

IMUN 2024 Research Report

Security Council Issue #1: The protection of civilians during armed conflict.

Introduction:

In Ukraine alone over 11,000 innocent civilians have died due to inadequate measures being in place to protect them. (Statista, 2024) The protection of civilians (POC) during armed conflict is a critical issue for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In many conflicts worldwide, civilians bear the brunt of violence, experiencing mass casualties, displacement, and grief. Although international laws, such as the Geneva Conventions, are designed to shield non-combatants, violations continue to escalate, with civilians being deliberately targeted or caught in indiscriminate violence. These persistent challenges underscore the urgency of addressing the protection of civilians within the UNSC framework, ensuring that concrete measures are adopted and implemented effectively to safeguard non-combatant populations and punish offenders.

Background Information:

International humanitarian law (IHL) is the primary framework governing the protection of civilians during armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols (Cornell Law School, n.d.) prohibit attacks on civilians, require the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and mandate humanitarian availability. Despite these established norms, conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and across the Sahel have demonstrated that civilians continue to face direct and disproportionate harm. Several factors exacerbate this vulnerability. First, the deliberate targeting of civilians remains a strategic method of warfare for some armed groups, aiming to spread fear or gain political leverage, this can often be observed with those labelled 'terrorist groups'. Other strategic methods include targeting civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and water supplies, amplifying the humanitarian toll and impact on civilians. Furthermore, accountability for violations of IHL is often weak or absent. In many conflict zones, justice systems are inadequate or underdeveloped, and internationally, criminal tribunals usually reprimand criminals after the conflict has come to a close, allowing widespread impunity for war crimes and human rights abuses.

Access to humanitarian aid is another significant issue affecting civilian populations. Active hostilities, blockades, and deliberate obstruction by warring parties prevent humanitarian actors from delivering life-saving assistance. These barriers result in widespread famine, forced displacement, and public health crises, as seen in countries like Yemen (Human Rights Watch, 2017) and South Sudan (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The vulnerability of specific groups, such as women and children, is another area of concern. Sexual violence upon women continues to be used as a weapon of war, while children face recruitment by armed groups or displacement into refugee camps (DLP Forum, 2022). Whilst this issue has been attempted to be tackled previously in the Hague Conventions (Scott, 2007), particularly Article 46, it has been difficult to enforce. Additionally, the displacement of civilians due to conflict often leads to large-scale refugee crises that further strain international resources and neighbouring countries' capacities to manage their borders and camps.

Focus of Debate:

The UNSC debate on the protection of civilians should prioritize several key areas. Strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law is paramount. Delegates must explore new ways to enforce existing laws and hold perpetrators accountable. Measures could include targeted sanctions, international tribunals, or supporting domestic judicial mechanisms to prosecute war crimes, however

specificity might need to be made for different conflict types. Accountability is crucial for breaking cycles of violence and deterring future violations, thus this must be attempted to be built through infrastructural and social improvements. Furthermore, improving humanitarian access must be a central component of the debate. The UNSC should consider measures to guarantee the safe passage of aid workers and supplies into conflict zones, and the safe passage of civilians out, potentially through ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, or protected zones.

Protecting vulnerable groups, especially women, children, displaced persons and journalists should also be a primary focus. The Security Council could strengthen mandates for peacekeeping missions to prioritize the protection of these groups, ensuring that peacekeepers are properly trained and equipped to respond to sexual violence and other forms of exploitation. Additionally, peacekeeping missions should be provided with clearer mandates and more resources to effectively protect civilians. The UNSC should also consider the role of non-state armed groups in modern conflicts, as many of these actors operate outside the framework of international law. Engaging with the entire international community and a range of state and non-state actors is imperative to attempt a holistic solution for this large-scale issue.

Recommendations for Research:

In preparation for debate, delegates are encouraged to research several key topics. First of all, understand your allocated countries key policies, both internally and internationally. Research any past humanitarian aid missions your nation has been a part of and study their response and decisions. Understanding the international legal frameworks governing civilian protection, including the Geneva Conventions, the Hague Conventions and relevant UNSC resolutions, will provide a foundation for informed discussions. Delegates should also familiarize themselves with recent case studies where civilian protection has been a significant challenge, such as in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These cases can offer insights into both the successes and failures of international efforts to protect civilians. The role of peacekeeping missions is another critical area for research. Delegates should examine past and current UN peacekeeping operations, such as those in South Sudan (UNMISS) or Mali (MINUSMA), to assess their effectiveness in civilian protection and identify areas for improvement. However, it is important to note that these two operations both happened in a similar region, so it might be of use to look into other peacekeeping mission in the Northern Hemisphere (delegates can use the research they have done on the Situation in Haiti as valuable information and insight on the topic).

Research into accountability mechanisms is equally important. Delegates should explore the workings of international criminal justice bodies, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), and consider how they can be strengthened to address impunity for war crimes. Additionally, humanitarian access challenges must be thoroughly understood. Delegates should review reports from organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to assess how access can be improved in conflict zones. Lastly, the role of non-state armed groups in civilian protection should be closely studied. Researching how international law applies to these groups and how they can be held accountable will be crucial for developing comprehensive solutions.

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