



# Security Council

Seventy-seventh year

**8953**<sup>rd</sup> meeting

Tuesday, 25 January 2022, 10 a.m.

New York

*Provisional*

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*President:* Mr. Støre/Ms. Juul/Ms. Syed . . . . . (Norway)

*Members:*

Albania . . . . .	Mr. Hoxha
Brazil . . . . .	Mr. Costa Filho
China . . . . .	Mr. Zhang Jun
France . . . . .	Mr. De Rivière
Gabon . . . . .	Mr. Boubeya
Ghana . . . . .	Mr. Bawumia
India . . . . .	Mr. Tirumurti
Ireland . . . . .	Ms. Byrne Nason
Kenya . . . . .	Mr. Kiboino
Mexico . . . . .	Mr. De la Fuente Ramírez
Russian Federation . . . . .	Mr. Kuzmin
United Arab Emirates . . . . .	Mrs. Nusseibeh
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . . . . .	Mr. Kariuki
United States of America . . . . .	Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield

## Agenda

### Protection of civilians in armed conflict

War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings

Letter dated 10 January 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2022/23)

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In accordance with the procedure set out in the letter by the President of the Security Council addressed to Permanent Representatives of Security Council members dated 7 May 2020 (S/2020/372), which was agreed in light of the extraordinary circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this official record of the Security Council will be supplemented by a compilation of annexes (S/2022/54) containing the statements submitted by interested non-members of the Council.



*The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.*

### **Adoption of the agenda**

*The agenda was adopted.*

### **Protection of civilians in armed conflict**

#### **War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings**

#### **Letter dated 10 January 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2022/23)**

**The President:** In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Morocco, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine and Yemen to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross; and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel, Chairperson and co-founder of the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite His Excellency Mr. Olof Skoog, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations, to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of the Holy See to the United Nations to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in that regard.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2022/23, which contains the text of a letter dated 10 January 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations

addressed to the Secretary-General, transmitting a concept paper on the item under consideration.

Before we begin with our speakers list today — recalling the Security Council's latest note by the President (S/2017/507) on its working methods — I wish to encourage all speakers, both members and non-members of the Council, to deliver their statements in five minutes or less. Note 507 also encourages briefers to be succinct and focus on key issues. In that spirit, briefers are further encouraged to limit their initial remarks to seven to 10 minutes. Everyone is also encouraged to wear a mask at all times, including while delivering remarks.

I wish to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, to whom I now give the floor.

**The Secretary-General** (*spoke in French*): I thank Norway and its Prime Minister for organizing today's public debate, and I am pleased that Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, is able to join us.

Today more than 50 million people are affected by urban conflicts. They face dangers that are unique to this context. When hostilities take place in cities, civilians are at a much higher risk of being killed or injured. In some cases, they may be mistaken for combatants. In others, civilian harm is often entirely predictable, but the parties to the conflict do not take steps to avoid or reduce it. When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, approximately 90 per cent of those killed or injured are civilians.

(*spoke in English*)

The use of explosive weapons in urban areas, particularly those with wide-area effects, carries a high risk of indiscriminate impact. Civilians can suffer devastating harm both in the immediate aftermath and in the long term. Many victims face lifelong disabilities and grave psychological trauma. Water, electricity and sanitation infrastructure are often damaged. Health-care services are severely disrupted.

To mention some examples: scores of schools and health-care facilities were damaged during fighting in Gaza last year. Nearly 800,000 people were left without access to piped water, increasing the risk of diseases and further hampering health care. In Afghanistan, an explosive attack outside a Kabul high school last May killed 90 students, mainly girls, and left another

240 people injured. Beyond the immediate pain and suffering, the indirect effects of damage to schools range from disruption to education to increased likelihood of early marriage and recruitment into armed groups. And a 2020 study in Yemen showed that the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas disrupted every resource and system in the country. From Afghanistan to Libya, Syria, Yemen and beyond, the risk of harm to civilians rises when combatants move among them and put military facilities and equipment near civilian infrastructure.

Conflict in urban areas goes far beyond its immediate impact on civilians. It also puts people at risk of sieges and blockades, which have had a horrific impact on civilians, up to and including starvation. Urban warfare forces millions of people from their homes, contributing to record numbers of refugees and internally displaced people. Four years after the destruction of 80 per cent of housing in Mosul, Iraq, an estimated 300,000 people were still displaced.

Warfare in cities creates millions of tons of debris that poses risks to both the environment and to people's health. Unexploded ordnance makes it too dangerous for people to return home. And mass destruction in urban areas sets development back by decades, undermining progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The frightening human cost of waging war in cities is not inevitable; it is a choice. I would like to outline some of the measures that prevent and mitigate its horrific impact.

First, all parties must fully respect international humanitarian law. Recent years have seen increasing concern over compliance with these laws. Attacks against civilians or civilian infrastructure, indiscriminate attacks and the use of civilians as a human shield are prohibited. Parties to conflict must take steps to minimize incidental civilian harm. Respect for these rules is all the more critical when armed conflict is waged in urban areas.

Moreover, accountability for serious violations is essential. States Members of the United Nations must demonstrate the political will to investigate and prosecute alleged war crimes to the maximum extent whenever they occur. We owe that to the victims and their loved ones — and it is also crucial because it serves as a powerful deterrent.

Secondly, parties to conflict have options. They should adapt their choice of weapons and tactics when they wage war in cities, recognizing that they cannot fight in populated areas the way they would in open battlefields. Even when explosive weapons are used in compliance with the laws of war, they can cause devastating harm to civilians. The facts on the ground underline the need for warring parties to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

I urge States to follow good practices to reduce the humanitarian impact of such weapons. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has published a compilation of military policy and practices in this regard. And I welcome efforts towards a political declaration to address the harm arising from their use. I urge all Member States to commit themselves to avoiding the use of wide-area explosive weapons in populated areas.

Thirdly, effective protection of civilians in urban warfare requires additional good policies and practices that go beyond that commitment. Parties to conflict should track and learn from allegations of harm to civilians and their homes, markets and infrastructure, in order to gauge the impact of their operations and find ways to minimize harm. Such analysis can also inform a more responsible approach to arms sales.

Recording casualties can help clarify the fate of missing people, inform ways to minimize civilian harm and help to ensure accountability, recovery and reconciliation. Those involved in conflict should ensure their armed forces are trained to follow these and other good policies and practices. And all States should develop national policy frameworks for the protection of civilians that build upon these policies and practices.

Finally, I urge all Member States to use their influence over their partners and allies to ensure respect for international humanitarian law and the adoption of good practices. The Security Council has a vital role to play in this regard. I count on all Council members to acknowledge the challenges of urban warfare, to call for specific protective measures and to use all the tools at their disposal to end tragic and preventable harm to civilians. And, of course, the best solution would be not to have urban warfare at all.

**The President:** I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Maurer.

**Mr. Maurer:** Why are we discussing this issue today? It is for three critical reasons.

First, we have mounting evidence of the unacceptable harm to civilians of warfare in urban areas and because repeated calls for action have not translated into major improvements.

Secondly, the urbanization of conflict and attacks on interconnected infrastructure is having massively negative impacts on populations in urban areas.

Thirdly, the application of international humanitarian law and other normative systems to reduce the impact of war in urban areas is objectively complex and needs more sophisticated guidance in order to increase compliance.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent movement are on the front line of the humanitarian response to urban warfare. We take our protection responsibility seriously and spare no efforts to support State and non-State armed groups in taking the right decisions. However, the responsibility to comply with international humanitarian law lies with the parties to armed conflict. States must redouble efforts to spare threatened populations from the effects of urban warfare. The humanitarian impacts are not inevitable, as the Secretary-General indicated today.

Today I have four recommendations for the Security Council.

First, all parties to armed conflict and those that support them must work for improved compliance with international humanitarian law that is adapted to the major trends in warfare today. As the concept note to this meeting (S/2022/23, annex) correctly highlights, urban fighting makes the implementation of international humanitarian law more demanding than in open territory because of the proximity of military objectives to protected persons and objects.

That is why respect for international humanitarian law is critical in urban environments. The massive impact of urban warfare calls for good faith interpretation and implementation of the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, notably distinction, proportionality and precaution.

The ICRC is particularly concerned about the extensive use of heavy explosive weapons in urban and

other populated areas, which is a particular cause of civilian harm in today's armed conflicts. This week, the ICRC will issue a major report on heavy explosive weapons in populated areas in over a decade of analysis of devastating consequences. It is clear that the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas should be avoided and preventive mitigating measures taken. Our report provides practices and recommendations to political authorities and armed forces on a range of such measures. It concretizes the concept of avoidance and can serve as a tool to inform ongoing negotiations on a political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas.

Efforts to protect civilians must also consider that parties to armed conflict rarely act alone. A multiplication of actors provide direct support to belligerents in conflicts, leading to a diffusion of responsibility that can put civilians, the wounded and detainees at risk. The ICRC continues to urge Member States to act more decisively to improve their own action and leverage their special relationship with allies and partners in order to enhance respect for international humanitarian law. That includes, for instance, making the export of explosive weapons with a wide-impact area conditional on recipients putting in place limits on the use of such weapons in populated areas.

Secondly, there is an urgent need to adopt and implement measures to protect essential services such as electricity, health, education, water and sanitation. When essential services are damaged in conflict, the impacts are severe and cumulative. Diseases spread, hospitals struggle to provide care, schools go dark. Given the enormous suffering of civilians, serious questions are raised as to how parties to conflict are interpreting and applying their obligations to ensure the continuity of essential services in urban conflicts. Investment in preventive measures to ensure continuity of essential services provides an additional safeguard for the public health of communities.

That is particularly significant now as we confront the double vulnerability of conflict and the pandemic. The ICRC urges States to fully and swiftly implement the landmark resolution 2573 (2021), which recognizes the importance of protecting critical infrastructure, service provider personnel and consumables. That means that a different approach must underpin sanctions policies. Members of the Council must ensure that sanctions allow humanitarian actors to prevent the implosion of basic social service systems, and we

remind them that in warfare — and even more so in urban fighting — States must facilitate and not hinder the work of neutral and impartial humanitarian actors.

Thirdly, there is a need to intensify efforts to mitigate hunger and food insecurity and prevent famine in protracted urban conflicts. Urban warfare creates food insecurity by disrupting the supply chains and markets that urban dwellers depend on to survive. This cannot be addressed through short-term relief alone. It requires early and anticipatory action. Parties to conflict can help prevent food insecurity by respecting international humanitarian law — notably the rules protecting civilian structures, such as markets, warehouses, shops and water installations, and other objects indispensable to the survival of populations from attack.

Finally, much more must be done to prevent internal displacement and to enhance protection and assistance for internally displaced people during urban warfare. Ensuring respect for international humanitarian law can help prevent a large number of people from being displaced and enhance protection. All possible measures must be taken in order to provide displaced people with shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition, as well as to ensure that family members are not separated.

Wars are changing at a fast pace. We are struggling to keep up with our efforts to prevent and respond to their humanitarian impacts. This is experienced most severely by people trapped in urban warfare. We can and must do more for the sake of generations present and future.

I ask that Council members refer to my full written statement, which contains a few additional ideas for their consideration.

**The President:** I thank Mr. Maurer for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Al-Mutawakel, who will be joining us from Sana'a with audio only.

**Ms. Al-Mutawakel:** I thank the members of the Security Council for allowing voices from civil society to reach the Council. I also want to thank the Secretary-General and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross for their briefings.

I delivered a briefing to this Council before, on 30 May 2017 (see S/PV.7954), during a special session on Yemen. Since that briefing, the combatants in Yemen have claimed thousands of civilian lives, destroyed more

civilian facilities and infrastructure and squandered many opportunities to stop the bloodshed.

I am speaking to the Council from my office in Yemen, where the reckless blood-shedding is still going on. In less than a month, Mwatana Organization for Human Rights documented seven air strikes by the Saudi/Emirati-led coalition on civilians and civilian objects, which killed at least 107 civilians and injured at least 106 others. The bloodiest air strike was on a detention centre in Saada where at least 82 detainees were killed and at least 163 others injured, including those injured due to live munitions fired by Ansar Allah Houthis.

Moreover, in the same period, Mwatana documented 10 incidents of ground attacks, mine explosions and drone use committed by Ansar Allah Houthis, killing at least nine civilians and injuring at least 10 others.

