under international humanitarian law. In no event may action be taken against such objects that would be expected to cause starvation of or force the movement of the civilian population. Violations of these and other rules protecting water infrastructure and resources, and aimed at ensuring civilian access to them, can constitute war crimes for which those responsible must be held accountable.

Such attacks not only exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, they also negatively impact international peace and security, and prolong the conflicts and their devastating consequences. The growing number of attacks on freshwater resources and related infrastructure requires the UN Security Council's attention.

The UN Security Council has reaffirmed the importance of protecting civilian infrastructure in resolutions such as **2365 (2017)**, **2417 (2018)**, **2573 (2021)**, **2664 (2022)**, and **2730 (2024)**. However, implementation remains inadequate. This UN Security Council Arria Formula Meeting seeks to address three key questions:

- **First, how do we reverse the trend of normalisation of attacks on or affecting freshwater and related infrastructure and foster a culture of compliance with international humanitarian law and UN Security Council resolutions? Which tools and mechanisms can be leveraged?**
- **Second, in protracted crises, how can the UN system and the humanitarian actors more effectively address the immediate and the long-term and cumulative impacts of attacks on or affecting freshwater resources and related infrastructure? Beyond immediate effects, how can we mitigate the environmental and public health consequences of such attacks?**
- **Third, how can the UN Security Council transform existing evidence into meaningful action? Building on its Protection of Civilians Agenda and past discussions, including the UN Security Council Arria Formula Meeting on "Achieving a better protection of water-related essential services and infrastructure for the civilian population during armed conflicts" in March 2023, what concrete steps should be taken to ensure water protection remains a priority in conflict settings?**

Modalities

The meeting, organised by Slovenia together with Algeria, Panama and Sierra Leone, and supported by Costa Rica, Hungary, Indonesia, Jordan, Mozambique, the Philippines, Senegal, Switzerland and Viet Nam, will be chaired by Ms Melita Gabrič, Deputy Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia. Interpretation into the official languages of the UN will be provided, subject to availability.

All UN Member States, Observers and UN Agencies are invited to participate. In order to allow as many delegations as possible to participate, interventions **should not exceed three minutes**. Time management will be closely observed. Delegations are kindly invited to inscribe to the list of speakers by **20 May COB** at slomission.newyork@gov.si.