Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am going to open with a few remarks since I have the honour of moderating this morning’s high-level panel discussion on “Reaching people in need and promoting respect for international humanitarian law and the humanitarian principles.” Today we will hear from a range of experts who will discuss the challenge of ensuring compliance with IHL and respect for humanitarian principles; the practical measures different parties are taking to boost compliance; and how we can work together to influence future action on this issue.

Rapid, unimpeded and sustained access to millions of civilians in need is critical to effective humanitarian response, yet severe, widespread and frequently persistent access constraints continue to jeopardize humanitarian assistance all over the world. I often, on a monthly basis, have to report to the Security Council on this.

In Syria, for instance, access constraints make it hard - or indeed outright impossible - to help 3.9 million people in hard-to-reach or besieged locations. In parts of Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, where millions are on the brink of famine, humanitarian access is also deeply constrained, leaving people without the help or the protection they desperately need. Fighting parties deny or restrict access by imposing a range of bureaucratic impediments including hampering humanitarians’ ability to obtain entry clearances; delaying travel authorizations; or detaining and deporting staff. Moreover, violence against humanitarian workers and assets continues to impede humanitarian activities in situations of armed conflict, often with devastating consequences.

In many cases, violence or threats lead aid agencies to not only reduce but to suspend their activities altogether, leaving vulnerable people without the very basics they need to survive. Preliminary records from the Aid Worker Security Database have shown that at least 249 aid workers were killed, kidnapped or seriously wounded in 2016. Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen were the most dangerous places to be an aid
worker. Medical workers are often singled out for attack with abominable consequences for healthcare to conflict-affected populations. In 2016, the World Health Organization recorded attacks against medical workers and facilities in 20 conflict-affected countries, resulting in 863 medical personnel being killed or injured.

The politicization of humanitarian action affects the ability of humanitarian actors to reach affected populations in a safe, predictable and principled manner.

Many of the questions we address today will naturally touch on the larger issue of how to enhance protection of civilians in conflict zones. We have now become used to hearing the harrowing accounts of attacks on civilians, medical personnel, hospitals, schools, places of worship, markets, and residential neighbourhoods. Civilians are also detained, tortured, forcibly disappeared, forcibly recruited into armed forces, cut off from aid or even starved to death as part of fighting parties’ cynical arsenal of war tactics. These acts only precipitate the displacement, disease, and hunger which humanitarian actors bravely and persistently seek to address.

Parties to conflict have an obligation to respect and protect the wounded and sick as well as medical personnel, units and transports. Last year, the Security Council recalled these rules and called for their full implementation in its landmark resolution 2286 [2016]. Upon the Council’s request, the Secretary-General submitted a comprehensive set of recommendations identifying practical measures to implement this resolution. I encourage Member States to adopt these practical measures.

Humanitarian action must remain distinct from political or military objectives and be conducted in line with the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. A study launched here this morning, Presence and Proximity: to Stay and Deliver, Five Years On, stresses the importance for humanitarian organizations to gain the acceptance of parties to conflict to operate. OCHA is most grateful to Germany for generously funding the study and to the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Jindal School of International Affairs for commissioning it with us.

As a corollary, Member States must not impede humanitarian actors’ efforts to interact with all relevant parties, including non-State armed groups, so that they can operate in areas under their control. The study recommends that humanitarian actors develop strategies to understanding the contexts in which they work and to building this acceptance; that they take greater responsibility for the safety and security of both their own staff and local partners; and that they continually refine their operational modalities in highly insecure environments. I look forward to hearing more from you on each of these fronts today.

While all parties to armed conflict have clear obligations, the onus to ensure respect for international humanitarian law does not rest on them alone. All States are obliged to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in all circumstances. Their words and actions should encourage other States and non-State parties to conflict to uphold respect for civilians’ lives and dignity. Conversely, States must not facilitate violations by
financing, arming or training parties who are at risk of flouting the law. I urge all those with influence to step up and ensure respect for international law.

Our panel this morning will examine practical steps and measures of influence that we can each exert to ensure better respect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles in order to enhance the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the protection of civilians more generally.

These issues are two of the protection priorities highlighted in the Secretary-General’s May 2017 Protection of Civilians report. The Secretary-General announced that he will facilitate a global effort to mobilize Member States, civil society and other stakeholders to enhance respect for international law and strengthen the protection of civilians in conflict. This action plan will include awareness-raising; advocacy; the development and sharing of good practices; and research and dialogue on the root causes of parties’ behaviour. It will also encompass initiatives to improve data collection and analysis, together with public reporting on the human cost of conflict which will facilitate evidence-based analysis of trends and patterns of civilian harm.

I do look forward to a very rich and insightful discussion with the panellists and with all of you this morning that will guide us all in our efforts to enhance the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Thank you.

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