



Security Council

Distr.: General
7 May 2026

Original: English

Protection of civilians in armed conflict

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to the request in the statement by the President of the Security Council of 21 September 2018 (S/PRST/2018/18) and responds to the Council's requests for reporting on specific themes in resolutions 2286 (2016), 2417 (2018), 2474 (2019), 2475 (2019), 2573 (2021) and 2730 (2024). The report covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2025 and highlights key trends regarding the protection of civilians in armed conflicts; country examples used are illustrative and not exhaustive.

2. In 2025, the gap between global commitments to protect civilians in armed conflict and the reality faced by civilians widened further. Across conflicts, the same pattern was repeated: civilians bore the brunt of hostilities, were killed and injured, and were subjected to sexual violence, repeated displacement, hunger and terror. Critical infrastructure was destroyed or damaged, whether through direct attacks or incidental harm. Essential services including food, healthcare, water, electricity, sanitation and shelter were disrupted, obstructed and rendered inaccessible, pushing already fragile populations towards catastrophe. This unfolded amid legal and political impunity.

3. The tenth anniversary, in May 2026, of the adoption of Security Council resolution 2286 (2016) is marked by rising attacks on medical personnel and facilities. The report examines key challenges facing medical care in conflict since 2016. Conflict-induced hunger deepened, with two simultaneous famines. Humanitarian workers were impeded in their work, kidnapped and killed. Climate shocks and environmental degradation further eroded the resilience of conflict-affected people.

4. Technologies, including artificial intelligence, drones and information and communications technology, reshaped battlefields in ways that increased risks to civilians and challenged established normative frameworks.

5. The conflicts in the Sudan, Ukraine and in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,¹ reflected a number of these patterns and trends and stood out for their scale of destruction. These trends, however stark, cannot capture the full human toll. Families searching for food and water under bombardment, children pulled from rubble and

¹ Encompassing the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.



communities uprooted repeatedly remind us that harm is not abstract; it is intimate, immediate and devastating.

6. Of utmost concern is that the scale – and in some instances, the stated intent – of civilian harm appears to far outweigh the political will and investment to prevent or stop it. The question for the Security Council and Member States is how they will choose to respond. Protecting civilians requires more than expressing concern – it demands leadership, renewed political resolve and decisive and consistent action to limit the devastation of conflict in cities, stop the transfer of arms when violations of relevant rules of international law are likely to occur, and hold perpetrators accountable, to name only these. It requires Member States to defend the Charter of the United Nations and the norms that safeguard our shared humanity in both words and deeds. When force replaces law, brutality prevails and civilians pay the price.

II. Global state of the protection of civilians

A. Widespread harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure

7. Armed conflicts in 2025 were again marked by widespread harm to civilians. Indiscriminate attacks, violence targeting civilians, attacks harming civilian infrastructure and forced displacement continued, with particularly severe impacts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, north-east Nigeria, the Sudan, Ukraine, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and elsewhere. The United Nations recorded more than 37,000 civilian deaths across 20 armed conflicts in 2025, marking the first decline after three consecutive years of increases.² The downward trend was observed in most contexts covered, with marked declines in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic linked to declines in active hostilities. However, civilian deaths rose sharply in the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The human toll remained severe in 2025, amounting to approximately one recorded civilian death every 14 minutes. Figures represent a minimum the United Nations was able to document rather than all civilian casualties, given limitations in access and information and challenges in verifying civilian status. Adult men made up about 40 per cent of civilian casualties recorded, women about 18 per cent and children 20 per cent.³ Certain groups faced distinct harms: men and boys were frequently recruited and arbitrarily detained; children were abducted and separated from their families; women and girls were often targeted by sexual violence.

8. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, at least 20,000 Palestinians were killed or their remains recovered in the Gaza Strip in 2025 according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, including thousands of women and children. Unknown numbers remain buried under the rubble. The last 20 living hostages taken from Israel in October 2023 were released by 26 January 2026, some after two years of captivity, with reports of serious ill-treatment, while the remains of all deceased hostages were returned by January 2026. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, 240 Palestinians were killed or died from previously sustained injuries in 2025. In the Sudan, more than 11,000 civilians were killed, mainly in the Darfur and Kordofan regions. Some 4,000 civilians were killed in north-east Nigeria in the first eight months of 2025. More than 3,800 civilians were killed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while in Myanmar, over 1,500 civilians were killed as indiscriminate aerial attacks intensified. In Ukraine, more than 2,500 civilians were killed and 12,000 injured, a 31 per cent

² The previous report (S/2025/271) reported over 36,000 civilian deaths across 14 conflict contexts in 2024.

³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), figures as at 23 April 2026.

increase from 2024 and 70 per cent increase 2023. Russian authorities reported⁴ 253 civilians killed and 1,872 injured in the Russian Federation.

