



Joint Civil Society Statement Ahead of the Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

14 May 2026

As Member States prepare for the **May 2026 UN Security Council Open Debate** on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, civilians continue to bear the brunt of hostilities. Parties to conflict kill, injure, and displace civilians, deny humanitarian access, target humanitarian workers and violate international humanitarian and human rights law with near-total impunity. In 2025, one in six people on Earth was exposed to armed conflict. By mid-2025, an estimated 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide and 363 million faced acute hunger. UN-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence and grave violations against children have surged to record highs. Attacks on hospitals, schools, water systems, and other civilian infrastructure have become commonplace.

These harms are not inevitable. **They reflect persistent failures by parties to conflict to comply with international humanitarian law, compounded by the failure of Member States and international institutions to act and hold violators accountable.**

Protection of civilians is ultimately shaped by political choices - especially those of States and members of the Security Council - and by the persistent failure to hold all parties to the conflict, including non-state armed groups, accountable. Norms and tools exist. What is absent is consistent compliance, political will to enforce them, and accountability for those who violate them.

Compliance with international humanitarian law, while indispensable, is only the starting point.

It is precisely against this backdrop of rising violations and collapsing accountability that the international community is conducting a sweeping reset of humanitarian funding, UN structures, and peace operations. Humanitarian funding fell by roughly 25% in 2025, even as global military spending reached record levels. Climate change is compounding these pressures, driving displacement, resource competition, and conflict in already fragile contexts. **Ongoing UN and peace operation reforms, combined with reduced resources, are reshaping how protection**

is delivered and raising urgent questions about how responsibilities will be funded, shared, and sustained.

Protection of civilians must not become the collateral damage of this institutional reconfiguration. The reform moment is not separate from the protection crisis; it is directly shaping it. **The value of any reform must be judged by a single standard: whether it strengthens protection outcomes in practice.** Any reform that weakens the ability to prevent, mitigate, document, or respond to civilian harm is not an efficiency gain. It is a failure, measured in lives.

The harms of conflict are not experienced equally. A civilian's identity - including their gender, age, disability, displacement status, or ethnicity - shapes the specific risks they face and must be central to protection analysis and response. Women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, LGBTIQ people, displaced persons, and other marginalized groups face specific and compounded risks, including sexual and gender-based violence, exclusion from lifesaving services, barriers to evacuation and assistance, and long-term social and economic harm.

Funding cuts, reduced field presence, and the weakening of specialized capacities have already worsened outcomes for those most at risk. Further reforms that compound these losses will deepen that harm. At a minimum, states should ensure that reforms preserve and strengthen civilian harm tracking, monitoring and reporting, investigative capacity, and avenues for civilian-centric redress and remedy. A system that further reduces its ability to attribute and address harm, confront impunity, or protect civilians from the foreseeable effects of military operations is not adapting responsibly to current realities.

Reforms will fail if they are designed without those closest to the harms they are meant to address. Civil society organizations, local peacebuilders, and affected communities play indispensable roles in early warning, documentation, community-based protection, and accountability. Local actors are the first to respond and the last to leave - yet they are increasingly expected to do more with fewer resources, without access to duty of care systems, and at greater personal risk. **A reconfigured UN system must not offload responsibility and risk onto local actors under the banner of localization, without quality financing especially at a time when attacks against aid workers are on the rise. Meaningful, safe, and sustained engagement with diverse civil society must remain a core protection safeguard.**

As states and institutions adopt new technologies, those tools must reinforce - not replace - existing legal obligations and operational protection commitments. Technologies linked to artificial intelligence do not reduce states' obligations under international law, nor substitute for field presence, community trust, or accountability. **Systems deployed for the use of force must remain under clear human responsibility and be subject to transparency, oversight, and accountability.** States must also address the role of digital technologies in enabling civilian harm, including disinformation, incitement to violence, and the misuse of data and AI systems.

The choices being made today on mandates, resources, technologies, and institutional architecture will determine whether civilians in armed conflict receive the protection they are owed under international law and by the basic obligation of humanity. **At the center of those decisions**

must be the civilians most affected, supported by the resources they need and the action they are owed.

We Call Upon Member States to:

- Use diplomatic and political leverage to ensure respect for international law, including international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law, and refrain from enabling violations.
- Adopt or strengthen national protection of civilians frameworks covering prevention, tracking, response, and redress, applicable to their own and partner forces, including non-state actors.
- Endorse and operationalize the EWIPA Political Declaration through national policy and operational guidance restricting explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Ensure third-state compliance by not aiding or assisting IHL violations, including through arms transfers, security assistance, intelligence-sharing, or diplomatic cover, and condition or withdraw support where credible risks arise.
- Ensure accountability for violations by armed actors, including through domestic legal frameworks, targeted sanctions, international cooperation, and support to investigative and judicial mechanisms, and by conditioning engagement or support on respect for international law.
- Fully fund and support UN accountability mechanisms, including Commissions of Inquiry, Fact-Finding Missions, and Panels of Experts, and strengthen verification and enforcement of their findings.
- Strengthen implementation of POC-related Security Council resolutions, including through cross-regional initiatives developed with civil society.

We Call Upon the Security Council to:

- Treat the protection of civilians as a core criterion in mandates, sanctions, arms embargoes, and mission transitions; consistently condemn violations; and ensure adequate resourcing.
- Recognize sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, as a tactic of war and a mass atrocity crime, and ensure documentation, survivor-centered response, and accountability are protected and resourced.
- Protect Gender and Women Protection Adviser roles and ensure gender analysis is integrated across mission planning, review, and transitions.
- Strengthen the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children, protect Child Protection Adviser roles, and link findings to Council decisions.
- Affirm the protection of humanitarian, medical, and educational personnel, and demand implementation of resolution 2730, including accountability for attacks.
- Support the suspension of the P5 veto in cases of mass atrocities.

We Call Upon the UN and Member States to:

- Ensure no mission drawdown or transition proceeds without a protection impact assessment, plans to sustain essential functions, and consultation with civil society.
- Treat human rights monitoring, child protection, Women, Peace and Security capacities, disability inclusion, civilian harm analysis, and community engagement as essential protection functions.
- Preserve civilian harm tracking, investigative capacity, and avenues for redress.
- Provide sustained, flexible, and direct funding to local and national protection actors, including women-led organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities.
- Ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian access and remove political, legal, and counterterrorism impediments.
- Establish and fund Early Warning Systems integrating civil society data with clear triggers for action.
- Ensure AI and data-driven tools are subject to civilian oversight and human rights impact assessments.
- Integrate climate-related risks into protection analysis, early warning systems, and mission planning.

Finally, we urge all actors to fully uphold their obligations, guarantee that reform strengthens rather than undermines the protection of civilians, and center those most affected in every decision made in their name.

Endorsed by the following 20 organisations (in alphabetical order):

1. Action Against Hunger
2. All Survivors Project
3. Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights
4. Center for Civilians in Conflict
5. ChildFund Alliance
6. Control Arms
7. Every Casualty Counts
8. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
9. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack
10. Human Rights Watch
11. Humanitarian Policy Group
12. International Humanitarian Law Centre
13. Legal Action Worldwide
14. Nonviolent Peaceforce
15. Norwegian Refugee Council
16. Oxfam International
17. PAX
18. Plan International
19. Save the Children International
20. Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict