

Security Council Open debate - Wars in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings - New York, 25 January 2022 - Statement by the Government of Canada

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Mr. President,

I am honoured to address the Council on behalf of Canada. Thank you to the Government of Norway for your efforts to bring the protection of civilians to the forefront of your presidency; and to the ICRC for its advocacy on compliance with International Humanitarian Law.

Today, when we examine the remnants of large parts of historical cities like Aleppo, Syria, Mosul, Iraq and Taiz, Yemen, we see decimated landscapes reminiscent of World War II: destroyed buildings, unexploded ordnance, mountains of debris as far as the eye can see. These cities were once thriving metropolitan centres with markets, schools, mosques, hospitals, and small businesses.

Thirty years after the Second World War, the world negotiated the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, a cornerstone of our rules-based international order. The modern principle of distinction – that parties to armed conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants, between civilian objects and military objectives – was finally written into treaty form, along with the principles of proportionality and precautions in attack.

Today these form the undisputed basis of international humanitarian law governing the conduct of hostilities all armed conflicts.

Mr. President,

The core problem of urban warfare is not a lack of international law. It is a problem of implementation and will, including by those parties that wantonly use the civilian population and their infrastructure as shields.

For States that do have the will to comply, the path forward is clear: ratify the relevant IHL treaties, give them teeth through domestic law, and integrate them into military doctrine, training, operational decision-making and disciplinary systems.

The urban environment is multi-layered, and the precautions that IHL requires include an understanding of the foreseeable second and third order effects of attacks, which often affect the essential services that allow people to survive and remain in their communities.

Beyond their legal commitments, parties to armed conflict may learn from best practices specific to urban warfare and update their doctrine and training. For example, the different roles of men, women, boys and girls in their communities impacts their likelihood of being injured or killed, and their exposure to sexual and gender-based violence. It is critical for all parties to armed conflict to understand the specific protection needs and priorities of women and girls.

Mr. President,

Where a State or an armed group flouts the law, the international community expects the UN system to move beyond ritual condemnation and take action. For the past 20 years we have seen that happen less frequently, because this Council is too often obstructed by the veto. Since 2011, it has been blocked 16 times from taking urgently needed action on Syria, including to address some of the most pressing humanitarian aspects of the civil war. It is incumbent upon all UN Members to challenge the Security Council when its will is blocked by the veto, and to pressure it to achieve its mandate, or find alternative avenues of collective redress within the UN Charter.

Mr. President,

Canada is doing its part to mitigate the effects of urban armed conflict by providing life-saving humanitarian assistance to those in need in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, amongst others.

Nevertheless, the obliteration of large parts of Aleppo, Mosul, Taiz and other cities rests on the conscience of humanity.

We owe it to those who have been killed, maimed and displaced by unlawful attacks to take every practical measure to ensure that parties to armed conflict abide by international humanitarian law. Collectively, the UN membership has the means to do so; do we have the will?

We strongly support Norway's initiative.

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