Civilians continue to suffer, and all warring parties — the Iranian-backed Ansar Allah Houthi armed group, the Saudi and the United Arab Emirates-led coalition, the internationally recognized Yemeni Government, the United Arab Emirates-backed Southern Transitional Council and the joint forces — have committed violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Many civilians in Yemen have been made victims by the use of various explosive weapons in populated areas — from weapons, such as indiscriminate projectiles, mines and ballistic missiles to smart weapons, such as laser-guided bombs and drones. All aspects of life have been devastated, including homes, schools, hospitals, wedding and funeral halls, farms, factories and cultural property. Each of those notable structures has meaning in the lives of Yemenis.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Yemen in 2014, the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights has documented at least 800 air strikes, more than 700 ground attacks and more than 300 incidents of mine explosions. The Mwatana Organization has also documented explosions caused by explosive objects and the use of drones and ballistic missiles. More than 3,000 civilians have been killed in those attacks and more than 4,000 civilians wounded. Civilian objects have been damaged and destroyed.

In the report, entitled *The Starvation Makers*, Mwatana documents how warring parties have used explosive weapons, such as air strikes and mines, as

a tool to starve civilians. In a large number of those attacks, Mwatana identifies no military target. In others, the documented civilian harm is beyond any apparent military benefit. Those attacks happened because the parties to the conflict confidently relied on impunity.

I have personally visited, as dozens of the Mwatana team have also, different parts of Yemen, where we saw the scattered remains of innocent men, women and children who did not know why they were killed. We saw how whole families slept peacefully at night, and, when the day came, the number of survivors was zero. We observed poor villages that never knew any modern technology — no smart phones or computers — but were targeted by the latest bombs and projectiles dropped by the latest aircraft manufactured in the richest and most urbanized countries; neither were the same villages spared from the most primitive weapons.

We also saw that the main Yemeni cities with the largest populations are suffering from the war. The cities have been at the centre of military operations and targeted over and over again. Despite all the grief that Yemeni women and men have experienced, the Security Council and the international community continue to have the ability to make positive change. Besides pushing for sustainable peace, there are a number of decisions that can be made that would better protect civilians.

Those decisions include putting pressure on the warring parties to stop the use of explosive weapons in populated areas; ending arms sales, especially to countries that have a track record of violating international human rights law and international humanitarian law, as arms-exporting countries have a responsibility to bear, and it is unreasonable to turn a blind eye to their role; striving for a new declaration on preventing the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, especially those that cause mass impact and incur heavy costs for civilians; and strengthening accountability for international crimes rather than upholding impunity.

It is not sufficient to name and shame the warring parties and their behaviour. The Council should at long last refer Yemen's situation to the International Criminal Court. It is shameful that we have seen States standing in the way of international accountability efforts, including by disgracefully ending the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen in October 2021 at the Human Rights Council.

There is still time to correct course. States should support the establishment of an independent and impartial mechanism through the General Assembly to investigate violations and abuses of international law committed in Yemen to publicly report, collect and preserve evidence and prepare files for future criminal prosecutions. I believe that if there had been real efforts to secure accountability since the beginning of the war in Yemen, the warring parties would not have dared to destroy the country with their explosive weapons and Yemen would not have become the worst humanitarian crisis today.

**The President:** I thank Ms. Al-Mutawakel for her briefing and for delivering it by telephone.

I am now pleased to address the Council in my national capacity as Prime Minister of Norway.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Chairperson of the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights for making the effort to attend this meeting and for sharing their comprehensive and compelling statements with us.

What do we hear and what do we see from those statements and our observations? We see cities reduced to rubble, people displaced from their homes, mass violations of human rights and lives being destroyed. Generations have grown up with the harrowing images of the Second World War. Indeed, that was the backdrop for the establishment of the Security Council itself. Tragically, such images are still all too common. From Aleppo to Mosul, from Mogadishu to Donetsk and from Sana'a to Gaza, the list is long.

This was the reality in the past and is even more so in the present. Armed conflicts in urban areas have devastating consequences for civilians, who account for the vast majority of casualties. Many civilians, especially children and vulnerable people, have nowhere to go, but they cannot stay where they are either. Essential civilian infrastructure is destroyed. Development gains are reversed and, as a consequence, poverty, social division and gender inequality are fuelled. Basic services like health care, education, food systems, water and electricity are disrupted, and often not restored for years, if ever. Any significant investment in reconstruction remains elusive as conflicts rage on. Humanitarian actors trying to fill the gap are denied access. All too often, this amounts to an impossible task.

The places where children live, learn and play are destroyed. They live in fear, often separated from their families, many without hope for the future, creating a huge mental and physical toll. That affects generations. It damages prospects for conflict resolution, peace, reconciliation and sustainable development.

I therefore say to the members of the Security Council — the supreme custodian of world peace and security and the meaning and reading of the Charter of the United Nations — that warfare in urban areas, particularly in protracted conflicts, causes civilian deaths and human suffering beyond what is acceptable. Civilians must be protected, whether or not the individual military attack is considered legal. That is not just a question of complying with International Humanitarian Law.

On behalf of Norway, having given priority to this during our term in the Security Council, I would like to make seven proposals — seven actions that we believe that we could and should take.

First, the effective protection of civilians and civilian objects must be made a strategic priority in the planning and conduct of military operations in urban areas. We must prevent severe, cumulative and protracted harm to civilians wherever possible. Military personnel must be made aware of the rights and obligations under international humanitarian law. Member States must develop, implement and maintain policy and operational procedures that take that into account. In my country, Norway, we have developed an extended-reality tool that will allow military officers to experience armed conflict from a civilian's point of view, as part of preparations.

Second, all parties to armed conflict, as the President of the ICRC said earlier, should fully comply with international humanitarian law. There must be accountability for violations. Breaches must be reported and punished. The principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality should be properly applied to the risks to civilians in urban contexts.

Third, the choice of weapons and methods of warfare must be adapted to the urban context. The use of weapons designed for the open battlefield, including heavy explosive weapons, should be minimized in urban areas. So-called precision weapons may target buildings, but they cannot distinguish between civilians and the military.

Fourth, parties to conflict and the international community at large must ensure that civilians continue to have access to essential services like health care, food systems, education, water and electricity during and not least after military conflict.

Fifth, every effort must be made to prevent displacement, account for the missing and reunite families.

Sixth, we need to support humanitarian and development actors in adapting to the needs and vulnerabilities of the population in urban areas. We need inclusive engagement with affected communities. The full, equal and meaningful participation of women is key.

Seventh, we must ensure the safety and security of humanitarian and health workers, be they from United Nations agencies, the ICRC or other regional or local organizations. We urge parties to conflict to fulfil their obligations to ensure safe, rapid and unimpeded access to civilians in need.

That is the purpose of bringing this critical theme to the Council's agenda. We must do more at every stage of the conflict cycle. The Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda* (A/75/982) sets out a good path forward. The best way to protect civilians is to bring conflicts to an end — that is obvious. As conflicts continue, they inflict cumulative harm on the civilian population and, in particular, on those who are most vulnerable, namely, children. That undermines the prospects for peace and security. Ensuring the protection of civilians will also lead to a more sustainable peace after conflict.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I call on the Vice-President of the Republic of Ghana.

**Mr. Bawumia** (Ghana): I thank the Norwegian presidency of the Council for the month of January 2022 and His Excellency Mr. Jonas Gahr Støre, Prime Minister of Norway, for convening this high-level open debate on the topic of war in cities and the protection of civilians in urban settings. I convey to you, Sir, and to the Council President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo's best wishes for a successful debate.

I also join other speakers in thanking the Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, and the other briefers

for their useful insights on the topic of this high-level open debate.

The asymmetrical nature of the prevailing wars in cities and the consequent embedding of combatants within the interconnected resources and infrastructure of urban areas pose immense challenges to the protection of civilian populations. Advancements in science and technology have led to the development of compact and more sophisticated weapons systems that are able to deliver greater damage to targets and their surroundings.

The humanitarian consequences of the increase in urbanized conflicts on civilian populations are therefore serious and require the careful consideration of existing frameworks for the management of urban wars. We therefore welcome the focus that this debate brings to the topic.

Wars by nature exact untold suffering, death and destruction. However, when wars are fought in cities, their impact on populations is even worse. They lead to higher incidents of mortality; the destruction of critical life-supporting infrastructure, such as hospitals; greater numbers of internally displaced persons; and a higher incidence of criminal and sexual exploitation, particularly once such wars are prolonged. That creates further vulnerabilities that are exploited by violent extremist groups to radicalize young people.

Data from 2018 from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs shows that the world is becoming increasingly urbanized, with 55 per cent of the world's population living in urban areas and a rise to 68 per cent expected by 2050. Asia and Africa, where most stabilization efforts are taking place, are expected to be the fastest-growing areas of urbanization. The outbreak of conflicts would therefore have telling effects in view of the population densities of those two continents.

We have already seen, in recent years, evidence of the horrific effects of urban conflicts in places like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, but also much earlier on the African continent in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, where civil wars that took place had an adverse impact in the city context.

The rise of terror and violent extremist groups and organizations — such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham — has revealed the huge threat posed to

civilian lives. Such groups do not fight in accordance with the rules of law of war. They scapegoat civilians in their crusades and consider them cannon fodder.

The roles played by civilians in such wars also demonstrate the conflicting, nuanced and complex nature of modern warfare. The Geneva Conventions and their Protocols Additional, which are at the core of international humanitarian law, as well as resolution 2175 (2014), provide for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. Indeed, although attempts have been made to bind non-State actors and armed groups to the rules of war, much of the conflict we experience globally and on the continent of Africa continues to involve civilian combatants and often results in the scapegoating of civilian populations, which have been used as human shields by warring sides or have become victims of heinous crimes.

The devastating impact of urban wars on civilian populations means that more investments need to be made in devising the necessary coping mechanisms and adaptation tools to tackle the issue. I would therefore highlight the following points for the Council's consideration.

First, we need to enhance global norms and standards on civilian protection in urban conflicts by prioritizing the integration of civilian protection in the planning and conduct of military operations. The Council can play a useful role by encouraging national authorities to embrace useful initiatives for the re-education and retraining of combatants on the new landscape of war and to acknowledge the redefinition of who the enemy is in a calibration of the acceptable tactics employed in contemporary warfare to assure the safety of civilian populations.

Secondly, the bane of any global norm lies in the lack of effective enforcement. We must therefore develop strong accountability frameworks that place the protection of civilians in armed conflicts at the heart of national and international justice systems. That requires States to recommit to international humanitarian law in their conduct of warfare and to a zero-tolerance approach towards the impunity of non-State actors.

Thirdly, while a general and complete cessation of all urban wars is an ideal aspiration, the reality of war requires that we focus on assessing and developing the resilience of existing urban infrastructure to cope with wars, particularly in terms of evacuation efforts, shelter zones and alternative life support infrastructure. Those



need to be complemented by the retention of support systems that psychologically equip civilians with the right tools, knowledge and skills required to build faster to recover as much of their lives as possible after wars ravage their lands.

Fourthly, I urge that we act to control the nature and indiscriminate use of explosives in war, combined with the management of the high civilian population density of urban areas, to reduce the adverse impact that often leads to the loss of lives, crucial infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, and sources of livelihood, such as business centres in these areas.

We must recognize that in developing norms and standards to protect civilian populations during conflict, there is a strong need for local engagement in order to assure the acceptance of such norms. Local communities need to be empowered in order to take required preventative actions and also in order not to shield perpetrators of crimes against civilian populations. Also, in addressing the resilience of urban communities, the issue of poverty, which is an important element in urbanization, would need to be taken cognizance of and addressed. National initiatives will therefore need to be supported to equalize access to economic opportunities in all parts of the country, develop alternate and reinforce urban communities, and manage the push and pull factors of migration that sometimes lead to unplanned urbanization outcomes and create fodder for the intensification of such conflicts.

**The President** (*spoke in French*): I now call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon.

**Mr. Boubeya** (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Norway, which, by convening the Security Council to discuss the issue of the protection of civilians in armed conflicts and wars in cities from the perspective of the protection of civilians in urban settings, has reminded us of a salient point of the Council's mandate, namely, ensuring the security of civilians in times of war.

