



Security Council

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Letter dated 6 April 2021 from the Permanent Representative of Viet Nam to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In its capacity as President of the Security Council for the month of April 2021, Viet Nam will convene an open debate in virtual format on the theme “Protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population” under the item entitled “Protection of civilians in armed conflict” on Tuesday, 27 April 2021, at 9 a.m. (Eastern Daylight Time).

In order to guide discussions on this topic, Viet Nam has prepared the attached concept note (see annex). I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) **Dang Dinh Quy**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative



Annex to the letter dated 6 April 2021 from the Permanent Representative of Viet Nam to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Concept note for the Security Council open debate on the theme “Protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population”, to be held on 27 April 2021

Introduction

1. The protection of civilians in armed conflict agenda has been one of the focuses of the Security Council, as reflected in several thematic and country-specific deliberations.¹ It is expected that, through constructive and positive discourse, the open debate can highlight experiences, challenges and recommendations regarding the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population in armed conflict, therefore contributing to furthering the protection of civilians in armed conflict agenda.

Background

2. Armed conflict causes devastating harm to civilians, civilian objects and the civilian population more generally. Attacks that lead to the destruction, damage or rendering useless of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, crops, livestock, agricultural assets, drinking water installations and supplies, irrigation works, wastewater management and sanitary systems, energy systems and medical facilities, can result in reduced access or deprivation of access to services that are vital to ensure the subsistence of the civilian population, including food, water and sanitation, medical care and electricity. The failure of such objects because they are destroyed, damaged or otherwise rendered useless during armed conflict can cause or contribute to forced displacement, compound the spread of infectious disease and hinder humanitarian efforts. More civilians are dying from the indirect effects of armed conflict, such as food insecurity, malnutrition, unmet medical needs, lack of access to safe water and sanitation or contamination of water, than of violence and attacks.² Armed conflict and the behaviour of parties to armed conflict also pose physical and bureaucratic impediments to the routine operation, maintenance or repair of civilian infrastructure and endanger or incapacitate personnel in charge of these activities, which can easily lead to infrastructure failures and the disruption of essential services. Humanitarian organizations providing assistance in accordance with humanitarian principles can be exposed to attacks and other impediments to their activities in contravention of international humanitarian law, complicating much-needed assistance efforts and depriving civilians of relief supplies.

¹ See United Nations, *Building a Culture of Protection* (May 2019).

² World Bank, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), *Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, D.C., 2021). In its publication entitled *Water under Fire: for Every Child, Water and Sanitation in Complex Emergencies*, UNICEF indicates that in protracted conflicts, children younger than 15 are, on average, nearly three times more likely to die from diarrhoeal disease linked to unsafe water and sanitation than violence directly linked to conflict and war. It also indicates that children under 5 years of age are more than 20 times more likely to die from diarrhoeal disease linked to unsafe water and sanitation than violence in conflict.

3. The destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population and the disruption of essential services have been identified as major challenges to the safe return and voluntary resettlement of displaced communities. In a post-conflict context, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of civilian infrastructure and the restoration of essential services should be prioritized, as those measures have the potential to facilitate socioeconomic recovery and peacebuilding. Owing to the significant costs associated with infrastructure rehabilitation and reconstruction, assistance from international partners in capacity-building could play an important role in supporting peacebuilding efforts.

4. The importance of protecting objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population comes to the fore in the light of new trends, including the urbanization of armed conflict and the emergence of new technologies and weaponry, as well as such issues as climate change and the environmental consequences of armed conflicts. Non-international armed conflicts are increasingly being fought in urban areas with an estimated 50 million people living there being affected. In these situations, such objects exist in an interconnected network and are vulnerable to damage, especially from heavy explosive weapons, which means that access to essential services could be cut off more broadly.³ The damage to or destruction of an object that renders it inoperable can affect associated objects.⁴ Armed conflict poses a wide range of threats to the environment, in both urban and rural areas, as well as to agricultural lands, which in turn can have devastating long-term environmental health impacts. Impacts of climate change such as extreme weather events, natural disasters and environmental degradation in conflict-affected areas further complicate underlying security risks. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of communities and stretched the resources of States, including health-care systems and facilities ravaged by armed conflict. It has reaffirmed the importance of international solidarity and coordinated efforts to support Member States and affected communities.

