

**Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of
Civilians and Healthcare in Armed Conflict**

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Security Council Chamber

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Thank you, Mister President, for convening today's debate. Ireland aligns itself with the statements delivered by the delegation of the European Union and by Slovenia on behalf of the Human Security Network.

In my national capacity, I will start by drawing your attention, Mr. President, to the broader issue of Sustaining Peace. This Security Council and, indeed, the entire UN system was established not to mitigate the effects of conflict, but to deal with threats and risks to peace, in order to prevent them from breaking out into full-scale conflict. We commend Secretary-General Guterres for emphasising the primacy of peace and for placing conflict prevention at the core of his mandate. We were also glad to see all UN Member States come together, with the backing of the UN Security Council, to adopt an innovative resolution on Sustaining Peace in April of last year. The role of political solutions in preventing and ending conflicts must be at the top of the agenda, even when we discuss the protection of civilians.

Unfortunately, we are here to focus on the myriad of conflicts currently being fought. Today there are more people in humanitarian need than we have seen since the end of the Second World War. Much of this is caused not by the mere existence of conflict, but by violations by conflict parties of their duties and obligations – most of which arise from international customary law.

Mr. President, there are no words strong enough to convey our condemnation of attacks on medical and healthcare facilities. Not only are parties to conflicts reneging on their obligations to ensure, in their military planning and operations, the protection of hospitals and other civilian facilities, they are engaging in deliberate and repeated attacks. We commend the Security Council for responding to this egregious trend by adopting resolution 2286 in May of last year. This saw the UN organ with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security demand that parties to armed conflicts comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and international human rights law to protect healthcare infrastructure and personnel.

The growing trend of attacks on humanitarian workers is also a cause of grave concern. We heard yesterday in this chamber that 17 aid workers have been killed in South Sudan this year alone. Moreover, the politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian aid is unacceptable. Access to food, water and medical care cannot be denied in an attempt by a conflict party to gain military advantage. Similarly, we reject the use of humanitarian access as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations, as well as the attempted tit-for-tat agreements we have seen regarding medical

evacuations in Syria. We support the critical role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which works to coordinate and protect those on the ground who are often putting their lives at risk to access and assist victims of conflict. We thank the ICRC for using its voice to remind States and other parties to armed conflicts of their legal obligations under international humanitarian law, as has been done today by the Vice-President of the ICRC, Ms. Beerli.

Ireland wishes to direct the Council's attention to the issue of civilian harm from the conduct of hostilities in urban areas, particularly through the use of cluster munitions. Last year, when explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 92% of those killed and injured were civilians. The immediate effects are clear; we've heard accounts in this Chamber of the destructive aftermath in cities in Yemen, Syria and many other places. What we often don't hear about is the longer-term effects: the stagnation of economic, social and environmental development; or the harm and injury caused by explosive remnants long after the initial conflict has ceased. We therefore support the recommendation of the Secretary-General for States to engage constructively in efforts to develop a political declaration to address the humanitarian impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. We also urge all States to accede to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Anti-Personnel Landmine Convention and the Arms Trade Treaty. Illegal and irresponsible arms transfers to conflict regions must be stopped.

Finally, when discussing the issue of the protection of civilians, we must also highlight the particular challenges faced by women and children. Ireland is supporting a civil society-led study to explore the specific risks faced by women and girls following forced displacement caused by Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. We have also advocated for a gender sensitive approach to be applied to all stages of humanitarian response planning, with emphasis on the need for women's participation.

Mr. President, we are making lowest common denominator calls today. We are asking that States and non-state actors alike adhere to the rules and norms that bind them to protecting civilians who have nothing to do with the conflict happening around them. This is simply not happening. Violations of IHL, including war crimes, are occurring on a daily basis. UNSCR 2286 affirms the need for States to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice. When this doesn't happen, the Security Council should refer cases to the International Criminal Court.

Since resolution 2286 was adopted this time last year, the suffering of civilians has persisted, and even worsened in some cases. We have one whole year until the implementation of this resolution is

again formally reviewed by this Council. Let us commit to ensuring that our statements for next year's debate contain more than condemnations.