Wars are increasingly taking place in urban settings. This is undoubtedly because that is where the centres of power are, where resources are concentrated and where civilian populations are a captive group. This situation calls into question the law of war and the logic of humanitarian action. From Tripoli to Mogadishu, Mosul, Aleppo and even Sana'a, many cities have recently experienced deadly and destructive conflicts and are sometimes still the scene of complex and violent

armed operations. The destruction of civilian property, the disabling of health-care infrastructure and the terror caused by bombings have claimed thousands of civilian lives and led many survivors to flee.

Urban warfare has undergone significant changes since the 1990s, taking on the characteristics of contemporary armed conflict. They are more domestic than international; they are long-lasting and they often involve opponents with very asymmetrical resources.

For non-State armed groups, cities today are what the jungle was in the 1970s and 1980s — an environment where they can easily hide, exploit their knowledge of the terrain and render inoperative some technological weapons available to powerful armies. The urban environment also gives them more media exposure because it concentrates the economic, political and symbolic centres of power that they are fighting.

When cities are targeted by bombings and shelling, 90 per cent of the victims are civilians. This is partly due to the intertwining and proximity of the civilian population and military targets. Cities depend on a complex network of interconnected services, so damage to one section of that network can trigger a domino effect, resulting in even more suffering. When water and electrical supply systems are destroyed, the consequences for public health and the delivery of health care can lead to loss of life that far exceeds the initial direct impact. The destruction and degradation of essential services render entire neighbourhoods uninhabitable and can result in the forced displacement of populations.

The most recent partial data reveal that urban warfare today affects more than 50 million civilians worldwide and kills an average of eight times more than conflicts in rural areas. The complexity of urban theatres is a major challenge for military and humanitarian operations, owing to the density of the population and the overlap of civilians and combatants.

Gabon, in its commitment to international humanitarian law, strongly condemns these ever-increasing practices, which lead to significant harm to civilian populations, the most vulnerable categories of which are women, children and disabled persons.

The international community must urgently respond to these contemporary challenges. International humanitarian law, as a body of rules designed to limit the effects of armed conflict and to protect those who

are not or are no longer participating in combat, must be able to restrain the means and methods of warfare that parties to conflict use in urban settings. Although there are no specific rules for urban settings and the use of explosive weapons in urban settings is not expressly prohibited, the legality of these weapons can be questioned in the light of the main principles of international humanitarian law, such as distinction and proportionality. In the case of the principle of distinction, the objective is to protect civilian populations and property by prohibiting the use of weapons of war that cannot be aimed at a specific military target because of a lack of precision.

In any case, it seems essential to legally bind the parties to conflict in urban areas to the obligation of precaution, which requires them to gather as much information as possible to assess the effects of an attack, in particular the use of dangerous plans and vulnerable areas. There is no doubt that the use of explosive weapons in urban areas can hardly be reconciled with respect for international humanitarian law. That is why Gabon joins the International Committee of the Red Cross in calling on parties to conflict to avoid their use in densely populated areas, because of the high probability of indiscriminate effects.

The nature of the challenges posed by conflicts in urban areas also calls for a rethinking of the modalities of the humanitarian response that must be provided. This is a real paradigm shift.

First, it seems necessary to provide a holistic response to the humanitarian needs resulting from urban conflicts. The interdependence of service networks, the mixing of civilians and combatants, and the protracted nature of conflicts call for cross-cutting, non-sectoral and long-term interventions. At the same time, it is essential to continue to carry out emergency actions in order to help the affected populations to survive. That would call for new financing schemes to address short- and long-term actions, as well as individual and systemic approaches.

Secondly, we note a significant increase in humanitarian needs during urban conflicts, which leads to many invisible forms of damage, such as the psychosocial effects of continuous bombings, weeks under siege and the destruction of important symbols. More recently, a third generation of humanitarian needs also seems to have increased in scope. Populations that are victims of violence express a growing need to be

connected and to see their digital data protected. Cities in conflict are often fragmented and controlled by different warring groups, some of which can deliberately impede access to certain areas. It is important for humanitarian organizations to be able to have more dialogue with local authorities and civil society organizations in order to decentralize humanitarian diplomacy.

Lastly, we cannot allow the enormous suffering witnessed throughout the world, with entire cities engulfed in combat, to become the new normal. Cities are for civilians. They should not be the battlefields of the future. My country, under the leadership of His Excellency President Ali Bongo Ondimba, remains convinced that by acting collectively and with determination we can both reduce the suffering caused by urban warfare and better assist the affected populations.

**The President:** I now call on the Permanent Representative of the United States of America and member of President Biden's Cabinet.

**Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield** (United States of America): I thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, for convening this very important meeting. I also thank the Secretary-General and Mr. Maurer for their remarks today. I would also like to express my appreciation to Ms. Al-Mutawakel for her presence with us today. I would also like to take a moment to welcome the presence of Ghana's Vice-President and Gabon's Foreign Minister here with us and reiterate our welcome to the Security Council.

As we all know, around the world cities are growing. The latest United Nations estimates predict that two thirds of the world will live in urban areas by 2050. Those trends are exacerbated by conflict and the climate crisis. The clear truth is that protecting civilians in urban settings will become only more important going forward, and the threat to civilians is horrifying, as we heard from our briefers today.

Explosive weapons have made it devastatingly easy to threaten and kill large groups of civilians. In some instances, armed actors go so far as to use civilians as human shields. In others, they deliberately place military objectives near civilians, sometimes purposely, seeking out the highest concentration of innocent people. Putting schools, hospitals and civilian infrastructure in deliberate danger is wrong, as is the terrible and prevalent sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls, as well as boys, which is not often discussed.

I am particularly concerned by children pulled into conflict in urban settings. Boys and girls are often recruited as child soldiers, while attacks on schools and hospitals have disrupted their ability to receive an education, medical care and humanitarian aid.

On the subject of humanitarian access, we also all know that one technique of armed groups is to create unnecessary and dangerous impediments that prevent civilians and displaced persons from accessing and receiving life-saving aid. Humanitarian workers and medical workers in urban settings are also being attacked more and more frequently.

I do not want to dwell on that long list of challenges because we all know them too well. Instead, I want to focus on what we can do about them. I am optimistic that we can work together on that because we have had recent consensus on this issue in the Security Council. Last April, during Vietnam's presidency of the Council, we unanimously adopted resolution 2573 (2021), demanding that all parties to armed conflict fully comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. We also strongly condemned the starvation of civilians as a weapon of war.

To build on that consensus, we should make progress on some of the practical steps that the Secretary-General laid out in his 2018 report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2018/462). As a first step, parties to armed conflict must respect applicable international humanitarian law. To make that commitment clear, Member States should adopt and enforce national policies to support the effective implementation of international humanitarian law.

Of course, the perpetrators are often non-State armed groups. They too must abide by such laws. We all need to clearly communicate that to them, and we must hold them accountable. To start, States should implement improved accountability measures to hold themselves to a high standard. That means conducting assessments and investigations, acknowledging civilian harm when it happens and making serious efforts to assist harmed civilians. We should also work together to develop frameworks for addressing the most pressing challenges. As just one example, the United States has been working with a number of other States, led by Ireland, to develop a political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas.

Our claim to maintain international peace and security is only as strong as our results. We have an

obligation to uphold international humanitarian law and to turn those lofty and important words into real and practical protections for civilians. The world's civilians are counting on us. Let us live up to their expectations, enable their hopes and dreams and do everything in our power to protect them.

**Mrs. Nusseibeh** (United Arab Emirates): The United Arab Emirates thanks Norway for organizing this open debate, and we thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, for your personal presence and for presiding over this meeting. We would also like to thank the Secretary-General and Mr. Peter Maurer for their insightful briefings. We also listened carefully to the briefer in Sana'a, and we of course strongly reject the allegations made against my country and the coalition. Unlike the Houthis, we reiterate the coalition's commitment to complying with its obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians. We would welcome the Houthis doing the same.

However, I will concentrate my remarks today on the important and timely topic of urban warfare, which Norway chose as the centrepiece of its presidency. As a country that has recently defended itself against multiple terrorist attacks by the Houthis within the space of just one week, targeting civilian infrastructure in densely populated urban areas, I could not agree more with the Council's condemnation of those heinous attacks, not only within armed conflicts but also in peaceful havens, such as the United Arab Emirates.

Since the Council adopted resolution 1265 (1999), we have seen conflicts in urban areas proliferate and take a devastating toll on civilians, with a disproportionate impact on women and children. With rapid urbanization continuing across the globe, particularly in fragile settings, and the increased density of cities, urban warfare has become more complex and the fundamental principle of distinction more challenging for parties in armed conflict to apply.

Yet some non-State armed groups exploit that challenging environment and deliberately choose cities as a primary battleground in complete disregard for human life. The Houthis and other terrorist organizations not only deliberately target civilians and civilian objects, but also use schools and civilian infrastructure to store weapons or to launch attacks, and they use civilians, including children, as human shields. That must stop, and it is the responsibility of the Council, among other bodies, to make it stop.

Against that backdrop, the United Arab Emirates would like to make the following four suggestions aimed at more effectively protecting, and mitigating the cumulative impact of urban warfare on, civilians and civilian infrastructure.

First, international law provides the necessary framework for the protection of civilians in urban warfare, and full compliance is even more critical in the complex environment of urban warfare because of its devastating consequences for civilians and essential infrastructure. Training, capacity-building and sharing best practices with parties engaged in armed conflict can help strengthen compliance.

Secondly, sanctions remain an important tool of the Security Council for achieving various objectives, including the protection of civilians. They can work either to deter or coerce actors into compliance with international law. To achieve the intended results, however, they must be carefully designed to ensure that humanitarian actors can continue to deliver their essential work in those urban settings.

Thirdly, we must more systematically support early-recovery and reconstruction efforts to restore critical infrastructure and basic services that are damaged and disrupted by the impact of hostilities in cities. The current pandemic makes that commitment even more critical given that the heaviest toll of urban conflict falls upon children. We welcome the fact that resolution 2601 (2021) highlighted the importance of the continuity of education in conflict and the potential of technology, particularly digital platforms, to mitigate disruptions to education. Developing and supporting ways to allow children to continue their education, even in the midst of conflict, is essential for their development and contributes to the achievement of peace and security.

Fourthly and finally, protection and reconstruction strategies are more effective when women and men are equally included in consultation and decision-making. It is therefore crucial that women and girls be empowered in such a way that enables them to participate fully, equally and meaningfully in those efforts. Their inclusion in all sectors — public and private — is critical for effective recovery as well as for helping prevent the resurgence of conflict.

Urban areas are key hubs of civilian life; we must ensure that the people, infrastructure and environment within them are protected. We recognize that the best

way to protect civilians is indeed to prevent conflict at its onset. The United Arab Emirates remains committed to working with the United Nations and its Member States to prevent conflicts and take collective action in the Council to promote the protection of civilians at all times.

**Mr. Kariuki** (United Kingdom): We, too, thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Maurer and Ms. Al-Mutawakel for their briefings.

The United Kingdom is grateful to Norway for having convened this event, whose importance is reflected by the presence of the Vice-President of Ghana and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon.

As we have heard today, civilians are paying a heavy price for the increasing urbanization of protracted conflict. All too often, civilians find themselves the victims of terrible violations of international humanitarian law, as witnessed during the appalling barrel-bombing campaigns in Syria and in the conflicts seen in Yemen, Ethiopia, Mali and elsewhere, which have caused devastating suffering and long-term effects.

Full adherence to international humanitarian law is fundamental to the protection of civilians. Compliance is not an aspiration; it is an essential legal and moral obligation. Operating in an urban environment is difficult and dangerous, but those doing so must take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and damage to infrastructure. If a military operation cannot be conducted in compliance with the law, it must not take place. The international community can and must do more to assist and pressure States to protect their civilians.

How do we achieve this? First, we must engage more purposefully in the sharing of best practices to help all parties to conflict enhance their compliance with international humanitarian law. The United Kingdom has long provided specialist training to the armed forces of other States, including forces deployed in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic and the African Union Mission in Somalia, to help build understanding and compliance.

Secondly, non-State armed groups need to understand their obligations under humanitarian law and the importance of compliance. The United Kingdom

supports organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross working to increase awareness, and we are also supporting research to improve our understanding of why non-State armed groups do or do not comply and to identify approaches to improve adherence.

Thirdly, we must work to ensure that those responsible for breaches of international humanitarian law are held to account. There can be no impunity for crimes committed in conflict. So I want to welcome the work that is being led by Ireland to seek a political declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The United Kingdom is committed to that process. It must serve to increase the protection of civilians without hindering legitimate and proportionate military operations in urban areas.

