



Concept Note

Protection of Civilians Week 2026

Water under Attack: Protection and Humanitarian Diplomacy in Times of Financial Contraction, Localization and Spreading Conflicts

Date: Thursday, 21 May 2026

Time: 15:15 – 16:45

Location: Kalayaan Hall, Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the UN
(556 Fifth Avenue, 5th Floor, New York)

RSVP: <https://tinyurl.com/GASWACPOC2026SideEvent>

The world is witnessing an unprecedented deterioration of humanitarian conditions due to a growing number of armed conflicts and an erosion of respect for the rules that govern them. Water systems are increasingly attacked in modern warfare with devastating consequences for civilians and the environment. Current funding and reform decisions risk deprioritizing the provision of essential services, such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) with direct consequences for the protection of civilians.

The year 2026 marks the fifth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 2573 (2021). The resolution unanimously condemned attacks on objects indispensable to civilian survival, including water and sanitation infrastructure. Yet the implementation record is deeply concerning.

In the current challenging context strengthening respect for international humanitarian law is more urgent than ever, and humanitarian diplomacy remains an essential means to achieve it. The convergence of record humanitarian needs, shrinking funding, repeated attacks on water systems and personnel, and a multilateral system undergoing reform means that technical and operational responses alone are insufficient.

Humanitarian diplomacy can help bridge the gap between international law, operational realities, and political constraints. It can facilitate agreements that enable effective protection of water



systems and workers based on international humanitarian law; underpin negotiations for safe access, including for repairs, supply and maintenance; the continued functioning and rehabilitation of water systems; and elevate attacks against water infrastructure within diplomatic and political fora, including the UN Security Council.

At a time when the multilateral system itself is under strain, humanitarian diplomacy remains one of the few mechanisms capable of aligning what international law requires, what humanitarian operations need, and what political actors are willing to do in order to ensure protection of civilians.

As part of the obligation to respect international humanitarian law, ensuring meaningful protection also requires safeguarding civilians' access to essential services, including WASH. Disruption of WASH systems can have life-threatening consequences and cause considerable harm to civilians. Safeguarding WASH access is a core component of protection.

This side event by the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflict positions WASH as a frontline protection issue. A concrete and operational entry point for sustaining the protection of civilians amid financial contraction, institutional reform, and shifting political priorities. It will examine two avenues with strong potential to strengthen the protection of water and sanitation infrastructure in armed conflict and to support WASH responses that deliver sustained, large-scale impact for protection of civilians.

First, the event aims to provide a better understanding of how humanitarian diplomacy can help bridge the gap between international law, operational realities, and political constraints. Second, the event aims to showcase opportunities of partnerships with local actors to safeguard WASH access for civilians, including through strengthened protection for essential service providers.

The discussion will be guided by the following questions:

1. With 2026 marking the 5th anniversary of Resolution 2573 and the 8th of Resolution 2417, what progress has been made in their implementation — and how can Member States, parties to the conflict, and other actors accelerate implementation, compliance and accountability?
2. How can UN80 and the Humanitarian Reset strengthen WASH-related protection outcomes? How can the Humanitarian Reset advance and elevate humanitarian diplomacy efforts to protect water and sanitation — and what concrete roles can Member States, parties to conflict, and international actors play in translating its ambitions into stronger protection on the ground?
3. How to better leverage partnerships in times of constraints? What are the opportunities for partnerships with local actors to safeguard access to WASH for civilians? How to ensure adequate protection, risk-sharing, capacity support, and compliance frameworks for IHL and humanitarian principles?

Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts galvanises the efforts to protect water and water-related installations from the consequences of armed conflicts. Members are committed to promote and ensure respect for international law protecting freshwater, water-related installations and other essential services. The Alliance harnesses expertise from the development and humanitarian sectors to identify action, which can increase resilience in times of conflict and post-conflict situations. It also aims to improve preventive measures, and foster collaboration to reduce or mitigate civilian harm from armed conflicts.

