

## The humanitarian impact of attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure and personnel.

### A call to action to better protect children in times of conflict

#### Concept Note

PoC Week Side Event

**25<sup>th</sup> of May 11 AM (EST) 2021**

Meeting to be held virtually via Zoom – please RSVP here:

[https://unicef.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_J4U2dcEaRMWktOQuh1Ou4Q](https://unicef.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_J4U2dcEaRMWktOQuh1Ou4Q)

#### **Background:**

Nearly every conflict-related emergency in recent years involves some form of attack that hinders civilians' access to water, whether the attack was directed against water infrastructure or through incidental harm or as a tactic (i.e. misuse of a service) used by a party to conflict to limit water supply to populations.

As the new UNICEF report *Water Under Fire Volume 3: Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children* indicates; cutting off a safe water supply during conflict leads to sanitation and health crises, to which children, especially girls, are particularly vulnerable. Faecally transmitted infections such as cholera and diarrheal diseases are still the second most common cause of morbidity and mortality among children under 5 years of age – and poor water, sanitation and hygiene is the main cause of such infection's transmissions. It is estimated that 297 000 children under five die annually from diarrheal diseases – more than 800 every day – due to poor sanitation, poor hygiene, or unsafe drinking water. If water and sanitation services were protected during armed conflict – a substantial number of children would have a better chance to survive, live, develop and prosper. It would also ensure adequate provision of water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure and services for women and girls.

It is not a lack of legal framework that allows these attacks to continue. For example, Article 54 of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977) states: "It is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population..." The prohibition applies to, among other critical objects, drinking water installations and supplies, and irrigation works. According to article 54, these objects cannot be denied for whatever motive.

Growing empirical evidence linking human suffering to attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure and the impact that the consequent disruption of these services has on civilians in armed conflict, include immediate and longer-term consequences, has been receiving increasing attention in UN global deliberations, reports and decisions.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the issue has been mentioned in numerous reports to the Security Council on the Protection of Civilians, most recently last year when UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres underscored his concern when parties to conflict damaged and destroyed essential civilian infrastructure, such as electrical and water and sanitation systems.<sup>2</sup> The need to protect water services, has also been mentioned in several UNSC resolutions and presidential statements.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC, "Urban services during protracted armed conflict: A call for a better approach to assisting affected people" available at: [https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file\\_plus\\_list/4249\\_urban\\_services\\_during\\_protracted\\_armed\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4249_urban_services_during_protracted_armed_conflict.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Protection of civilians in Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, 6 May 2020

<sup>3</sup> UNSC S/RES/2573 (2021), S/RES/2417 (2018), S/RES/2393 (2017), S/RES/2165 (2014), S/RES/2191 (2014), S/PRST/2013/15,

The recent high level Security Council open debate on protecting indispensable objects in armed conflict highlighted that; “when these objects [Water and sanitation facilities] fail, either because they are destroyed, damaged or otherwise rendered useless during armed conflict, it can cause or contribute to forced displacement, compound the spread of infectious disease, and hinder humanitarian efforts. More civilians are dying from indirect effects of armed conflict such as food insecurity, malnutrition, unmet medical needs, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, or contamination of water than of violence and attacks.”<sup>4</sup>

All parties to the conflict have a legal and moral obligation under international human rights and humanitarian law to undertake measures to ensure that civilians, including children, and especially girls, have universal access to water and sanitation services. These vital services need to be better protected during armed conflicts, while States with influence over parties have a responsibility to ensure respect for the protection of water in times of conflict and ensure accountability. **The United Nations Security Council also can play an active role in ensuring that civilians, including children and civilian infrastructure, such as water and sanitation are better and adequately protected during armed conflicts.**

The new UNICEF *Water Under fire* report calls on all key stakeholders to protect water and sanitation systems and services, to establish better monitoring and reporting of attacks, and to strengthen advocacy to end these abhorrent violations and better protect children, including girls, affected by armed conflict.

**Objectives:** On 25<sup>th</sup> of May, UNICEF in collaboration with Germany, Jordan and Niger, aims to convene a virtual side-event to the annual Security Council open debate on the Protection of Civilians to launch its new report *Water Under Fire: Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children*. In doing so, it wishes to bring together government and humanitarian leaders, as well as UN experts and civil society to:

- 1) identify key humanitarian consequences to civilians - specifically on children - when access to water and sanitation is hindered by attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure and personnel, misuse of water and sanitation services during armed conflict and obstruction of humanitarian access. Raise awareness about the specific impact on girls.
- 2) discuss global, national and local practical measures that should be pursued to better protect water and sanitation infrastructure and personnel in today’s armed conflicts in line with international humanitarian law and human rights law.

**Agenda:**

- **Opening remarks** – *Ambassador Sima Sami Bahous Permanent Representative (PR) of Jordan to the UN and Ambassador Günter Sautter, Deputy PR of the Federal Republic of Germany to the UN*
- **40mins: Panel discussion:**
  - Lotta Sylwander Country Representative UNICEF Ukraine
  - Laëtitia Courtois, Permanent Observer of the ICRC to the UN in NY
  - Dr. Danilo Turk, former President of the Republic of Slovenia
  - Civil Society Representative (TBC)
- **40mins: Q&A Session**
- **Closing Remarks** - *Minister Counsellor Halimatou Hima, Niger permanent mission to the UN*

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council Ministerial-level open debate held under auspices of Viet Nam Presidency: Protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population: Concept note