I would like to underscore the United Kingdom's own unwavering commitment to the full implementation of and compliance with international humanitarian law. Our defence policies have practical measures to protect civilians integrated at every stage of the operational process. We will continue to encourage others to do likewise, share best practices and condemn those who fail to meet their obligations.

**Ms. Byrne Nason** (Ireland): I want to warmly welcome you to the Chamber, Mr. President, and also to thank you for having convened this dedicated debate, where we really welcome the opportunity to discuss the specific legal, moral and operational challenges faced by parties to conflict, and, of course, by United Nations agencies and civil society, in seeking to protect civilians and to alleviate the devastating humanitarian impacts.

I would also like to warmly welcome the Honourable Vice-President of Ghana and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon to the Chamber today, and to thank the Secretary-General and Mr. Maurer for their assessments of the Security Council's obligations and role in this space and what we can do better. I want to especially thank our civil-society briefer, Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel, for her remarks. It is important that we heard her voice this morning; it is an important part of our considerations here today.

In cities such as Idlib, Gaza and Taiz, millions face the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of deliberate violence through besiegement, starvation, the use of explosive weapons, the destruction of vital civilian infrastructure and the disruption of essential

services. Those populations are viscerally aware of the grim realities of war.

Civilians face considerable risk in simply navigating their city. They must constantly determine whether a road is safe to cross, a store is safe to access for basic food, a hospital safe to enter with a desperately ill child. Five years after the Council adopted resolution 2286 (2016), the targeted and systematic destruction of health care and services, and the killing and maiming of medical and humanitarian workers, shamefully continues. It continues in Ethiopia. It continues in Myanmar. It continues in Syria — in too many conflicts.

Urban conflict exacerbates the specific vulnerabilities of children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Chilling reports from medical and humanitarian agencies stress the deep psychological trauma that air strikes inflict on children. In restricting access to education, urban conflict also severely stifles children's development. Those who have fled urban conflicts have shared harrowing testimonies, including being forced to leave behind an older relative or a person with disabilities in the hope of leading others to safety — choices no one should have to make. Those displaced face further challenges, often with no prospects of returning to their homes or their families. Urban conflict also has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including the risk of gender-based violence in humanitarian settings.

Ireland is gravely concerned by the devastating impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. According to the Secretary-General's report (S/2021/423), almost 90 per cent of those killed and injured by the use of such weapons in populated areas are civilians. Moreover, explosive remnants continue to kill and maim long after the conflict is over.

Ireland believes more can and should be done to reverse the pattern of humanitarian harm from the use of weapons in populated areas and to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law. We are proud to be chairing international efforts in Geneva to agree a political declaration on the use of weapons in populated areas. We are determined to deliver a meaningful political declaration that improves the protection of civilians during armed conflict and leads to change in policy and in practice.

The protection of civilians plays a major role in United Nations peacekeeping operations and is a key pillar of many peacekeeping mandates. Ireland was

proud to ensure that the protection of civilians was central to resolution 2594 (2021), which the Council adopted unanimously during our September presidency (see S/PV.8852). We know that risks to civilians are heightened during transitions. It is imperative that planning for their protection is a focus of any mission reconfiguration.

In conclusion, I would like to reinforce two points that should guide the work of the Security Council. First, international humanitarian law must be respected by parties to all conflicts, including in urban settings. And finally, we know that without accountability we are condemned to repeat our mistakes. It is essential that those responsible for violating international humanitarian law are held accountable. Countering impunity is essential to preventing future violations. The international community — importantly, the Security Council — needs to do better.

**Mr. Zhang Jun** (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): First of all, I would like to thank Norway for its initiative in holding today's open debate, and I welcome Your Excellency Prime Minister Støre to the Security Council as you preside over this meeting. We look forward to the adoption of the presidential statement on the protection of civilians in the context of urban warfare.

I also thank Secretary-General Guterres and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Peter Maurer, for their briefings.

Cities are where population, economy, science and technology and civil infrastructure are concentrated. They are the epitome of human civilization. Wars and conflicts in cities often cause more devastating damage and more serious humanitarian consequences.

In Palestine, the blockade has turned Gaza into the world's largest open-air prison whose civilian population has experienced unspeakable sufferings from siege and war. In Afghanistan, more than 20 years of war have left cities in ruins and displaced over 9 million people. In Syria and Libya, foreign military intervention and imposed democratic transformation triggered wars that have lasted a decade.

Civilians and infrastructure were mercilessly bombarded, reducing erstwhile prosperous cities to ruins. These humanitarian tragedies are happening all around us. The international community should give great attention to pursuing accountability and seeking redress for the related acts and uphold global

equity and justice. Meanwhile, we should persevere in pursuing the political settlement of disputes and in ensuring that all parties to conflict act in accordance with international law and better protect the rights and interests of civilians.

Ceasefire is the first step of a political solution. The Secretary-General issued an urgent appeal for a global ceasefire in March 2020, yet up till now, we still see ongoing armed conflicts in various forms in many parts of the world.

Last month, the General Assembly unanimously adopted the Olympic truce resolution for the Beijing Winter Olympics (General Assembly resolution 76/13). Some 173 countries co-sponsored the resolution, which has once again reflected the international political consensus that all parties to conflict should cease hostilities.

The Beijing Winter Olympics are around the corner. Both President Shahid and Secretary-General Guterres are calling for all countries to abide by the Olympic truce resolution. China also strongly calls on all countries and parties to conflict to earnestly follow the tradition of the truce and the General Assembly resolution, seize the opportunity of the Beijing Winter Olympics to bridge differences through dialogue and replace confrontation with cooperation, thereby demonstrating the firm resolve of the international community to achieve peace, unity and solidarity together for a shared future.

Eliminating the root causes of conflict is the fundamental way for achieving lasting peace. War represents a systemic risk for civilians. To eliminate this risk, we must focus on the root causes and take a holistic approach. We should persist in promoting peace through development and, through sustainable development, alleviate the absolute poverty that causes conflict. China put forward the Global Development Initiative and took the lead in setting up the related Group of Friends with a view to forging strong synergy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and addressing the root causes of conflicts.

We should be determined to resolve disputes peacefully, the Security Council should join forces with Secretary-General, his special envoys and special representatives, in stepping up mediation and good officers on hotspot issues and in de-escalating tensions. We should also coordinate peacebuilding efforts, help

post-conflict countries and regions rebuild, restore the rule of law, justice and order, and embark on a virtuous cycle of peaceful development.

The countries concerned bear the primary responsibility for protecting civilians. The international community should respect the sovereignty of these countries, heed their views and help strengthen their capacity to protect civilians and provide basic services in the light of their national conditions. Humanitarian assistance to these countries should be more relevant and aligned with their needs. Politicizing aid should be avoided.

At present, Afghanistan is witnessing a humanitarian situation more serious than anywhere else in the world. Nearly half of Afghans are facing extreme hunger. Some 97 per cent of the population may fall below the poverty line. These populations are mostly urban. So far, the United Nations has launched its largest aid programme ever for a single country, while the overseas assets belonging to the Afghan people are still frozen. We call on the countries concerned to immediately lift the economic blockade and unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan and other countries, undertake concrete actions and fulfil their obligations under international law, especially international humanitarian law.

**Mr. De la Fuente Ramírez** (Mexico) (*spoke in Spanish*): Your participation in today's debate, Mr. Prime Minister, is a clear demonstration of the importance Norway attaches to the protection of civilians. My country also shares this perspective.

We thank the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Chairperson of the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights for their briefings. We also welcome the Vice-President of Ghana and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon at today's meeting.

Although the use of explosive weapons in urban areas is not explicitly prohibited by international humanitarian law, given the population density prevailing there, it is practically impossible that they can be used without a high risk of violating the principles of discrimination and proportionality. It is therefore necessary for the international community, led by the Council, to recognize that their use in urban contexts has unacceptable humanitarian consequences. We hope that the current negotiations for a political declaration in Geneva will recognize that, as well as

the impact such weapons have on people's physical and mental health.

Deliberate and collateral attacks on civilian infrastructure, whether by traditional methods of warfare or in the form of cyberattacks, are deplorable. They adversely affect the provision of electricity, water, sanitation and health services, as well as hamper humanitarian assistance.

Civilian populations in urban centres in the Middle East — such as Gaza, Syria and Yemen — and elsewhere are today paying the consequences of these attacks in the difficult context of the pandemic. We invite the Secretary-General to include in his reports specific data and recommendations on the impact of war in urban contexts so that the Council can respond in a more timely and effective manner.

As some have mentioned, education has also been affected by war in urban areas. We express our deep concern about the destruction or military use of schools and call on those who have not done so to join the Safe Schools Declaration.

It is clear that international humanitarian law is not being respected. We therefore call on all States to comply with their obligations, including resolution 2573 (2021), adopted last year.

Finally, we call for all violations of international humanitarian law to be investigated and punished, either in national courts or before the International Criminal Court.

**Mr. Kimani** (Kenya): I welcome you to New York, Mr. President. I thank Secretary-General António Guterres, Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel for their briefings. I also welcome His Excellency Mr. Mahamudu Bawumia, Vice-President of Ghana, and His Excellency Mr. Pacôme Moubelet Boubeya, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon.

This debate offers us the opportunity to reconsider the very reason for the existence of the United Nations and the Security Council so that we can ensure that they are fit for purpose to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

None of us was born during the founding of the United Nations. But we all carry in our mind's eye the searing images of the destruction of cities as emblematic

of the untold sorrow to humankind that forced the existence of our common enterprise into being.

We carry the indelible images of the siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany, which lasted almost 900 days, with untold suffering and heroism by its residents. To this day, the culture of the British people is marked by the experiences of civilians running into their bomb shelters to the sound of wailing sirens warning of incoming bombs.

History will always recall the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which, for the first time in human history, literally vaporized civilians in order to send a terrifying signal to their leaders. We recall Hiroshima losing 60,000 of its 90,000 buildings in a single morning. By 1945, many of the great cities of Europe and Asia lay in ruins, their residents mourning lost relatives and friends and scavenging for food — many in countries whose will to fight had been broken by the bombings.

The attacks on the cities were deliberate. They were meant to break the will of the States waging war by breaking the lives and hopes of civilians. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of conflict in urban areas, as witnessed in recent years in fighting by Islamic State in Iraq and the Shams in Mosul and in the Syrian conflict, to cite but two examples.

This leads us to wonder whether a war the equal of the past two great global conflicts is possible today and whether the Security Council has the will to recognize its approach and act to prevent it. We ask that question knowing that such a war will be an outlier and that our tools to predict it are extremely poor. What is needed is a system of State relations that lowers the incentives for such a confrontation.

Yet, we are in a period of surging rivalries, escalations of military spending and provocative actions — on multiple continents. Some of the great Powers involved in this rising geopolitical struggle are members of the Council, while others stand outside it. Their confrontations frequently lead to sparking or worsening conflict situations in other parts of the world. Africa is one of the regions that has historically suffered the most from the proxy actions of great Powers.

The past two world wars have come as a surprise. The next one is likely to be the same if we do not undertake urgent Security Council reforms that bring balance to permanent membership and the veto. If

this famous table is to truly prevent major wars, then its membership must expand or change substantively. Added to the fact that the majority of the situations before the Council today are in Africa and that great power rivalries will be most keenly felt there, we call for fundamental reform.

We call the Council's attention to the Kampala road map of the just-completed ministerial meeting of the African Union Committee of Ten Heads of State and Government, on the re-form of the Security Council. International peace and security would benefit immensely from the implementation of the Common African Position, as encapsulated in the Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration. Africa's goal is to be fully represented in a Security Council that retains the power and capacity to save humanity from major wars. We have had decades without a world war, but we should not rest on our laurels and imagine that we will not one day be thought of, disparagingly, as similar to the hapless League of Nations that was unable to prevent world war.

**Mr. Hoxha (Albania):** I would like to thank Norway for organizing this high-level open debate on such an important topic. I also thank Prime Minister Støre for chairing it — testimony of its paramount importance for all of us.

I thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Ms. Al-Mutawakel for the information they provided today.

This debate brings us to the heart of reflections on the disastrous humanitarian consequences of conflicts in urban settings and on the need to seek and take appropriate measures to protect civilians, in line with international humanitarian law.