9. The use of missiles, bombs and other explosive weapons in cities and populated areas remained a leading cause of civilian harm. Increased use of drones to deploy explosive weapons in urban areas was a worrying trend. Alarming high numbers of civilian fatalities from the use of explosive weapons were reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere.⁵ Hospitals, schools, places of worship, water and sanitation infrastructure, electricity grids and telecommunications networks were repeatedly damaged, disrupting essential services and having cascading, long-term effects on civilians.

10. The second international conference of the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas was convened in Costa Rica in November 2025, highlighting important implementation measures by some States, including issuing and revising policy and guidance to restrict the use of explosive weapons and improving data to assess and respond to civilian harm. There were strong calls to broaden support for the Declaration and for signatories to accelerate its implementation through the adoption and revision of policies and good practices, including by avoiding use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas and refraining from transferring such weapons when their use may undermine the Declaration.

11. Civilians comprised most of those injured or killed by landmines, cluster munitions, improved explosive devices and other explosive ordnance. Their indiscriminate impact and the severe and long-lasting harm they cause underscore the need for compliance with applicable prohibitions and obligations under international law. Civilian casualties from landmines and other explosive ordnance were reported across many contexts, including in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, the Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Explosive ordnance continued to disproportionately affect children, restrict movement, impede access to essential services, and hinder returns and humanitarian operations. The unprecedented decision of some States to withdraw from the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction marked a dangerous retreat from international humanitarian law, increasing the risk of renewed anti-personnel mine use and threatening to reverse hard-won progress to protect civilians.

12. Abductions and hostage-taking were reported in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and elsewhere. Across conflicts, children were often abducted for recruitment and use in hostilities, or for the purpose of sexual violence.

13. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees was reported in Israel, Myanmar, the Russian Federation, the Sudan and the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, including sexual violence, severe beatings, electrocution, being forced to remain in stress positions for prolonged periods and waterboarding.

14. Parties to conflict continued to damage or destroy civilian infrastructure and disrupt vital services in hospitals, schools, water and sanitation networks and other

⁴ Due to a lack of access to the Russian Federation and limited publicly available information, the United Nations was unable to verify these numbers.

⁵ Action on Armed Violence, Explosive Weapons Monitor: 2025, initial data as of 6 February 2026.

essential facilities. Schools were attacked and used for military purposes. These actions drove displacement, hunger, public health crises and psychosocial harm. In the Sudan, attacks on power plants, water stations and dams surged, causing prolonged outages that affected more than 75 per cent of households. In Ukraine, 429 attacks on energy infrastructure, a 32 per cent increase from 2024, led to nationwide power cuts and disrupted heating and water services, including during freezing conditions. In the Gaza Strip, more than 80 per cent of all structures were damaged by year's end. In Yemen, repeated air strikes on power stations, ports, airports and fuel facilities caused electricity shortages, disrupted essential services and reduced the flow of commercial goods and humanitarian supplies into a country already facing acute shortages.

B. Aggravated suffering

Medical care: 10 years after Security Council resolution 2286 (2016)

15. In 2016, the Security Council adopted resolution 2286 (2016) in response to an alarming increase in the frequency and scale of attacks against medical personnel and facilities. In the resolution, the Council demanded that all parties to conflict fully comply with their obligations under international law and urged Member States and warring parties to develop effective measures to ensure the protection of medical care in conflict.

16. Ten years later after the adoption of that resolution, attacks and other impediments affecting medical care remain a feature of many conflicts. In 2025, the United Nations recorded 1,356 conflict-related attacks on healthcare in 18 conflict settings, resulting in 1,980 deaths and 1,175 injuries, compared with 802 incidents in 2018, when monitoring began. Incidents increased in many contexts, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Myanmar, South Sudan, the Sudan, Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The Sudan saw the highest number of fatalities, with 1,620 deaths from ongoing hostilities and targeted violence against health infrastructure and personnel. The largest number of injuries occurred in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (357), followed by the Sudan (276) and Ukraine (204).⁶ The significant increase in violence against healthcare since 2016 has been driven by State actors, who account for more than double the number of incidents as non-State actors.⁷

17. In several contexts, supplying health centres remained a major challenge. In the Gaza Strip, cumbersome administrative and bureaucratic impediments hampered access to essential goods such as medicines, water, food or fuel, forcing health centres to suspend activities or operate in rudimentary conditions. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, South Sudan, the Sudan and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, medical convoys carrying supplies to medical facilities were attacked and looted. Some humanitarian donors prohibited the use of funds to support front-line health centres in areas where groups on national terrorist lists have influence.

18. Conduct affecting medical personnel and transport was regularly reported, including arrest and detention at checkpoints and direct or indiscriminate attacks. In 2025, drone attacks directly affected medical facilities, transport or personnel in Colombia, Ethiopia, the Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere.

19. In several countries, hospitals became unsafe and non-functional for the wounded and sick and for medical personnel. Of the above-mentioned incidents, 932 destroyed or damaged medical facilities. In Yemen, almost half of the health facilities

⁶ Data from the World Health Organization (WHO), Surveillance System for Attacks on Healthcare, as at 15 April 2026.