TENTATIVE AGENDA

Opening remarks by H.E. Mr. Enrique Austria Manalo, Permanent Representative of the Philippines to the United Nations

Video message by Mr. Samuel Godfrey, Chief of WASH, UNICEF Sudan

Interactive discussion

- **Ms. Elyse Mosquini, Permanent Observer of the ICRC to the United Nations**
- **Ms. Brenda Mofya, Head of UN/New York Office, Oxfam International**
- **Mr. Nicolas Villeminot, Senior Technical Lead, Action Against Hunger**

Moderated by: Dr. Caroline Pellaton, Operations Director, Geneva Water Hub

Interventions from the Floor and Q & A Session

Closing remarks by Ms. Saša Jurečko, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Slovenia to the United Nations

BACKGROUND

The deliberate targeting of water infrastructure and water technologies is a serious violation of international humanitarian law and may constitute a war crime under the statute of the International Criminal Court. Such attacks do not only disrupt immediate access to water, which is essential for survival, but systematically undermine livelihoods, public health, and food security, compounding existing vulnerabilities in already water-scarce environments.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure is civilian in nature under international humanitarian law (IHL) and is protected against direct-attack, reprisals, and avoidable or excessive incidental harm. It also amounts to objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, that are explicitly protected against attacks and destruction under international humanitarian law, while also forming part of a broader network of critical infrastructure underpinning essential services, whose interdependence means that damage to one system can trigger cascading effects across others.

In Ukraine, Yemen, Gaza, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Iran and the Gulf and elsewhere, water systems—including desalination plants, treatment facilities, pumping stations, and distribution networks—have been partially or entirely destroyed or rendered non-functional due to the lack of electricity, fuel, spare parts, and treatment chemicals. This translates into acute protection risks, as communities are deprived of safe water, exposed to disease, and forced to adopt negative coping mechanisms, particularly in already fragile settings. Water infrastructure is therefore not only a casualty of conflict, but increasingly a strategic target or instrument of warfare.

Beyond the immediate damage, attacks on water infrastructure generate reverberating effects that significantly amplify harm to civilian populations. Because water systems are interconnected with electricity networks, health services, food systems, and urban infrastructure, damage to a single facility can have cascading effects on services and communities alike. When pumping stations or treatment plants cease to function, hospitals lose sterilization capacity, sanitation systems fail, food production declines, and waterborne diseases spread rapidly. These cascading impacts often extend

far beyond the site of the original attack and can persist for months or years, multiplying civilian suffering and undermining recovery prospects long after hostilities subside.

The impacts are deeply gendered. When water systems are damaged or destroyed, women and girls are forced to travel further and take greater risks to collect water, exposing them to heightened threats of violence while increasing unpaid care and labour burdens. In this way, attacks on water infrastructure place women directly in the line of fire, with long-term consequences on their rights, dignity, health, and equality.

Behind the immediate operational challenges, the WASH sector faces a convergence of financial, institutional, and political constraints that complicate efforts to protect water systems and ensure sustained service delivery in conflict settings. In certain contexts, chronic under-investment in water-systems as well as effects of climate change, are already severely constraining access to safe water and sanitation for the population.

Current funding and reform decisions risk deprioritizing essential services, such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) with direct consequences for protection of civilians:

First, the financial architecture supporting humanitarian WASH responses is contracting sharply. Funding for WASH in humanitarian contexts is typically short-term, emergency-oriented, and donor-driven. Yet most contemporary conflicts are protracted crises, requiring sustained investment in infrastructure maintenance, operational continuity, and system rehabilitation. According to the [2025 Global Humanitarian Overview](#), a record \$45.48 billion was required to assist 181.2 million people across 72 countries, yet by mid-year only 16.8% of this funding (\$7.64 billion) had been secured — representing a 40% decline compared to the same period in 2024.

Second, the institutional environment for humanitarian action is undergoing major transformation. The ongoing UN80 reform process and Humanitarian Reset are redesigning institutional roles, mandates, and funding flows across the UN system. While reform may create efficiency gains, it also raises uncertainties regarding WASH cluster coordination, UN–NGO partnerships, and the operational capacity of key agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, and OCHA. If not carefully managed, these reforms risk creating operational gaps or weakening humanitarian principles that underpin the respect and protection of essential services.

Third, the political dimensions of water governance in conflict settings remain insufficiently addressed. Control over water resources is frequently used as a tactic of control over the civilian population, whether through the seizure of water infrastructure, manipulation of supply, or denial of maintenance access. Yet peace processes and stabilization efforts rarely integrate water governance as a strategic component of conflict resolution. Humanitarian diplomacy related to WASH often focuses on negotiating short-term access for repairs or service delivery, rather than establishing the durable governance arrangements necessary to ensure long-term protection and operation of water systems.

Finally, greater attention must be attached to the protection and support of essential service providers. Their role is critical to maintaining water, sanitation, and other vital services. And yet they face significant risks and constraints in conflict settings. Ensuring their safety and ability to operate is a prerequisite for the continuity of essential services.