5. There are many potential benefits from the systematic protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. Not only does it reduce disruption to essential services and alleviate the humanitarian situation in armed conflicts, it also represents a critical component in a comprehensive approach to protecting civilians. Enhancing the resilience of civilian infrastructure and essential services could contribute to the resilience and adaptive capacity of the local population and reduce dependency on humanitarian aid. The consequences of the destruction and damage of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population can be felt in the long term. There is a cost to inaction that lives on long after the conflict has ended. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to the protection of such objects is critical to recovery and peace efforts and in making progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in conflict-affected countries.

6. International humanitarian law accords protection to civilians and civilian objects on the basis of principles including those of distinction, proportionality and precaution. In addition, certain civilians, such as medical personnel, and civilian objects, including objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, benefit from special protection under such law. For example, international humanitarian law prohibits attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. International humanitarian law also prohibits the starvation of the civilian population as a method

³ See [S/2020/366](#).

⁴ For instance, if a power plant fails, this can have the indirect consequence of disrupting the operation and use of other associated infrastructure, including, but not limited to, the water supply network, the wastewater collection and treatment system and health-care facilities.

of warfare. In most cases, objects supporting the delivery of essential services to the public would come within the meaning of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.⁵

7. The Security Council has made efforts to elaborate a normative framework for ensuring the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including foodstuffs, agricultural areas, drinking water installations and supplies,⁶ hospitals and medical facilities,⁷ and other objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, as well as civilian infrastructure critical to the delivery of humanitarian aid.⁸ In resolution [2417 \(2018\)](#), the Council explicitly condemned acts depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival and calls on all parties to armed conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the obligation to refrain from attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. In resolution [2565 \(2021\)](#), the Council also urged all parties to protect civilian infrastructure which is critical to the delivery of humanitarian aid for essential services concerning vaccinations and related medical care, in situations of armed conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies.

Objectives

8. The open debate provides an opportunity for Member States to exchange views and share good experiences regarding the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. Member States are invited to pay particular attention to (a) the current state of the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population; (b) steps that have been taken to better respect and protect such objects and to address the challenges faced by Member States and other stakeholders, especially in the context of urbanization, new technologies, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic; and (c) recommendations to advance deliberations in the future.

Guiding questions

9. Guiding questions include:

(a) What good experiences and examples can be shared by Member States regarding the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population and the delivery of essential services to the civilians in situations of armed conflict?

(b) What are the challenges faced when seeking to advance such efforts, including in the context of recent developments such as urbanization, the emergence of new technologies, climate change and environmental degradation, the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health emergencies?

(c) What steps should the Security Council, Member States, the United Nations, regional organizations and other stakeholders take in supporting efforts to address such challenges?

⁵ ICRC, *Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People* (Geneva, 2015).

⁶ See resolution [2417 \(2018\)](#).

⁷ See resolution [2286 \(2016\)](#).

⁸ See resolutions [2417 \(2018\)](#) and [2175 \(2014\)](#).

(d) What are the policy and practical measures for building the capacity of States to fulfil their obligation to protect the civilian population under their control and objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population?

(e) How can the United Nations systems, international and regional organizations, donors and non-governmental organizations play a more important role in supporting a holistic approach to rehabilitate, “build back better”, strengthen the resilience of civilian infrastructure and essential services and, more broadly, enhance the adaptive capacity and resilience of the local community?

(f) How can the Security Council better employ its existing tools and mechanisms and play a more important role in protecting objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian populations and preventing the disruption of essential services, with a view to further strengthening the Protection of civilians in armed conflict agenda?

Format and briefers

10. The ministerial-level open debate will be held from 9 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. via videoconference. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam is expected to chair the Open Debate.

11. The following speakers will brief the Security Council:

The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

The President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer

The Chair of the International Peace Institute, Kevin Rudd