⁷ Data from the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition and Insecurity Insight, as at 27 March 2026.

were reported as non-functional or partially functional, largely owing to conflict-related damage, insecurity and disruptions to supplies and staff. In the Sudan, 43 per cent of public hospitals and most private facilities were non-functional. In June, during 12 days of hostilities, 14 health facilities were damaged in the Islamic Republic of Iran and 1 in Israel; 16 health workers were killed and 3 injured in the Islamic Republic of Iran and 5 were injured in Israel. At times, health facilities were reportedly misused for military purposes.

20. Violence and threats against medical personnel and patients disrupted medical care. Medical personnel and patients were arrested, detained and questioned, including due to alleged affiliation with parties to a conflict or alleged support for terrorism. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, more than 400 health workers were detained. Medical personnel and patients were killed and abducted in multiple attacks that harmed hospitals, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and the Sudan.

21. Some parties to conflict justified attacks on medical facilities and obstacles to the provision of medical care on the grounds that these were being used by parties to conflict or that supplies were being diverted for military purposes. International humanitarian law imposes a series of obligations to respect and protect the medical mission, including in such instances. These rules cannot be ignored. Moreover, as consistently asserted by the Security Council, States must ensure that any measure taken to counter terrorism complies with all their obligations under international law, including Security Council resolutions [2462 \(2019\)](#) and [2482 \(2019\)](#).

22. Misinformation and disinformation about the medical mission, especially in social media, has been on the increase, creating suspicion and hostility towards medical personnel among civilians and fuelling violence against medical personnel and medical objects in some countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique. As medical services and humanitarian operations increasingly rely on digital infrastructure and data networks, they also face growing risks of malicious cyberactivities.

23. In line with Security Council resolution [2286 \(2016\)](#), restoring an environment of respect for the medical mission should be a priority for Member States. The recommendations of the Secretary-General to the Security Council ([S/2016/722](#)) have given Member States practical guidance on action they can take in this regard.

Food insecurity and water scarcity

24. In 2025, conflict and insecurity were the primary drivers of acute food insecurity for 147 million people in 19 countries and territories.⁸ Conflict-induced food insecurity persisted in the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. For the first time in two decades, two famines were confirmed in the same year, in the Sudan and the Gaza Strip, exacerbated by the weaponization of food and siege tactics.

25. In the Sudan, the armed conflict triggered an unprecedented food crisis, with famine conditions confirmed in El Fasher and Kadugli and over 21 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity countrywide as of September, amid the widespread denial of humanitarian access, looting and interference with principled

⁸ Information on levels of acute food insecurity are based on Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) phase 3 (crisis), phase 4 (emergency) and phase 5 (catastrophic).

aid delivery. Prolonged sieges cut tens of thousands of people off from food while over 17 million people lacked safe drinking water.

26. The Security Council was again alerted to the risk of conflict-induced famine in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, pursuant to its resolution 2417 (2018). In the Gaza Strip, damage to a reported 87 per cent of cropland, the destruction of fishing, irrigation and market infrastructure, and severe restrictions on the entry and distribution of aid and commercial goods pushed nearly the entire population of 2.1 million into high levels of acute food insecurity, with 32 per cent facing catastrophic levels and more than half facing emergency levels from early August and into September. Famine was subsequently confirmed in Gaza Governorate in August. While conditions improved after the ceasefire of October 2025, including through increased access for humanitarian and commercial food deliveries, food security gains remained fragile. Even during ceasefires, the unpredictability of crossings and insecurity repeatedly depleted stocks, while prices for staple foods spiked. Water and sanitation infrastructure remains devastated, with most people living far below minimum standards.

27. In Yemen, over half the population, 18.1 million people, faced high levels of acute food insecurity, including 5.5 million people at emergency levels, as conflict disrupted maritime traffic, fuel imports and supply chains. Air strikes and infrastructure damage depressed production, while access impediments and funding cuts limited humanitarian reach. Over 13 million people lacked access to safe water due to destroyed networks and power shortages, thereby exacerbating disease and acute malnutrition.

28. In Myanmar, protracted conflict, marked by the burning of villages and farmland and forced displacement, border closures and the earthquake of March 2025 left 16.7 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Roadblocks and insecurity severed people from essential goods, while prices rose sharply in several regions. Protracted conflict and insecurity in north-east Nigeria restricted access to farmland, markets and livelihoods, leaving over 4.5 million acutely food insecure for the sixth consecutive year. In Somalia, conflict combined with below-average rains and humanitarian funding gaps left 4.5 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity by late 2025.

Forced displacement

29. The number of people forcibly displaced surpassed 117.3 million by the end of June 2025, including 67.8 million internally displaced persons and 42.5 million refugees.⁹ Conflict and climate-related crises increasingly overlapped, with the number of countries reporting internal displacement from both causes tripling since 2009, often resulting in more complex and prolonged displacement.¹⁰

30. Conflict in just five countries – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, South Sudan, the Sudan and Ukraine – accounted for 65 per cent of all new displacements in the first half of 2025.¹¹ The Sudan remained the largest displacement crisis globally, with 11.8 million Sudanese refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons. In April and May alone, large-scale attacks on camps in northern Darfur forced an estimated 400,000 people to flee. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 90 per cent of residents were forcibly displaced by military operations in the Gaza Strip, many multiple times, and into increasingly shrinking spaces, while over 37,000 were forcibly displaced in the West Bank due to demolitions, settler violence and military operations.