Armed conflicts in urban settings always take a terrible toll on innocent civilians. Tens of millions of civilians around the world are currently affected. The 2021 annual report of the Secretary-General (S/2021/423) on the protection of civilians, as we heard from him earlier, reveals worrisome trends in armed conflict, with devastating impacts for civilians. Deaths, injuries, trauma, displacement and severe damage to essential civilian infrastructure and services, resulting in dramatic humanitarian crises, are the well-known consequences of urban warfare. That is what we have seen in the armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, the



Central African Republic, Mozambique, Somalia and Ukraine.

They all tell the same story. When cities become theatres of war, houses are reduced to rubble, streets become deathbeds for innocent civilians and services are destroyed, with long-term devastating effects on people's lives. Nowhere has that been truer than in urban environments, such as in Mosul, Taiz, Sana'a and Donetsk, to mention some of the most appalling cases. Urban warfare, in particular the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in the urban contexts, always leads to mass civilian casualties, displacement and the destruction of critical infrastructure and systems, such as water, food, health services, education and sanitation.

Those long-term and cumulative effects of urban warfare on people's lives require joint humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts and actions. It is therefore important to develop a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the humanitarian aspect, in line with humanitarian principles. We strongly believe that States and all parties to armed conflict must, as a matter of priority, ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians in urban settings by adopting specific national policies, based on best practices; make the protection of civilians a strategic priority, in all military operations in urban settings; avoid the use and stocking of explosive weapons in populated areas and undertake mitigation measures to reduce the consequent risk of harming civilians; and, lastly, protect essential services to mitigate the humanitarian consequences in urban settings.

Albania urges all States to seek and agree on the best way to protect civilians. To that end, we recommend the following actions.

First, Council Members should not allow political differences to undermine collective action to protect civilians. The Council must reach consensus and stand united in taking all the necessary measures to prevent and end armed conflicts in compliance with international humanitarian law and always ensure the protection of civilians.

Secondly, all Member States should support the United Nations and others actors on the ground in engaging with non-State armed groups to develop policies to protect civilians, including in urban settings.

Thirdly, all Member States must always ensure accountability for crimes committed, refuse and reject impunity and bring perpetrators before justice.

Albania strongly believes that Member States, local communities, civil society and international organizations can contribute to policy frameworks, based on good practices, to prevent, respond to and protect civilians. We must learn from good practices to consolidate political will, participation and the implementation of such initiatives.

*(spoke in French)*

Let me conclude by stating that we believe that there is nothing more precious, important, imperative or noble than the protection of innocent civilians and saving lives, which is best achieved by avoiding and preventing conflicts. In our view, that must be at the core of the work of the Security Council.

**Mr. Costa Filho** (Brazil): I would initially like to convey our appreciation to the Secretary-General, Mr. Maurer and Ms. Al-Mutawakel for their thoughts, which help frame our debate today. Let me thank Norway for organizing this timely open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts carried out in urban settings.

Protracted and asymmetrical conflicts have nowadays become the norm, with dire consequences for the civilian population, which can be exacerbated in urban areas. Brazil reiterates its commitment to the protection of civilians, which is a priority of our mandate in the Security Council. The Council cannot normalize the current situation, in which civilians account for the majority of deaths in armed conflicts and are very often deliberately targeted. It is unacceptable that in many conflicts today the principle of proportionality has been turned upside down.

Despite the heavy toll of armed conflicts in urban areas, there are tools that parties can resort to as a way to avoid or, at least, minimize civilian harm in such contexts. The Council is well placed to recommend some measures, and I take this opportunity to highlight four of them.

First, respecting and ensuring respect for international humanitarian law is not only a legal obligation, but it is also an effective way to protect civilians. The Council must be united in demanding that all parties respect international humanitarian law and in encouraging actions to strengthen compliance.

Specific training tailored to urban settings is key, as well as proper adaptation of the means and methods of warfare to the specificities of densely populated areas. It is also important to document civilian harm, including as a means to assess whether the predicted casualties of military operations correspond to the damage actually caused to civilians. Parties must plan their operations based on solid information with regard to military objectives and the location of civilian personnel and objects.

Secondly, the choice of weapons is a key part of military considerations to protect civilians in armed conflicts in urban environments. Brazil has endorsed the Santiago Declaration, signed by Latin American and Caribbean States in support of a political declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and has actively participated in the informal consultations on the subject coordinated by Ireland. For Brazil, such a political declaration should establish common standards, promote policies to reduce the risk of civilian harm and facilitate the exchange of good practices. It is also an opportunity to promote compliance with international humanitarian law and recognize the rights of victims and affected communities, while providing them with adequate assistance.

Thirdly, humanitarian actors must be able to provide assistance to civilians in need. Parties to armed conflicts should facilitate safe and unimpeded passage for relief actions that are humanitarian and impartial in character. In many instances, humanitarian actors might need to engage with non-State armed groups to facilitate humanitarian access, disseminate international humanitarian law or even ensure the provision of basic services in urban settings. Such contacts, when carried out in respect for the norms of international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, should not be criminalized. Moreover, the Council should adopt safeguards to ensure that sanctions and counter-terrorism measures do not have adverse consequences to legitimate and impartial humanitarian action.

Fourthly, meaningful accountability for civilian harm goes hand in hand with effective protection. When violations occur, they must be investigated impartially and their perpetrators must be held accountable.

The fact that civilians live in areas controlled by non-State armed groups or even terrorists does not make them combatants or terrorists. It does not make them targets. It generally makes them victims

of a situation that they often did not create. Those are important points to recall when addressing the situation of civilians in armed conflicts in urban areas, which poses specific challenges for humanitarian principles, especially the principle of distinction.

Finally, let us take this opportunity to renew, as the Secretary-General reminded us earlier, our commitment to the prevention of armed conflicts and the protection of civilians in all conflict zones, including in urban areas. The destruction of urban infrastructure, including historical sites and cultural property, and the sight of abandoned cities and the ruins of once vibrant urban centres have often become images of contemporary armed conflicts. They are also an eerie reminder of the costs of reconstruction. Prevention, diplomacy and de-escalation must therefore continue to be at the centre of our joint efforts to promote respect for international humanitarian law and to protect civilians in all armed conflict situations, including in urban settings.

**Mr. Kuzmin** (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We welcome you, Sir, as President of the Security Council. We thank the Secretary-General for his participation. We also thank the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Ms. Al-Mutawakel for their information and assessments.

Once again, we are grateful to the Norwegian delegation for its proposal to address the question of the procedure for conducting possible combat operations in urban areas. It is commendable that the theme of the protection of civilians remains in focus for the close attention of the Security Council, which has accumulated an impressive array of resolutions and statements on the issue.

Minimizing casualties among non-combatants requires a responsible approach to respecting the norms of international humanitarian law. The task of adhering to those norms is of particular importance in situations of hostilities in densely populated areas.

The specifics of military operations in cities include the fact that civilian and military objects are often interspersed within urban spaces. In that context, when planning operations, the use of the most accurate and reliable information is of particular importance. It is unacceptable to conduct strikes using unmanned aerial vehicles or other means of remote warfare on the basis of unverified intelligence.

The American drone strike on 29 August last year in Kabul against a family with children is a real tragedy and a good example of what not to do. Unfortunately, the world has seen quite a lot of similar examples in recent times.

In general, the States members of NATO and other various coalitions for democracy have huge negative experience in the framework of the topic under consideration today.

Moreover, the bombing of city blocks was often carried out not with the aim of achieving a military advantage, but for political intimidation, revenge or the punishment of undesirable Governments. We all remember the air strikes in the centre of Belgrade and other Serbian populated areas in the spring of 1999, and neither have we forgotten the root causes and methods of warfare in Iraq and Libya.

Far from being the best examples of military operations in cities are the actions of the Ukrainian army against civilians in their own country. Currently, against the backdrop of an artificially inflated imaginary threat from Russia, Western countries continue to pump weapons into Ukraine, post military advisers there and generally indulge Ukrainian provocations, instead of forcing Kyiv to comply with the Minsk agreements endorsed by the Security Council. That means that, in the eastern part of Ukraine, women, children and the elderly — against whom the Kyiv authorities have been waging an undeclared war for years — will continue to die.

Today terrorist groups participating in armed conflicts, primarily in Syria and certain African countries, pose a particular threat to the civilian population. The warring parties, militants and terrorists are increasingly using civilian infrastructure and facilities, including hospitals and schools, for military purposes. We strongly condemn those actions. Such irresponsible conduct turns those facilities into legitimate targets for attack under international humanitarian law. As a result, the lives of civilians are endangered. We consider the practice of using civilian objects for cover or civilians as a human shield to be extremely shameful and immoral.

On the whole, we believe that the existing legal framework, such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Protocols Additional, are sufficient for the protection of civilians and civilian objects, including in urban warfare. The norms of international humanitarian

law are flexible enough to ensure that the precautions taken in planning military operations correspond precisely to the context of combat and ensure that damage be minimized — urban environments are no exception.

Loose interpretation of international humanitarian law, as well as the invention of endless innovative constructs to fill the gaps in it that supposedly exist, lead in fact only to the erosion of established international legal norms. We must not weaken that authoritative set of rules. Likewise, we cannot allow international humanitarian law to become a tool for political manipulation.

**Mr. De Rivière** (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Norway for organizing this debate, as well as the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel for their briefings.

Once again, we hear and acknowledge the gravity of the humanitarian consequences of conflicts, especially for civilian populations in urban areas. The responsibility to protect civilians lies, first and foremost, with those who wage wars, but that does not exclude our collective responsibility to protect and reaffirm our commitment to addressing the destructive consequences of conflict for civilian populations and guaranteeing the infrastructure necessary for their survival. Our response in that regard must take four trajectories.

First, the Security Council must remain fully engaged to ensure that parties to conflicts comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and international human rights law. We must also ensure the implementation of Council resolutions on the protection of civilians. In that regard, we encourage all Member States to endorse the Humanitarian Call to Action, launched by France and Germany in September 2019.

Secondly, we must ensure better protection for humanitarian and medical personnel and infrastructure. Attacks and threats against women and men who have dedicated themselves to serving others must not be tolerated. Attacks on infrastructure in violation of international humanitarian law, including in cyberspace, must be condemned.

Thirdly, it is essential that the protection of civilians remain at the heart of peacekeeping operations. The mandates of those operations must take into account

an analysis of threats to civilians, including threats of sexual and gender-based violence and threats of grave violations against children and their rights. The aim is to do everything possible to prevent those threats from becoming a reality.

Finally, attacks and violations against civilians and civilian infrastructure must be strongly condemned and cannot go unpunished. France condemns the methods used by certain parties to conflicts, including the massive and indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices, as well as the use of civilians as human shields. The Council's action against those phenomena must be strengthened, as must cooperation with fact-finding missions, commissions of inquiry and international criminal justice instruments. We also reiterate our call for a better use of sanctions against those responsible for such acts.

Beyond those four aims, we must continue to work together to propose concrete actions. That is why France has taken the initiative, together with the European Commission, to organize the first European Humanitarian Forum, to be held from 21 to 23 March 2022.

We must take action for international peace and security. We owe it to the civilian populations whom we are mandated to protect.

**Mr. Tirumurti** (India): At the outset, let me thank the Norwegian delegation for organizing this open debate on the important theme of "War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings". I would like to convey the greetings and best wishes of my Prime Minister to Your Excellency, Mr. President, for presiding over this important meeting. We thank the Secretary-General for his briefing. I also thank the President of International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Peter Maurer, and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel for sharing their insights with us. I also welcome His Excellency the Vice-President of Ghana and His Excellency the Foreign Minister of Gabon in our midst.

We have witnessed an unprecedented resurgence in armed conflicts around the globe, which has been further complicated by the ongoing coronavirus disease pandemic. According to United Nations figures, over half of the world's population lives in urban centres today. That is projected to increase to more than two thirds by 2050. History has shown us that the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure has been used as a weapon of war, especially during the two World

Wars. Subsequent wars and armed conflicts have also witnessed such acts under the guise of collateral damage. With the growth in urbanization, it is inevitable that the impact of armed conflicts on people living in cities will increase.

We are already witnessing the effect of urban warfare and terrorist attacks in cities. According to the report of the Secretary-General (S/2021/423), more than 50 million people were affected by conflict in urban areas. The use of explosive weapons, particularly those with wide-area effects, continues to expose civilians to a high risk of indiscriminate effects. People in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen have witnessed the devastation caused by urban conflicts.

