

Open Debate

War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings

Tuesday, 25 January 2022

Concept Note



1. Objective

This High-Level Open Debate is intended to deepen dialogue on the issue of protection of civilians in urban warfare, draw attention to and reflect on the devastating humanitarian impacts, and to identify steps that may be taken by various actors to alleviate these consequences ensuring the protection of civilians and civilian objects against the effects of urban warfare, in line with international humanitarian law.

2. Context

Armed conflicts are increasingly being fought in urban areas, with devastating and unacceptable humanitarian consequences, with the vast majority of casualties being civilians¹. While wars in cities are not a new phenomenon, there has been a resurgence of urban warfare in recent decades, with an estimated 50 million civilians around the world now affected². This trend is being fueled by the rapid rate of urbanisation³. If not addressed through concerted international action, the already unacceptable humanitarian consequences of urban conflict are only set to worsen.

War in cities impacts populations in different ways: people are at risk of being killed, injured or disabled. People are displaced from their homes, and are living in undignified conditions with no idea when they may return. While these consequences are not unique to armed conflict in urban areas, they occur on a significantly larger scale in urban warfare, given higher populations and their dependency on interconnected critical infrastructure.

People in cities often face a terrible choice between remaining in their homes while risking bombardment, siege, disease, and starvation - or fleeing and risking criminal exploitation, sexual violence, deprivation, or being directly targeted by warring factions. Additionally, disappearances, and people being separated from their loved ones during conflict creates trauma for families and communities and can leave children unaccompanied and vulnerable.

Moreover, the interconnected urban services that are indispensable for sustaining human life, are disrupted by the direct, indirect, and cumulative impact of hostilities. Schools, hospitals,

¹ United Nations Security Council, S/2021/423, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. Report of the Secretary General, 2021.

² ICRC, *Waging War in Cities: A Deadly Choice*, ICRC, Geneva, 2020.

³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, United Nations, New York, 2018.

and other essential infrastructure are attacked and destroyed depriving civilians of education and health care and services, including vaccines. Food, water, sanitation and electricity is also interrupted. The concentration of people and density of infrastructures means that a greater number of people are affected, with increasing severity over time as conflict continues and the harm to the civilian population accumulates.

Even when fighting has ceased, explosive remnants of war continue to kill and injure and to prevent the rebuilding of communities, people from returning home, going to school, and pursuing livelihoods. Safe reconstruction of houses and essential infrastructure is also made more challenging when explosive remnants of war may be buried within the rubble of damaged or destroyed buildings.

This accumulative and protracted civilian suffering exacerbates social divisions caused by the fighting, making it difficult for cities and their inhabitants to heal. It also affects women and men, boys and girls differently, often aggravating existing vulnerabilities and gender inequalities, while tearing the social fabric of communities apart. This also increases the risk of new waves of violence and damages prospects for achieving peace and reconciliation, along with the safe and dignified return for displaced people, and the possibility of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

A particular challenge in urban environments is ensuring that military operations are conducted in full conformity with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including the principles of precaution, distinction, and proportionality. Even armed forces doing their best to fully implement IHL and to avoid civilian harm are faced with challenges. The nature of the urban environment challenges the ability of the parties to a conflict to accurately assess and anticipate the expected incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects. This demonstrates that ensuring full compliance with IHL is more demanding, but even more critical, in these contexts.

In many situations, we see that parties to armed conflict continue to fight in urban areas in ways that do not take these challenges fully into account. For instance, in their use of weapons primarily designed for use in open battlefields, including heavy explosive weapons. This is a major cause of civilian suffering and death in situations of urban warfare⁴. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas in 2020, a total of 88 per cent of those killed and injured were civilians, compared with 16 per cent in other areas⁵. While civilians may sometimes be prevented from leaving a besieged area, fighting in urban centers often results in increasing the need for the essential services that are also often disrupted or destroyed.

It is necessary to make the protection of civilians a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations.

The devastating, cumulative and protracted humanitarian harm caused by urban warfare also puts great demands on humanitarian actors to adapt to the humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities of the population, based on inclusive engagement with affected communities. and taking into account the gender dimension. This includes promoting the full, equal, and meaningful participation and leadership of women. It also negatively impacts the safety and security of

⁴ United Nations Security Council, S/2021/423, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. Report of the Secretary General, 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

humanitarian and health workers. The need for parties to fulfil their obligation to facilitate safe, unhindered access to civilians in need of humanitarian aid, is acute. In recent years, the sheer scale of the humanitarian suffering caused by urban warfare has created daunting operational, resource, and diplomatic challenges for humanitarian and development actors. Past and ongoing conflicts demonstrate the need for effective preventative actions, and improved responses to ensure the full protection of civilians and the objects they rely on, and respect for international humanitarian law.⁶

3. Guiding questions

The discussion may focus on the following questions:

- How can the Security Council better use the tools at its disposal to prevent and respond to the challenges of the accumulated harm caused to the civilian population and infrastructure in urban warfare?
- How can States and parties to conflict improve respect for IHL and ensure that protection of civilians is a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations in urban settings?
- How can Member States better employ existing tools to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare and reduce civilian harm, including by protecting objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, and to prevent the disruption of essential services?
- How can national and local authorities, together with relevant humanitarian and development actors, adapt, improve and coordinate their response, with more sustainable solutions to ensure the continuity of essential services during protracted conflicts in urban areas?
- How can humanitarian organisations, the UN system, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant actors better provide sustainable humanitarian protection and assistance, which is adapted to the accumulated and protracted needs created by urban warfare?

4. Participation and format

The Open Debate will be held in the format of Heads of State or Government Level, and is to be chaired by H.E. Jonas Gahr Støre, Prime Minister of Norway.

The following speakers are invited to brief the Council:

- **António Guterres**, Secretary-General of the United Nations
- **Peter Maurer**, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross
- **A civil society representative**

Should the health and safety situation allow, the in-person participation of the broader membership is welcome.

Delegations are kindly requested to limit their statements to no more than four minutes, masks are to be worn at all times even while addressing the meeting, and delegations are kindly requested and to limit their participation to one representative in the Chamber.

⁶ ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Recommitting to Protection in Armed Conflict on the 70th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019.

A provisional list of those who have requested to speak will be circulated in advance by email to those who have inscribed. The list of speakers will be available in hard copy in the Chamber, shortly before the beginning of the meeting.

Member States wishing to participate **in-person** should inscribe their names on the list of speakers through the eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+. A letter addressed to the President of the Security Council, duly signed by the Permanent Representative or the Chargé d'affaires, a.i., requesting to participate in accordance with Rule 37 of the Council's Provisional Rules of Procedure must be uploaded to the eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+. Inscription for said meeting will open on **20 January 2022, at 9:30 a.m.** Please note that delegations speaking in-person should not submit a written statement via e-deleGATE+, as the delivered statement will be included in the provisional verbatim record of the meeting.

The list of speakers will be determined by the order in which requests are received.

Furthermore, delegations wishing to submit **written statements** instead of participating in-person at the meeting may do so through the same eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+ by uploading their statements in Microsoft Word format with a cover letter duly signed by the Permanent Representative/Chargé d'affaires, a.i, and addressed to the President of the Security Council no later than the date of the meeting, **25 January 2022**. These statements will be published as part of an official compilation document containing the interventions submitted in connection with this open debate.

Delegates are invited to contact their Mission's access focal points to be granted access to the eSpeakers module on the e-deleGATE+ platform. For technical support related to user login and password, please contact OICT Help Desk at 212-963-3333 or by e-mail at missions-support@un.int.

For other questions related to the open debate, please contact SCAD at dppa-scsb3@un.org.