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Mid-Year Trends 2025* (Geneva, 2025).

¹⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement, 2025*.

¹¹ UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2025*.

31. Returns, primarily in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic, led to a near 5 per cent decline in the number of displaced people.¹² Many returns occurred in adverse circumstances driven by such factors as limited legal stay alternatives or exhausted coping mechanisms, while reintegration remained challenged by explosive ordnance contamination, limited access to services and other challenges.

Sexual violence

32. Conflict-related sexual violence persisted, with the United Nations reporting over 9,300 cases in 2025 (S/2026/321), in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. Figures remain indicative given the significant underreporting. Sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage and pregnancies, was again used as a tactic of war, retaliation and social control, including in detention and along displacement routes. Women and girls represented some 95 per cent of victims. Men and boys were subjected to rape, genital mutilation and other forms of sexual torture, particularly in detention. Sexual violence against children, often preceded by abduction, remained pervasive. Survivors faced severe barriers to healthcare, psychosocial support and justice owing to stigma, funding shortfalls and damaged infrastructure, while food insecurity and economic collapse heightened risks of sexual exploitation.

The natural environment and climate change

33. In the Central African Republic, Colombia, Lebanon, Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Yemen, in the Sahel, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and elsewhere, armed conflict accelerated environmental degradation and amplified climate change risks, including reduced water availability and increased soil contamination, with long-term consequences.

34. In the Gaza Strip, the conflict caused an environmental crisis, generating some 57.5 million tons of debris, polluting soil and water and destroying cropland and tree cover. With most wastewater plants non-functional and pumping stations damaged, untreated sewage spilled into streets and the sea, contaminating the aquifer and posing an acute public health risk. In the Sudan, hostilities near the Nile River and in agricultural areas contaminated water sources and soil with explosive ordnance and degraded metals. Contamination outstripped clearance capacity, rendering arable land unusable, while damaged energy infrastructure released pollutants into the air and soil. In Somalia and Yemen, floods breached rivers, damaged water and irrigation networks, displaced explosive ordnance and destroyed farmland, thereby exacerbating displacement, resource competition and undermining early recovery.

C. Persons at specific risk

Persons with disabilities

35. In Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Sudan, Somalia, South Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen and elsewhere, persons with disabilities faced heightened risks, including barriers to evacuating ahead of attacks and exclusion from effective advance warnings, essential services and humanitarian assistance, all of which raise serious protection concerns. These risks

¹² Ibid.

compounded others, such as the vulnerability of children and older persons to family separation. The collapse of health and rehabilitation services, the lack of access to assistive devices and the lack of disability-disaggregated data exacerbated pre-existing marginalization and long-term vulnerability.

36. In the Sudan, persons with disabilities were unable to evacuate high-risk areas, were harassed at checkpoints and lost essential assistive devices. Explosive ordnance created new disabilities at scale, while the collapse of healthcare left thousands without treatment or rehabilitation. In the Gaza Strip, conflict-related disabilities increased substantially, including thousands of amputations and spinal injuries, while 83 per cent of persons with disabilities lost assistive devices, and the destruction of rehabilitation services left many without basic mobility or care. Inaccessible shelters and damaged roads further isolated persons with disabilities, limiting their access to humanitarian assistance and essential services.

Children

37. Children continued to suffer on an alarming scale in 2025, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere. The killing and maiming of children increased, driven mainly by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, in Lebanon, Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen and elsewhere. Explosive ordnance contamination continued to harm children, including in countries where hostilities had abated. In the Syrian Arab Republic, child casualties from incidents involving mines and other explosive ordnance increased fourfold in 2025 compared with 2024, as many Syrians returned to former front-line towns.

38. The use of certain technologies, including drones and the use of artificial intelligence in identifying targets, was increasingly involved in incidents affecting children. Information and communications technology, including social media, was used by armed actors to influence, abduct, extort and recruit and use children in hostilities. Girls were particularly vulnerable to technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Women and girls

39. Women and girls continued to face specific risks. Gender-based discrimination and exclusion hampered girls' education and women's livelihoods and participation in civic life. In the Gaza Strip, 16,000 women lost their husbands and their families' breadwinners, leaving some 57,000 women-headed households more vulnerable. In Nigeria, women and girls were abducted, raped and forced into marriage with limited access to justice. In Burkina Faso, Colombia, Mozambique and elsewhere, gender-based violence during displacement remained widespread.

Journalists

40. In 2025, 60 of the 96 killings of journalists recorded by the United Nations occurred in conflict settings, confirming an alarming upward trend from 53 cases in 2024 and 35 in 2023. The Occupied Palestinian Territory accounted for more than half of conflict-related killings of journalists globally. Yemen witnessed the highest number of killings since 2016. Journalists in armed conflicts also experienced systematic harassment, arbitrary detention and threats. Unauthorized access to data, tracking and other forms of digital surveillance and cybersurveillance facilitated the targeting of journalists and their disappearance.