There are other countries as well that are still reeling from military actions carried out in the past, either without due consideration for protecting civilian populations or through the deliberate targeting of civilians amounting to genocide, as was done in the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971, now Bangladesh.

The primary responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of populations, including the maintenance of essential services, rests with national Governments. However, over decades of practice and shaped by the calamitous experience of destructive wars, we now have a set of international principles and jurisprudence that places no less responsibility on the aggressor to ensure that civilians and civilian infrastructure are not targeted in situations of armed conflict. In the face of such aggression, especially in urban areas, it is equally incumbent on States to protect those who put their lives in the line of fire to protect civilians. In other words, we also need to protect the protectors.

It is a matter of concern that parties to armed conflicts to this day seem to consider civilian populations and civilian infrastructure as legitimate targets. Such a despicable approach has resulted in the maiming and killing of thousands and the rendering of millions homeless. Civilian populations and civilian infrastructure are also easy targets for terrorist groups and non-State actors. Vulnerable groups, women, children and minorities, as well as indispensable civilian infrastructure, hospitals and irreplaceable cultural heritage, have been the first casualties of attacks by such actors.

Having suffered the scourge of cross-border terrorism for decades, India has always been at the forefront of global counter-terrorism efforts. We have

witnessed dastardly terrorist attacks on our cities targeting innocent civilians.

Any debate on the protection of civilians in urban areas would be incomplete without taking into account the carnage wrought by terrorist forces, especially those backed by State actors. The dastardly terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, which resulted in the killing of 166 innocent civilians of 15 nationalities, is still a ghastly reminder to the entire international community. In recent memory, the Mumbai terror attacks epitomize the sheer scale and scope of urban warfare that we had to mount against jihadi terrorists when our police personnel had to put their lives on the line to secure the city's safety.

The international community should therefore stand firm in its opposition to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reject any attempt to provide any justifications for terrorist acts. We should remember that the consequences of any relaxation of our guard on this count would be borne not only by civilians, but even by the security forces that combat them in extremely difficult conditions in urban areas. We have already seen implications of such an approach in Europe, where lone wolf attacks have resulted in killings of civilians in urban areas and the terrorizing of urban populations.

While it is important to deliberate on the devastating consequences of armed conflict in urban settings, we should not ignore fundamental issues and international power politics that contribute to the accentuation of armed conflicts. Today we need to reaffirm our commitment to the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of States. All conflicts must be resolved by peaceful means and through political and diplomatic efforts in line with international law and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Similarly, the debate on the effects of conflicts in urban settings cannot be delinked from the post-conflict role. In the post-conflict context, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of civilian infrastructure and the restoration of essential services should be given high priority to facilitate socioeconomic recovery and peacebuilding. Owing to the significant associated costs, donor countries and United Nations agencies must provide financial and technical assistance for capacity-building.

For its part, India recognizes the importance of rendering assistance to countries that have suffered

the destruction of urban infrastructure. After the end of the armed conflict in 2009 in Sri Lanka, India assisted the Government of Sri Lanka in immediately restoring some of the most basic and essential civilian infrastructure. India deployed seven demining teams on an emergency basis, which enabled internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes and livelihoods. India contributed extensively to rebuilding basic essential infrastructure in northern Sri Lanka, including 46,000 houses for IDPs. India also invested more than \$3 billion in infrastructure and community development projects in Afghanistan.

In conclusion, India stands ready to support efforts towards strengthening the normative architecture for the protection of civilians and the provision of humanitarian assistance in armed conflict in urban areas as part of a broader endeavour. Such a normative architecture should respect the principles of the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and unity of countries affected by armed conflicts.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Liechtenstein.

**Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein):** We thank your delegation, Mr. President, for getting us together today for this important discussion.

The density of cities means that the suffering caused by attacks against them is overwhelmingly borne by civilians — 88 per cent of those killed and injured in 2020, according to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians (S/2021/423). Damage caused to essential infrastructure — including water, sanitation, power supplies and health care — forces survivors to flee and aggravates health risks, such as those posed by the coronavirus disease pandemic. Irreplaceable cultural heritage may also be threatened. Explosive remnants of war remain long after the immediate hostilities end, continuing to kill and injure and deterring civilians from returning and rebuilding their communities.

The heightened risk of indiscriminate harm to civilians and civilian objects serves only to emphasize the importance of strict compliance with international humanitarian law in such situations. Over a decade ago, the International Committee of the Red Cross called for the use of explosive weapons that have wide-area effects — the weapons predominantly used in urban warfare — to be avoided, owing to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects.

Unfortunately, respect for the rules and principles governing the conduct of hostilities, including the prohibition of direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects, is eroding, which poses a particular challenge to the Security Council. Parties to armed conflicts must put respect for international humanitarian law at the heart of their military planning and operations. While some claim that innovations such as increasing the precision of munitions or reliance on enhanced data and surveillance collection and analysis tools can help to minimize civilian harm, even the most prepared State actor cannot technologize away the risks that any use of armed force in urban areas poses to civilians. Strict compliance with the obligation to ensure necessity, proportionality and distinction is now more important than ever.

The Council should backstop such efforts, as it did in resolution 2573 (2021), on attacks on critical infrastructure. Going forward, the Council should better acknowledge the preventive dimension of the protection-of-civilians agenda, including by ensuring the credible prospect of accountability for those that violate international humanitarian law—a responsibility to which it has largely failed to live up in recent years. The Council can also see to it that engagement with non-State armed groups, whose cooperation is often essential to the protection of civilians in urban areas, is not criminalized, but rather seen as a means to avert further suffering, including with respect to those actors under sanctions designations.

Civilians in urban areas face a particularly acute vulnerability to attacks carried out through cyberoperations, for example on the electric grid or water supply. We would again like to quote the ICRC:

“International humanitarian law limits cyberoperations during armed conflicts, just as it limits the use of any other weapon.”

Moreover, irrespective of whether an act is kinetic or conducted through cybermeans, the law reflected in the Geneva Conventions and in article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) applies once international humanitarian law is triggered.

The Council has the power to refer situations to the ICC to ensure accountability and further deter such crimes. Indeed, as discussions on the application of international law to cyberspace continue in several forums at the United Nations, we must include the

Rome Statute and international criminal law more generally in such analyses as a matter of prevention. That is why, together with partners, we created a council of advisers, which helped to produce an in-depth report of the application of the Rome Statute to cyberwarfare. We invite everyone to read the report, which, with our partners, we will disseminate widely in the coming weeks.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Switzerland.

**Mrs. Baeriswyl (Switzerland):** I am honoured to take the floor on behalf of the Group of Friends on the protection of civilians in armed conflict — a cross-regional network of 27 Member States.

We thank Norway for organizing this important debate. I would also like to thank the briefers, the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the civil-society representative for their important insights.

According to the Secretary-General’s 2021 report (S/2021/423), a large majority of casualties in armed conflicts in urban settings are civilians. Ample evidence of the devastating impact of war in cities has been collected, including the negative long-term and systemic consequences on basic health and education services. The Group of Friends therefore stresses the importance of respecting international humanitarian law and the need to enhance the protection of civilians, including from the humanitarian impacts that could arise when explosive weapons are used in populated areas. The Group of Friends takes note of the ongoing consultations led by Ireland. I will concentrate my remarks today on actions that the Security Council and Member States should take to remedy that tragedy.

First, the strict application of the rules and principles of international humanitarian law, including those of distinction and proportionality, as well as precautions, are required by all parties to armed conflict. The Group of Friends emphasizes that only full respect for international humanitarian law, international human rights law and a reduction in hostilities can protect the civilian population, including in cities. The Group of Friends echoes its constant calls for ensuring strict compliance with international humanitarian law in all circumstances and for the political settlement of armed conflicts. We welcome the adoption of the landmark resolution 2573 (2021), on attacks on critical infrastructure, and emphasize the call to avoid, to the

extent possible, establishing military positions within or near densely populated areas.

Secondly, the implementation of international humanitarian law at the national level is key, and it requires both legal and practical measures in times of peace and of armed conflict. Military doctrine and practice should provide the basis for the development of military competence in protecting civilians during military operations in cities. That should include specific training and the development of good practices in planning and conducting military operations in cities during armed conflict.

Thirdly, respect for the rules and principles governing the conduct of hostilities, in particular the prohibition of direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects, is eroding, including in situations on the Council's agenda. The dissemination of international humanitarian law to all parties to a conflict is therefore important to increase compliance and generate better protection of civilians. Engaging armed groups is also essential, and contacts for such purposes should not be criminalized.

Fourthly, war in cities has altered and shrunk the humanitarian space. Those complex security environments lead to access restrictions and impede humanitarian assistance and protection, in particular for women and children. Therefore, it remains all the more important for all parties to armed conflicts to allow and facilitate humanitarian activities. It is equally essential to ensure the participation and leadership of women and girls in humanitarian processes and initiatives. Furthermore, even when parties comply with international humanitarian law, warfare often leads to civilian losses and destruction, which must be addressed. Comprehensive approaches by humanitarian and development actors, including preventing further negative impacts of armed conflict, are highly important, especially in addressing protracted armed conflict in urban areas.

Allow me to add the following in my national capacity.

“Boredom, shooting, shelling, people being killed, despair, hunger, misery — that’s my life”. Those were the words of author Zlata Filipović, who, as a girl, was trapped in the siege of Sarajevo. Almost 30 years later, too many girls, boys, women and men still find themselves in that reality in conflict zones around the world. We must strive to ensure that cities remain

spaces of life and hope, even during armed conflict. Strict respect for international humanitarian law is key to achieving that.

As a candidate for the Security Council, my country is committed to the protection of civilians in armed conflict and the full implementation of international humanitarian law. We work for human dignity in war.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Austria.

**Mr. Marschik (Austria):** At the outset, I would like to thank you, Mr. President, and Norway for convening this debate on war in cities. I also thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel for their briefings earlier today.

Austria aligns itself with the statement delivered on behalf of the Group of Friends on the protection of civilians and that to be delivered by the Head of Delegation of the European Union. In our national capacity, we would like to add the following elements.

Tragically, war in cities is not a new phenomenon either for humanity or for the Council. What is new, however, is the increasingly devastating impact of urban warfare. There are several reasons for that. Today larger shares of populations live in cities than in earlier times. There are more cities and their areas have expanded exponentially. Cities host ever more critical infrastructure and new lethal weapons, and technology can cause greater havoc and devastation.

As a result, the international community can see the cruel, disruptive and lethal impact of urban warfare now more clearly than ever. In his recent reports on the protection of civilians, the Secretary-General mentioned some figures. Today almost 90 per cent of casualties in urban warfare are civilians. Globally, 50 million civilians are estimated to be affected by urban warfare. Those numbers are simply too high.

A common pattern among conflicts in urban settings is the systematic violation of international humanitarian law. Indeed, international humanitarian law and the principles of necessity, proportionality, distinction and humanity are flouted precisely in those circumstances where adherence is most needed. We join the call on all parties to armed conflict to fully comply with international humanitarian law under all circumstances.

Austria is particularly worried about the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and are addressing this issue and this concern with partners. The gruesome humanitarian impact of this type of warfare manifests itself not only directly in the form of injury or death as a result of explosions but also indirectly, as such explosions disrupt essential infrastructure and the provision of services. Schools are destroyed, children stay home in fear of attacks, and this leads to follow-on effects on education but also on the social development of children. Austria has long advocated a convincing reaction by the State community to the call of the Secretary-General for urgent and determined action.

The 2019 Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare underscored that call. As a start, we need a strong political declaration on this matter, which is currently being negotiated under Ireland's leadership, for which we are very grateful.

The Security Council has shown in recent years that it can respond to urgent protection challenges. Last year's unanimous adoption of resolution 2573 (2021), on the protection of infrastructure that is indispensable to the survival of civilians, was a welcome step forward. The resolution also applies to urban warfare, as much of today's infrastructure is located in cities and towns. The Council should urgently address the implementation of the resolution, taking into account the specific needs of urban populations.

Finally, in the case of conflicts, we have the issue of humanitarian aid. Help and assistance can be delivered to cities only when those delivering aid are granted safe access. The Council must strive to enable unimpeded access for humanitarian workers to cities in conflict areas. That is especially relevant in cases where urban conflict leads to food insecurity and malnutrition. In that context, we reiterate our strongest condemnation of the use of starvation as a method of warfare in armed conflict, which can amount to a war crime.

