

Statement from ICBUW, IKV Pax Christi and TRWP on Protection of Civilians in Conflict.

[Delivered during final session on recommendations]

On behalf of my colleagues I would like to express our gratitude to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for both the conference and the opportunity to make a statement.

Throughout the debates during the last two days, an important aspect of civilian protection has been absent: the relationship between civilian livelihoods, wellbeing and health, with a clean environment.

The International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, IKV Pax Christi and the Toxic Remnants of War Project believe that greater attention should be paid to the long-term post-conflict civilian health legacy from environmental contamination and degradation.

Civilian areas subject to intense conflict may face localised, but severe, environmental pollution, by contamination with pulverised building materials, industrial materials, sewage and munitions residues. Similarly, population displacement can lead to intense environmental degradation.

Documenting, communicating and managing environmental contamination must be viewed as a key component of protecting the long-term health of civilians, particularly where the capacity of national authorities to provide these services may be constrained.

In addition, we believe that civilian protection would be strengthened if the responsibilities accepted for explosive weapons were extended to other classes of weapons. For example by covering other munitions or materials that present a post-conflict hazard to civilians, and that require specialist attention; for example White Phosphorous and Depleted Uranium.

In the case of Depleted Uranium, states have repeatedly supported calls for greater transparency over its use at the General Assembly, in order to facilitate more effective assessment and management; nevertheless, monitoring and managing contaminated scrap, soils and infrastructure remains challenging for states recovering from conflict.

In addition to the risks posed by unexploded ordnance, the presence of toxic industrial chemicals or abandoned military materials can also present a risk to civilians and the environment. These may require specialist management or specific harm reduction measures. For example attacks on industrial facilities, abandoned rocket propellants, contaminated wreckage and other military wastes. Accurate recording and transmission of data on these substances or legacy wastes could reduce the likelihood of civilian and environmental harm, and simplify the work of international and national agencies.

Consistent reports from Iraq have documented increases in congenital birth defects and certain cancers amongst the civilian population. The most recent World Health Organisation and Iraqi Ministry of Health data appears to link areas subject to intense fighting with the highest rates of congenital birth defects.

While a range of environmental risk factors may of course be present, the correlation between increased rates and areas subject to heavy fighting should be a matter of concern. Further research on these issues is urgently needed. This should take the form of independent environmental assessments, detailed public health monitoring and support for healthcare providers.

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We believe that documenting the post-conflict public health legacy from environmental degradation or contamination is complex, but necessary to truly understand the civilian impact of conflict. These assessments should form part of broader exploration of the nature of harm from conflict.

Thank you.