Missing persons

41. The global scale of missing persons remained vast in 2025. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered 178,092 new cases and followed more than 411,500, with the sharpest increase linked to the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Other contexts with significant new registrations of missing persons included the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Uganda, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

42. In the Sudan, thousands remained unaccounted for following the capture of El Fasher, Darfur, in October 2025. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, civilians, including children, went missing in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, more than 11,000 people remained missing in the Gaza Strip, with many recovered bodies still unidentified. In Colombia, 385 cases of missing persons were registered.

D. Efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, protect civilians and seek accountability

Humanitarian action

43. In 2025, the lack of protection for humanitarian personnel remained deeply concerning. More than 332 humanitarian workers were reported as having been killed globally, including over 325 who were reported killed in conflict settings across 18 countries,¹³ marking the third consecutive year of a record level of fatalities. National and locally recruited personnel, serving their own communities, accounted for most deaths, yet their losses rarely received international public attention. Fatalities were concentrated in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, during aid delivery and in residential settings, alongside the Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ukraine. In the Gaza Strip, between October 2023 and the end of 2025, more than 579 aid workers were reported killed, some in their homes, others while at work, including 388 United Nations personnel, primarily from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – the highest death toll in the history of the United Nations. United Nations and humanitarian personnel also faced threats and intimidation, including public threats by Israeli officials against UNRWA personnel. These trends highlight the urgent need for parties to conflict and Member States to uphold their legal obligations to respect and protect humanitarian personnel, assets and premises and underscore the importance of initiatives such as the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, launched in 2025, to strengthen protection in practice.

44. Humanitarian personnel faced arrests, arbitrary detention, kidnapping and intimidation across more settings, alongside growing criminalization of humanitarian action. In Yemen, offices of the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations were raided, with 73 United Nations and five staff of non-governmental organizations still detained as of December 2025. In the Sudan, at least 19 local responders were detained. Severe and abrupt funding shortfalls in 2025 undermined risk management capacities. Violence against aid workers disrupted operations, undermined principled humanitarian action and deprived vulnerable populations of timely access to vital aid. Humanitarian workers faced extreme constraints to reach the people in need in the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation.

¹³ Aid Worker Security Database, 2025, available at www.aidworkersecurity.org/. Figures as at 23 April 2026.

45. Bureaucratic and administrative procedures continued to impede humanitarian operations. In the Gaza Strip, all humanitarian and commercial entries were suspended by Israel for 78 days after the first ceasefire ended on 2 March, while the closure of the Zikim crossing for two months from September prevented direct humanitarian access to northern Gaza. In December, 37 international organizations that provide essential humanitarian services were notified by Israel that their registrations would expire. In South Sudan, 12 barges carrying approximately 800 metric tons of humanitarian supplies were held at Malakal Port for over four weeks due to taxation and administrative barriers.

46. In 2025, in several contexts, parties promoted the delivery of humanitarian assistance through mechanisms that prioritized political or military aims over the needs of affected people. None of these models achieved the stated objectives or could substitute for principled humanitarian action. In the Gaza Strip, a militarized food distribution scheme put civilians at risk of death and injury while excluding persons with disabilities and older persons. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, at least 2,615 Palestinians were killed while attempting to access humanitarian assistance between late May and early October 2025. Most were young men and boys. In the Niger, the Government-issued *Journal officiel* invited non-governmental organizations to contribute to the country's war effort, raising potential concerns about humanitarians' ability to maintain neutrality and independence. The normalizing of approaches that politicize aid and contravene humanitarian principles undermines effective humanitarian action and access well beyond any single conflict.

Peacekeeping and special political missions

47. Peacekeepers continued to protect hundreds of thousands of civilians despite increasing instability, access restrictions and budget reductions. Following the takeover of Goma and surrounding areas in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo by non-State armed groups, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has protected dozens of at-risk individuals in its bases. In Ituri, MONUSCO reinforced State presence and deterred violence, contributing to decreased attacks by the end of 2025. In Abyei, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) facilitated dialogue between community leaders, which eased tensions, with no serious violence between them reported in 2025. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) continued to facilitate the safe movement of civilians to more secure areas, in coordination with local authorities, and to protect individuals on its bases.

48. Starting in October, all peacekeeping operations had to make significant cuts due to liquidity shortfalls. Despite implementing mitigation measures, cuts inevitably constrained missions' protection efforts. In South Sudan, for example, budget cuts and subsequent base closures coincided with renewed hostilities, straining the capacity of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) amid escalating threats to civilians.

49. Joint efforts continued with the African Union to enhance operational readiness to implement Security Council resolution [2719 \(2023\)](#). The United Nations provided technical support around guidance, standardized templates and mission-specific protection of civilians strategies in African regional and subregional operations.