**The President:** I give the floor to the representative of Egypt.

**Mr. Mahmoud (Egypt):** We would like to express our appreciation to Norway for having convened this timely open debate on the protection of civilians in urban settings and to thank all the briefers: the Secretary-General; Mr. Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross; and the civil-society briefers. I acknowledge the presence of the

Vice-President of Ghana and the Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs of Gabon.

Today we continue to witness an alarming increase in an armed conflict, including in urban settings around the globe, in a pressing challenge to international humanitarian law and to the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2021/423) highlights the perpetuation of civilian casualties in armed conflict in several parts of the world. It also demonstrates the devastating repercussions that the spread of armed conflict has on civilians' access to food, water, health care, education and other essential services, thus aggravating the plight of civilians as a result of conflict, war and instability.

Unfortunately, people in vulnerable situations continues to be the most impacted, particularly women and children. We also observe that in numerous armed conflicts around the world, medical personnel and health-care facilities continue to come under attack. In addition, the coronavirus disease pandemic has had grave effects on conflict-stricken countries and has severely affected efforts to end armed conflict.

In that regard, it is imperative that the international community prioritize ensuring safe access to and the delivery of health care in situations of armed conflict. In addition, there is a strong need to protect humanitarian and medical personnel and peacekeepers, whose work translates into a significant component of the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Egypt has always been a staunch supporter of the advancement of the agenda of protecting civilians within the United Nations system. In 2016 Egypt joined efforts with other Security Council members to introduce resolution 2286 (2016), on the protection of medical personnel and facilities in armed conflict. The resolution drew upon the existing legal framework that binds all parties involved in armed conflicts and condemned violations of international humanitarian law, urged Member States to adopt practical measures to prevent their occurrence and called on States to ensure unimpeded access to medical care. Those efforts must be advanced through a strong political message to uphold the principles of international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians in armed conflict while refraining from politicization and selectivity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that enhancing the protection of civilians requires an integrated approach to addressing this important issue. The role that non-State



actors have in armed conflict and in targeting civilians in a systematic manner has become increasingly evident, resulting in higher levels of violence and threatening regional and international stability, particularly given their role in the proliferation of arms and the increase in smuggling activities.

Therefore, one of the essential components of protecting civilians lies in the provision of effective political solutions aimed at ending crises and ensuring that they do not reoccur. That can materialize only through a tackling of the root causes of conflict through a comprehensive approach that addresses the need to achieve sustainable development and increase employment, especially in the light of the presence of the other threats posed by international terrorists in already volatile regions.

In addition, noting the primary responsibility of States to protect civilians, it is key to highlight the importance of enhancing the role of the relevant State institutions and the national mechanisms responsible for addressing conflict in order to pro-mote their stability and adherence to the relevant norms of international law. Moreover, peacekeeping operations, to which Egypt remains a major contributor, play an important role in the protection of civilians, including through building capacities and strengthening the institutions of host States to enable them to take ownership and ensure the sustainability of efforts in that regard.

We therefore reiterate the need to match peacekeeping operations' protection-of-civilians mandates with adequate human and material resources. We urge Member States to meet their commitments and ensure the provision of sufficient resources to peacekeeping operations so as to enable them to fulfil their protection-of-civilians mandate, while reaffirming the importance of adhering to the principles of sovereignty, national ownership and the specific conditions of each host country.

**The President:** I give the floor to the representative of Malta.

**Mrs. Frazier (Malta):** I begin by thanking Norway for having organized today's open debate. I also thank the Secretary-General and Mr. Maurer for their invaluable insights and the civil-society briefer for sharing her experience.

Malta aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the European Union and would like to add a few remarks in its national capacity.

In recent years, we have witnessed fighting taking place in various towns and cities. From Aleppo, Mosul and Sana'a, to Marawi, Mogadishu, Donetsk and Mekelle, civilians continue to bear the brunt of the consequences of such urban conflict.

Urban warfare kills, injures and displaces civilians. It destroys critical civilian infrastructure and essential services. Too often civilians are deprived of food, water, sanitation, electricity and health care. We also see that the impacts of urban conflict persist long after hostilities. Explosive remnants of war and unexploded ordnance delay reconstruction, prevent the return of those displaced and prolong the suffering. We also emphasize the disproportionate impact suffered by women and children in urban warfare, as well as the mental dimension, with long-lasting psychological trauma suffered by survivors.

We reiterate that all parties to conflict must ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and its foundational principles. Let us commit to safeguarding the protections afforded to civilians and civilian objects.

Let us ensure that life-sustaining humanitarian assistance and relief continues to be delivered without obstacles.

Reports of war crimes must be effectively investigated, and perpetrators brought to justice and held accountable. This is indispensable to ensuring deterrence and providing justice for victims. The Security Council has a fundamental role to play in advancing compliance with international humanitarian law and ensuring accountability. It is equally important for the Council to ensure the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions. In this vein, we highlight resolution 2286 (2016) on the protection of health-care workers, resolution 2573 (2021) on the protection of civilian infrastructure, and resolution 2601 (2021) on the protection of education in conflict, all of which Malta co-sponsored. Synergies should also be explored with other international instruments, such as the Safe Schools Declaration.

To effectively protect civilian populations and related infrastructure, we need to re-evaluate previous military practices. This is particularly applicable to the use of wide-area explosive weapons in densely

populated areas. Today the Secretary-General highlighted once again the devastating toll suffered by civilians and civilian infrastructure when such weapons are used. Reassessing the use of such weapons in populated areas is imperative, given their nature, likelihood of indiscriminate effects and risk posed to civilians. We echo his call for parties to conflicts to avoid using wide-area explosive weapons in populated areas and express our strong support to the Irish-led initiative that seeks to adopt a political declaration on this issue.

In conclusion, the responsibility to promote this agenda lies with the international community and the Security Council. Malta will not shirk this responsibility should we be entrusted to serve as a member of the Security Council in 2023-2024.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Italy.

**Mr. Massari (Italy):** Italy aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the representative of the European Union, in its capacity as observer, and by the representative of Switzerland, who spoke on behalf of the Group of Friends for the Protection of Civilians.

We thank Norway for bringing the issue of the protection of civilians in urban warfare to the attention of the Security Council. We are also grateful for the briefings by the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the civil society representative.

This debate comes at a particularly challenging time for the protection of civilians, as several conflicts in urban settings are currently raging throughout the world. Civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in armed conflicts and are widely affected by gross violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws. The coronavirus disease pandemic is exacerbating this situation, as many of the affected civilians are also more exposed to the effects of the virus.

Wars in cities challenge the basic principles of international humanitarian law, with devastating consequences for civilian population and infrastructure, as well as on cultural heritage. War in urban settings has also triggered the creation of new warfare tactics, causing even more disruption and casualties among the civilian population. In urban warfare, civilians have few possibilities for finding a secure place to hide or

live, while the existence of military objectives within densely populated urban areas makes it difficult for the combatants to respect international humanitarian law provisions. As cities grow and expand, armed conflicts tend to spill more and more into urban areas, making cities the battlefields of our time. In this particularly worrisome context, it is key to make the protection of civilians a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations and to find ways to ensure full respect for international humanitarian law, particularly in the context of urban warfare, in line with the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Protocols Additional of 1977.

Respect for international humanitarian law must be ensured at all times and in all circumstances, which includes the need to comply with the obligation to pursue accountability through all available international justice and ad hoc mechanisms. In this perspective, Italy reaffirms, in particular, its support for the work and the independent role of the International Criminal Court. As stated in resolution 2573 (2021), all parties to armed conflicts should distinguish between civilian population and objects, on one hand, and combatants and military objectives, on the other.

Specific attention should also be paid to the continuity of such key infrastructure and service providers as hospitals and schools. In this respect, Italy would like to reiterate its full support for the Safe Schools Declaration, stressing the vital importance of protecting education from attack and to restrict the use of schools and universities for military purposes. Italy also firmly condemns the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, which causes unbearable urban destruction and human suffering.

Last, but certainly not least, all efforts must be put in place to safeguard humanitarian and aid workers, including in urban settings. It is not only a moral imperative but also an obligation for the international community and, specifically, for the Security Council, to make sure that those who put their lives at risk in order to save the lives of others are adequately protected.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Morocco.

**Mr. Hilale (Morocco) (spoke in French):** Let me first thank the Norwegian presidency of the Security Council for organizing this particularly important and relevant high-level open debate on the protection of civilians in urban areas. I take this opportunity to

thank the Secretary-General and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Peter Maurer, for their comprehensive briefings. I also thank the representative of civil society.

The regularity with which the Security Council addresses this important issue is amply justified by a turbulent international situation that calls on all of us to promote and ensure respect for the principles and rules of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Morocco reiterates its rejection and condemnation of acts of aggression and intimidation perpetrated against civilian populations. The recent attack by the Houthis on peaceful cities in the United Arab Emirates unfortunately confirms the relevance, timeliness and importance of today's public debate. Systematic and premeditated attacks against civilians in cities should be considered terrorist acts, and the perpetrators should be considered terrorists.

The complexity of urban needs, particularly the primacy of civilian protection, presents a real challenge. To minimize collateral damage therefore requires not only the implementation of the principles of international humanitarian law, the application of very precise targeting procedures, the tactical decision to remove conventional combat from cities, and the taking of precautions in attacks or against the effects of attacks, but also, and above all, the analysis and practical implementation of effective military actions that are still legitimate.

Moreover natural disasters continue to cause dramatic consequences for cities and urban populations. Indeed, human-made crises have severely affected urban environments, generating urgent humanitarian needs. The majority of refugees and internally displaced populations often seek refuge in cities or peri-urban areas. In addition, the proliferation of armed conflicts the parties to which are often violent extremist groups or non-State armed groups or separatist groups makes it even more difficult to protect civilians from the effects of conflicts in urban areas which benefit from the proximity of civilians and critical infrastructure, thereby transforming modern conflicts into complex, dynamic, and fragmented phenomena.

I would like to highlight four main points in this regard. First, we reiterate that the protection of civilians is primarily the responsibility of States. Nevertheless, peacekeeping operations, when so mandated, play a decisive role in this regard, ensuring and strengthening

the political process and deploying to areas where civilians are potentially at risk. Indeed, the protection of civilians requires adequate human and financial resources, whether in terms of the number of Blue Helmets deployed, their equipment or their training. It is also necessary to be able to manage the expectations of the different parties involved, whether it be the local populations, the authorities of the host country or the members of the Security Council.

Secondly, humanitarian action in the context of the protection of civilians must be clearly separated from political objectives and protected from being instrumentalized by a party to a conflict. In order to better protect humanitarian personnel and ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered to those in need, the missions mandated with that task must deploy adequate protective mechanisms so that civilians are not the targets of armed groups.

Thirdly, all parties, in particular host countries, must abide by international humanitarian law, honour their commitments to protect civilians and ensure the access and delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need. Increased coordination in the humanitarian sphere among the States Members of the United Nations, its agencies and civil society organizations is necessary in order to prevent the violation of international humanitarian law and ensure that civilians have safe and secure access to humanitarian aid. In addition, humanitarian actors should be allowed to fulfil their noble mandate in complete safety and without political interference.

Fourthly, we believe it is desirable to promote a preventive approach to the protection of civilians, which can be achieved by building the capacity of the States concerned with respect to the rule of law, the assurance of good governance, the entrenchment of a culture of human rights and the establishment of early warning mechanisms that can detect emerging conflicts and prevent their transformation into open and deadly confrontations.

In conclusion, the Kingdom of Morocco shares the firm conviction of the Secretary-General that the protection of civilians requires the enforcement of the provisions of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Morocco takes the opportunity of today's debate to pay a heartfelt tribute to the women and men who protect civilian populations in conflict zones, often at the risk of their own lives.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Germany.

**Ms. Leendertse (Germany):** Germany aligns itself with the statement made by the representative of the European Union.

I would like to thank Norway for hosting the debate today, as well as the Secretary-General, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Ms. Radhya Al-Mutawakel for their important remarks.

Unfortunately, with armed conflicts being increasingly fought in urban areas, we see their impact on people on a larger and larger scale. In densely populated areas, civilians account for up to 90 per cent of casualties and the risk of critical civilian infrastructure being damaged or destroyed is multiplied.

