

Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien
ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment High-Level Panel
High-Level Panel – Impediments to the Protection of Civilians

New York, 29 June 2016

As delivered

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour of moderating this morning's high-level panel discussion on "Impediments to the Protection of Civilians." This is our last panel discussion at this year's ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment but in no way the least.

Today civilian deaths and suffering continue unabated due to the blatant and frankly shocking lack of respect for international humanitarian and human rights law, with repeated direct attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, indiscriminate attacks, sieges and arbitrary denial of humanitarian access. There can be no doubt that such disrespect contributes significantly to death, displacement, and untold loss suffered by men, women, and children around the world.

To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war is at the very heart of the United Nations Charter, and ensuring the protection of civilians in armed conflict is at the core of international humanitarian and human rights law. This was well underscored in the Secretary-General's report for the World Humanitarian Summit and in both his most recent reports on the strengthening of humanitarian coordination and on the Protection of Civilians.

As I have said before, and I repeat here, there is something fundamentally wrong in a world where attacks on hospitals and schools, on places of worship and public markets, on ethnic and religious groups, have become so commonplace that they cease to incite any reaction. Month after month, indeed increasingly year after year, we have each spoken about ending the carnage, and about the importance of justice and the need for accountability.

To address this grim reality at the World Humanitarian Summit, stakeholders announced well over 400 concrete commitments across a wide spectrum of important topics. Continued efforts to disseminate, train and promote the law, including among non-state armed actors, drew particularly broad support. Stakeholders also expressed commitments to enhance the protection of humanitarian and medical personnel and objects; improve access to humanitarian and medical assistance; and enhance precautions to minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects during hostilities, including through measures to address the harm resulting from the use of wide-area explosive weapons in populated areas, as their effects are likely to be indiscriminate and devastating for civilians. Commitments also supported tracking and reporting violations, and taking steps to improve accountability and justice for victims.

The actions announced at the Summit were the first essential steps towards meeting the Secretary-General's call in his report, "One humanity: shared responsibility" and its Agenda for Humanity. Namely all States must use their political and economic leverage to ensure that parties to armed conflict comply with international humanitarian and human rights law, and each one of us has the moral obligation to speak against violations and to use our sphere of influence to shape policies and decisions.

To demonstrate the human cost of violating the fundamental norms that safeguard humanity, we need to significantly improve our collection, analysis and presentation of data on violations of IHL and of the facts on the ground. It is also time for a vigorous and broad-based global campaign that draws a line in the sand and demands an end to the erosion of respect for the law.

When implemented, each specific measure announced at the Summit will make an important contribution towards a worldwide effort to enhance the protection of civilians and reduce human suffering. For now the hard work of putting our words into action begins. It is critical that all Member States and other important stakeholders continue persistently to implement concrete measures to strengthen the protection of civilians, and to measure progress along the way.

I am looking forward to hearing this morning the perspectives of so many key actors in the humanitarian field. It is urgent that we not only examine the complexity of today's major impediments to the protection of civilians, but that together we develop concrete measures to confront these challenges and significantly reduce human suffering. As Peter Maurer put it so plainly at the World Humanitarian Summit Middle East and North Africa Regional Consultation last year, and again at the Summit last month, "Wars without limits are wars without end."