50. Special political missions supported the protection of civilians through their mandates in the areas of child protection, children and armed conflict, conflict-related sexual violence and human rights in several countries, including Afghanistan and Somalia.

Accountability

51. The pursuit of accountability continued at various levels. In Colombia, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace issued its first sentences against former leaders of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) for kidnapping and against former members of State forces for killings and disappearances. Seven former FARC members and 12 members of State forces were sentenced to eight years of reparations-related sanctions for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court emphasized the participation of over 9,000 victims and the convicts' obligation to contribute directly to reparative projects. In the Central African Republic, the Special Criminal Court convicted 12 individuals in two cases for crimes against humanity and war crimes. In Ukraine, between November 2024 and June 2025, Ukrainian courts conducted at least 292 trials relating to alleged war crimes, resulting in multiple convictions.

52. In Sweden, the Stockholm District Court convicted a Swedish national who joined Da'esh in the Syrian Arab Republic of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against nine Yazidi victims. The judgment marked the first conviction for genocide through forcible transfer of children from one group to another. Roger Lumbala, a former leader of the armed group Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie, was convicted in France of complicity in crimes against humanity and sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment.

53. Trial Chamber I of the International Criminal Court convicted and sentenced Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman for 27 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Darfur between August 2003 and April 2004; this was the Court's first conviction relating to Darfur.¹⁴

54. The International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion on 22 October 2025 reaffirming Israel's obligations as occupying Power, finding that the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip was inadequately supplied and that Israel was in violation of its obligations under international humanitarian law to facilitate humanitarian relief and ensure the essential needs of the population are met. The Court also recognized the indispensable role of UNRWA in the Gaza Strip. In its subsequent resolution [80/77](#), the General Assembly recalled the Court's affirmations and demanded that Israel comply with its obligations under international law.

55. Coercive measures imposed on members of the International Criminal Court risk weakening accountability mechanisms and deterring victims from seeking justice. Attempts to weaken or delegitimize institutions charged with maintaining international peace and security and upholding international law, notably the United Nations, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, also erode the systems established to protect civilians.

III. New technologies and changing battlefields

56. Technological advances are fundamentally reshaping conflicts, presenting complex challenges for the protection of civilians. Artificial intelligence and new digital and weapons technologies are generating risks to civilians by expanding the reach of violence, increasing the speed of decision-making and eroding the distinction between civilians and combatants. Technology is transforming existing weapons systems and enabling entirely new ones, raising profound humanitarian, ethical and legal concerns, particularly around human judgment and control in the use of force and compounding civilian harm.

¹⁴ The trial judgment is under appeal.

57. Drone attacks in conflict settings increased by at least 4,000 per cent between 2020 and 2024,¹⁵ driven by technological advances, lower costs and mass production. Their use, whether by State or non-State parties, contributed to civilian casualties, the destruction of critical infrastructure and forced displacement. In Ukraine, short-range first-person view drones were a leading cause of civilian death and injury, in some months surpassing missiles, artillery and aerial bombs. In the Sudan, civilians experienced continuous drone attacks affecting densely populated neighbourhoods, markets, hospitals, mosques and universities. Drone use is increasingly affecting humanitarian operations, with reports of attacks on United Nations humanitarian convoys carrying life-saving assistance in North Darfur, the Sudan, in August, and in the Kherson region of Ukraine in October. Technical failures, targeting errors or the inability to distinguish humanitarian from military actors compound these risks. Drones have enabled mine-laying far from front lines, including in cities, while improvised manufacturing such as 3D printing-enabled modifications made munitions harder to detect and clear.

58. Armed forces have rapidly expanded investment in artificial intelligence and its deployment on the battlefield. In Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, artificial intelligence has reportedly been used to support target identification and inform military operations. While artificial intelligence may enhance situational awareness and enable faster analysis, helping to protect civilians, if used responsibly, it also introduces severe risks. As captured in the report of the Secretary-General on artificial intelligence in the military domain (A/80/78), serious concerns include the loss of human oversight, inadequate accountability and its application in densely populated areas. Artificial intelligence systems rely on data that are often biased, incomplete, outdated or unreliable; in conflicts, the use of such systems risks discriminatory or unlawful outcomes at an unprecedented scale. Some artificial intelligence systems depend on the surveillance of civilians, including the collection of personal information, raising legal and ethical concerns about privacy, personal data protection and human rights.

59. The year 2026 offers a critical moment for States to consider the risks of using artificial intelligence in warfare, building on two resolutions of the General Assembly on artificial intelligence (79/325 and 79/239), and to identify ways to harness the potential of artificial intelligence to better protect civilians. Artificial intelligence-enabled military decision support systems must never replace human judgment. These technologies must operate within applicable legal frameworks and meet the highest ethical standards. With adequate safeguards, artificial intelligence can support compliance with international humanitarian law and civilian harm mitigation; for example, through the use of artificial intelligence-equipped drones for landmine clearance.