Today I would like to focus on four central aspects that Germany considers of particular importance.

First, we call on all parties to armed conflict to fully comply with international humanitarian law. We all have to make the protection of civilians an undisputed priority. Last year, the Security Council adopted landmark resolution 2573 (2021), which calls on conflict parties to avoid establishing military positions in densely populated areas. Member States must ensure respect for international humanitarian law, including resolution 2573 (2021), and urge all parties to armed conflict to do so as well. Those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law and for human rights abuses must be held accountable.

Secondly, with respect to humanitarian assistance, it is crucial that parties to armed conflicts grant access to humanitarian assistance for all those in need, in compliance with international humanitarian law. Safe, rapid and unimpeded access for medical and humanitarian personnel must be guaranteed and their safety must be ensured at all times.

Those are the core demands of the call for action to strengthen respect for international humanitarian law and principled humanitarian action, which was launched by France and Germany in 2019. We call on all Member States to join its 52 signatories in their efforts to protect the humanitarian space.

Thirdly, unexploded ordnance poses a major threat in densely populated areas, especially when displaced communities start to return after the end of hostilities. Explosive remnants of war not only endanger lives but

also impede the provision of much-needed humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian mine action is an important first step to protect civilians in urban settings after fighting has ceased.

Among other projects funded in the past two years, Germany funded two projects implemented by the international non-governmental organization the HALO Trust to identify and clear hazardous areas in southern Tripoli.

Fourthly, armed conflict in urban settings and impeded humanitarian assistance affect genders differently. Women and girls face particular risks in their homes or while fleeing. Sexual and gender-based violence is a particularly heinous crime.

In our effort to combat such violence, Germany joined the Humanitarian Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies and assumed the role of co-Chair of its States and Donors Working Group. To address those and further challenges, we have to ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in all humanitarian processes and initiatives.

Let me conclude by calling on the United Nations and its Member States to do more to protect the most vulnerable in situations of armed conflict and ensure the protection of civilians. Germany will continue to insist on the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, accountability for serious violations, humanitarian principles and the protection of human rights in order to help better prevent casualties of civilians in armed conflict in future.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Slovenia.

**Mr. Malovrh (Slovenia):** Allow me to thank Norway for organizing this timely debate. Slovenia aligns itself with the statement delivered by the European Union and would like to add the following remarks in our national capacity.

Slovenia wishes to reaffirm its support for the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire during the coronavirus disease pandemic. We would also like to thank him for his annual reports on the protection of civilians, which help guide our action to strengthen accountability for serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

The humanitarian consequences of urban warfare are complex and have both immediate and long-term effects, resulting in tragic human losses and immeasurable development costs. The increased complexity and resurgence of urban warfare calls for the increased engagement and continued focus of the Security Council.

First, I stress that we must ensure the compliance of urban warfare with international humanitarian law. In that regard, humanitarian law, education and training on the basic principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in all aspects of the protection of civilians in armed conflict should be reinforced at the national, regional and international levels. To that end, the contributions of Slovenia include the establishment in 2019 of the Peace Operations Training Centre, which provides national and international training to military, police and civilian personnel, including on the protection of civilians.

Secondly, the mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations should better reflect the realities on the ground regarding the protection of civilians in urban settings, including by strengthening the humanitarian, development and peace nexus. They should also build capabilities for different types of conflict analysis across the spectrum of urban operations, as well as for foreseeing the risks to civilians and vital civilian infrastructure. Planning, training and resourcing to mitigate risks in order to protect civilians in urban settings are also essential.

Thirdly, urban warfare takes a devastating toll on civilian infrastructure and services, such as water, electricity, sanitation, health and schools. Water too often becomes a military and strategic tool, which is unacceptable. We believe that water-related issues should be of particular relevance to the Council's agenda. Slovenia continues to address those issues in its capacity as Chair of the Group of Friends on Water and Peace, which is based in Geneva.

Last but not least, Slovenia is a consistent advocate for the protection of vulnerable groups. We provide assistance to victims of armed conflict, especially children. More than 1,600 children from various urban conflict settings have been rehabilitated in recent years in our health institutions. A project run by the Slovenian organization ITF Enhancing Human Security also works on humanitarian demining and to address the impact of explosive remnants of war.

Let me conclude by expressing our deepest gratitude to all the humanitarian personnel and peacekeepers who continue to risk their lives in order to protect and improve the safety of civilians in armed conflict.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Iran.

**Mr. Takht Ravanchi (Iran):** I thank Norway for having organized this important meeting. I also thank all briefers for their insightful presentations.

Urban warfare has devastating consequences for civilians and critical infrastructure as we witness increasing attacks against civilians and civilian objects. The latest United Nations report on the protection of civilians (S/2021/423) indicates that armed conflicts continue to be characterized by high numbers of civilian deaths, injuries, displaced persons and disappearances, as well as of damaged and destroyed homes, schools, hospitals and civilian infrastructure. The protection of civilians in urban settings requires the adoption of a comprehensive approach in order to anticipate and mitigate such risk and suffering. Every effort must be made to ensure that international humanitarian law is respected and that civilians and civilian objects are protected, regardless of the theatre of combat.

To that end, the role of the United Nations in compelling parties to a conflict to adhere to their obligations and respect international humanitarian law is more vital than ever. In addition, States need to do much more to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law.

States also need to fulfil their obligations under international law to prevent conflicts and resolve them through peaceful means. We share the view that sustainable political solutions remain the only way to ensure that civilians are safeguarded from harm and suffering.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Protocols Additional thereto constitute the corner-stone of the legal framework for the protection of civilians and those who do not take part in hostilities.

Furthermore, in its 1996 advisory opinion on the Legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons (A/51/218, annex), the International Court of Justice places emphasis on two cardinal principles of international humanitarian law — the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and the prohibition of unnecessary suffering.

The Court stated clearly that States must never make civilians the object of attacks and consequently must never use weapons that are incapable of distinguishing between civilian and military targets. Unnecessary suffering should also not be caused to combatants and in that regard States do not have unlimited freedom of choice in the weapons they use.

Despite the legally binding rules of international humanitarian law, the serious challenge that the international community faces today is the non-compliance of the parties to a conflict to such rules. Equally important is the inaction of the Security Council in the face of serious violations of international humanitarian law.

It is regrettable and alarming that in the Middle East, the implementation of international humanitarian law is being seriously violated. The most serious violation of international humanitarian law is the decades-long systematic inhumane and apartheid policies and practices of the Israeli regime in the occupied Palestinian territory, which include a range of brutalities such as the deliberate, systematic and massive killing of civilians, including women and children; the seizure and demolition of homes; the confiscation of the land and property of Palestinians; their forceful eviction; and the blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Similarly, systematic and serious breaches of international humanitarian law in Yemen have caused the widespread and deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure; targeted killings of civilians, including women and children; and severe and unlawful blockades of civilian ports and airports, resulting in the extreme suffering of civilians, the deterioration of the humanitarian situation and continued disregard for the most basic principles of international humanitarian law.

It is the responsibility of the Security Council to ensure the protection of civilians, compel the violators of international humanitarian law to immediately end such flagrant violations and hold them accountable for their crimes.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Portugal.

**Mr. Duarte Lopes (Portugal):** Portugal aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the observer of the European Union and the statement delivered earlier by the representative of Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends on the protection of civilians. We thank Nor-

way for organizing this open debate and would like to add the following points in our national capacity.

The urbanization of warfare is one of the chief humanitarian and legal challenges of contemporary armed conflict, which has a disproportionate impact on persons and objects protected under international humanitarian law. While that is not a new phenomenon, it is resurging and likely to endure since two thirds of the global population are expected to live in cities by 2050.

Sustainable solutions are required to prevent and mitigate the human cost of urban warfare and address the needs of communities affected by war. Networked multilateralism, in particular the promotion of the triple nexus of peace and security, development and humanitarian action, is the way to go as set out in *Our Common Agenda* (A/75/982).

Explosive weapons and improvised explosive devices can prove especially challenging, as can new technologies with integrated autonomy. The political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas promoted by Ireland is certainly a good example of encouraging best practices in urban settings, based on international humanitarian law.

Ultimately, however, improving respect for international humanitarian law and ensuring that the protection of civilians is a priority in planning and conducting military operations will require military training and doctrine to be adjusted and kept up to date. Member States have an important role to play.

In our case in that regard, I am glad to announce that Portugal established the National Committee on International Humanitarian Law this year to provide an important tool to support compliance with obligations under international humanitarian law.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Poland.

**Mr. Szczerski (Poland):** I wish to thank Norway for choosing the pertinent issue of the protection of civilians in urban settings as the theme for this open debate. Let me also express my appreciation to you, Madam President, for your country's successful presidency of the Security Council this month.

Poland aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the observer of the European Union and the statement delivered by the representative of

Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends on the protection of civilians.

Poland is deeply disturbed by the severe humanitarian consequences of urban warfare — the direct harm done to civilians, the long-term damage done to essential infrastructure and the protracted and repeated urban displacement.

The most recent report of the Secretary General (S/2021/423) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict found that more than 50 million people were affected by conflict in urban areas, where the use of explosive weapons continues to expose civilians to a high risk of indiscriminate effects. That subject is especially dear and important to us, as we remember the tragic fate of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, 80 per cent of which was destroyed in the Second World War, with enormous human losses.

Therefore, Poland emphasizes the need to ensure respect for and full compliance with inter-national humanitarian law and calls for urgent action to strengthen the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The promotion of and strengthening of respect for international law was one of the priorities of our term in the Security Council for the period from 2018 to 2019.

Today we are continuing our efforts to uphold international law during our term on the Human Rights Council. Our priority is to protect groups in vulnerable situations, in particular civilians in armed conflicts, persons with disabilities, children and members of religious minorities.

That vision also guides the Polish chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2022. In that respect, Poland plans to pay special attention to the protection and assistance of civilians affected by armed conflict.

In that context, we would like to call for continuing the promotion and full implementation of resolution 2475 (2019) on persons with disabilities in armed conflict, which was unanimously adopted by the Security Council at the initiative of Poland and the United Kingdom.

The use of explosive weapons in urban areas takes a devastating toll on essential infrastructure and services. It not only results in damage or the destruction of water, electricity and sanitation infrastructure but also causes severe disruption in the health-care services that are critical to caring for the wounded and

sick, especially during the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

In places like Libya and Ukraine, fighting has damaged water infrastructure and hindered its maintenance, leading to cuts and shortages. We hope that resolution 2573 (2021), which was unanimously adopted last year, will ensure better protection of civilian infrastructure and lead to a durable humanitarian pause to facilitate assistance, including the equitable, safe and unhindered delivery and distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations in conflict-affected areas.

We should also bear in mind that the corrosive impact of violence on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals puts millions of people at risk of being left behind in conflict-affected urban areas. In view of that, Poland fully supports the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, as the COVID-19 pandemic remains far from over.

Immediate, full, and uninterrupted humanitarian access in situations of conflict is an important prerequisite to effective humanitarian action. We strongly condemn attacks against humanitarian and medical workers in armed conflicts and reiterate our commitment to bringing the perpetrators of these heinous crimes to justice.

Poland recognizes and appreciates the unique capacity of multilateral organizations, especially United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to efficiently address the most pressing and complex humanitarian issues. We consider the ICRC to be one of the key partners in the field of providing humanitarian aid in hard-to-reach areas. Since 2010, Poland has been providing regular payments to that organization in response to crises in Syria, eastern Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Haiti. In its humanitarian assistance efforts, Poland concentrates on areas in which humanitarian crises overlap with violence and unstable political situations, such as the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Syrian civilian population and hosting communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq; Ukraine; and the Caucasus.

The protection of children in armed conflict remains a priority for Polish humanitarian assistance and development cooperation efforts. In order to implement feasible solutions, Poland cooperates closely with UNICEF and the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter. Since 2019, Poland

has continued to support both offices by making regular contributions.

In conclusion, let me assure the Security Council that Poland remains concerned about the humanitarian harm caused during active hostilities in populated urban areas. We believe that only full respect for international humanitarian law and international

human rights law and a reduction of violence can protect civilian populations.

**The President:** There are still a number of speakers remaining on my list for this meeting. Given the lateness of the hour, with the concurrence of the members of the Security Council, I intend to suspend the meeting until 3 p.m.

*The meeting was suspended at 1 p.m.*