60. Progress was made in 2025 by the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems in drafting elements of a possible instrument under the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects. Adopting a legally binding instrument that establishes clear prohibitions and restrictions on autonomous weapons systems in 2026, as called for in the joint appeal issued in 2023 by the Secretary-General and the President of ICRC, is paramount.

61. Information and communications technologies, including social media, were increasingly used to spread misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against

¹⁵ Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), based on data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), “Drones are changing how wars harm civilians”; and CIVIC, “Protection of civilians trends report”.

certain communities and against United Nations, humanitarian and medical personnel. These dynamics can incite violence, endanger aid workers and obstruct access to essential services, as well as enable the surveillance and targeting of civilians.

62. Of serious concern, information and communications technology has also been used to disrupt or damage critical civilian infrastructure. As societies depend more heavily on digital systems for water, energy, food supply, healthcare and communications, such services become more vulnerable to disruption, with potentially far-reaching consequences for civilians. States should continue to be guided by the norms endorsed by the General Assembly for responsible behaviour in the use of information and communications technologies, including for the protection of critical infrastructure.

63. Digital technologies have significantly expanded civilian involvement in conflict, with hacker groups, private technology companies and even children drawn into hostilities. Civilians can collect and feed targeting data, build or operate drones, jam communications or conduct cyberoperations. In some contexts, civilian hackers have conducted conflict-related information and communications technology operations affecting civilian objects. Such involvement raises complex questions of international humanitarian law, potentially exposing them to direct or incidental harm. States should avoid drawing civilians into activities that implicate them in hostilities, and children must never be used.

64. Connectivity disruptions are increasingly observed in conflicts, including intentionally by parties to conflict, and have had devastating consequences for civilians in Myanmar, the Sudan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and elsewhere, preventing civilians from obtaining life-saving information such as evacuation warnings, accessing emergency and essential services and contacting loved ones.

65. The establishment of the Global Mechanism on developments in the field of information and communications technologies in the context of international security and advancing responsible State behaviour in the use of information and communications technologies in 2025 is an opportunity for States to strengthen understanding of the risks for civilians and necessary safeguards to prevent and mitigate harm, including how international humanitarian law applies in the digital domain.

IV. Ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law and working towards full protection of civilians

66. In too many conflicts, military advantage is prioritized over the obligation to protect civilians and vital infrastructure, with long-term consequences for people's safety, health, housing, family unity, education, livelihoods and the natural environment. Civilians are identified as threats, detainees are denied protection, healthcare personnel and humanitarian workers face obstruction and violence. Those who pursue accountability for crimes, including journalists, activists and judges, are vilified, sanctioned and sometimes killed while those suspected of crimes enjoy impunity.

67. Dehumanizing rhetoric fuels fear and normalizes violations. Persistent violations of international humanitarian law and the selective defence of norms undermine confidence in international law and encourage further breaches, while a trend towards excessively permissive interpretations undermines the very object and purpose of international humanitarian law.

68. More than 75 years after the adoption of the four Geneva Conventions, respect for international humanitarian law must remain universal. States must both respect and ensure respect for its rules. They must stop and prevent violations – in their own operations and those they support. The global initiative launched by Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa, together with ICRC, to galvanize political commitment to international humanitarian law, which now has 108 participants,¹⁶ is a call for humanity to be upheld in war.

69. Previous reports¹⁷ highlighted the need to complement respect for applicable law with concrete measures to understand, prevent and mitigate the full range of civilian harm. While international humanitarian law reflects the minimum protection civilians and other protected persons must be accorded, serious harm may occur even when parties act lawfully. Nor does the legality of conduct diminish the harm experienced by civilians. The scale and scope of suffering in contemporary conflicts demands proactive leadership towards the full protection of civilians. Political decisions are required and must be translated into policies and operational measures to reinforce compliance with existing legal obligations and prioritize the protection of civilians. The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and the Safe Schools Declaration are prime examples. The adoption of national policies on the protection of civilians, such as in Nigeria,¹⁸ provide vision and frameworks for action.

70. Strengthening protection requires systematically incorporating foreseeable direct and indirect effects into planning and decision-making and assessing cumulative harm over time, rather than viewing incidents in isolation. Civilian harm tracking is a critical tool and should capture harms beyond immediate death and injury, incorporating damage or destruction of civilian objects and the indirect or reverberating effects that often result therefrom. Research has shown that allocating dedicated resources, establishing standardized procedures and methodologies and robust data management systems, and developing effective internal and external reporting mechanisms enhance effectiveness.¹⁹

71. Harm caused by parties' policies and actions such as forced displacement, limitations on freedom of movement or the delivery of humanitarian assistance should also be assessed. Understanding patterns of harm and how harm is experienced by civilians across different groups is essential to inform appropriate policy and operational responses and effectively protect civilians. Research across nine conflicts revealed that both community members and armed actors viewed mental harm as equally or more serious than physical harm, highlighting the importance of locally driven, contextual understandings of harm and looking beyond physical harms to include psychological harms that can profoundly impact individually, collectively and generationally.²⁰

¹⁶ As of February 2026. See <https://www.upholdhumanityinwar.org/en>.

¹⁷ S/2024/385 and S/2025/271.

¹⁸ See <https://airforce.mil.ng/news/naf-institutionalises-civilian-protection-measures-to-strengthen-operational-accountability-and-public-trust1246836323>.

¹⁹ See United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), "Leveraging data to reduce civilian harm during military operations in populated areas: practical, data-driven steps to implement the political declaration on EWIPA", November 2025; Article 36 and Airwars, "Tracking civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas", May 2025; and Article 36 and Airwars, *Implementation Toolkit on Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*, November 2025.

²⁰ Research by the Beyond Compliance Consortium.

V. Observations and recommendations

72. The architecture built over generations to safeguard civilians and a minimum of humanity during conflict is under attack. Legal protections and norms are being disregarded, distorted or abandoned altogether. The withdrawal of some Member States from the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions risks undermining a normative framework that has saved countless lives. Claims of exceptional necessity cannot justify disregard for the rules designed precisely to protect civilians during armed conflict. We must reject attempts to subordinate the protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law to a general claim of security or defence considerations.

73. Technological advances are transforming the conduct of conflict faster than our ability to understand or regulate them. While they offer potential benefits, they carry profound risks for civilians. Armed drones lower the threshold for using force, complicate accountability and bring violence into areas once considered safe. Artificial intelligence enables the identification of targets at a speed and scale that risks amplifying civilian harm. Cyberoperations can cause massive harm without a shot fired. States must ensure that new technologies are developed, deployed and regulated in ways that effectively protect civilians and comply with international law. Human control over the use of force must be preserved.

74. Other tools to protect civilians are underutilized, underresourced or under attack. Peace operations had to reduce staffing levels and scale back presence, stymying efforts to support the protection of civilians and their rights, increasing the gap between mandates and resources. The severe funding cuts to humanitarian action left many civilians without life-saving assistance, compounding conflict harms. Even the worst affected are not spared.

75. Meanwhile, global military spending continues to rise, reaching an estimated \$2.7 trillion in 2024.²¹ Just 1 per cent of that total would fund the global humanitarian appeal. I urge States to show their solidarity by supporting the “87 million lives” campaign and reinvesting more broadly in the protection of civilians. The UN80 Initiative seeks to transform the Organization to be more effective, coherent, accountable and fit-for-purpose. I call upon States to ensure that protection mandates across the United Nations system remain strong and resourced to support collective efforts with Member States to keep the protection of civilians as a critical priority now and in the future.

76. Member States and parties to conflict must commit to the effective protection of civilians and stop the surge in civilian harm and suffering. This includes redoubling efforts to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law and accountability for violations thereof, and to mitigate and dramatically reduce civilian harm, irrespective of whether its cause is lawful. It also includes investigating alleged serious violations of international law, prosecuting perpetrators, ensuring reparations for victims and guarantees of non-repetition and strengthening States’ capacities and resources to investigate and prosecute.

77. States must uphold and preserve the norms and principles enshrined in humanitarian disarmament treaties. Those that have withdrawn from the Convention on Cluster Munitions and Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention should refrain from actions that are inconsistent with them and rejoin. States not yet Party to the Conventions should join without delay.

²¹ *The Security We Need: Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future* (United Nations publication, 2025), p. 17.

78. States should endorse and implement the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, adopt procedures and policies that reduce civilian harm and share good practices, including by restricting or refraining from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas as appropriate. States that endorsed the Declaration should condition the transfer of explosive weapons, their components and delivery systems on recipient parties' willingness and commitment to use them in a manner consistent with the Declaration. This would complement States' legal obligations on arms transfers.

79. States and parties to conflict must respect and protect United Nations and humanitarian personnel and associated personnel, including local and nationally recruited personnel, their assets and premises, allow and facilitate safe and unimpeded humanitarian access, and take measures to prevent harm and ensure accountability, consistent with Security Council resolution 2730 (2024). They should take forward the recommendations contained in my letter dated 22 November 2024 (S/2024/852) and consider joining voluntary initiatives such as the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel and ensure their effective implementation.

80. States, parties to conflict, the United Nations and civil society should work collaboratively to build shared understanding, innovate protective measures and create sustained spaces for dialogue and joint action towards the full protection of civilians.

81. The United Nations was founded 80 years ago with the primary purpose to safeguard humanity from the scourge of war. And yet, looking back over the past decade, the level of harm civilians have endured has only grown. Conflicts are multiplying, as are violations of international law and impunity for those violations. The rule of law is being outmuscled by the rule of force, often in plain sight. The Charter of the United Nations is being ignored. Across conflicts, our shared sense of humanity that restrains violence is eroding. This endangers everyone, everywhere. And it is the result of political choices.

82. In this increasingly dangerous world, I am convinced that Member States not only have a legal obligation and moral imperative to recommit to the protection of civilians, but also have a vested interest to do so. The alternative is the law of the jungle and brutality. Today's choices will determine whether we can rise to the values and ambitions of the Charter. They will shape the future of warfare and our future as the peoples of the United Nations.
