Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to deliver this statement on the humanitarian impact of wartime environmental damage, which I present on behalf of the Toxic Remnants of War Network.

Armed conflict creates environmental threats that can directly and indirectly impact the lives and livelihoods of civilian populations. The targeting of industrial sites and urban areas can generate toxic hazards, as can the remnants of weapons and abandoned military materiel. Water, sanitation and waste management infrastructure may be disrupted or destroyed, while population displacement can place enormous burdens on ecosystems and natural resources. Natural resources may also fuel conflicts, or fall victim to them, through over extraction, or scorched earth policies.

We see these problems in Syria, in Ukraine, in Iraq, in Gaza and in conflict zones around the world. With each new conflict, our understanding of these interactions has grown, as has the awareness that these are not just environmental threats. These problems can threaten security, they can threaten effective peacebuilding, they can threaten post-war reconstruction and sustainable development, and they can threaten economic recovery. Above all, they can directly threaten the lives and livelihoods of civilians.

Since the 1990s, and thanks to the work of UNEP, OCHA, the UNDP and many other actors, how the international community responds to wartime environmental damage has improved, but there is much more that could, and should, be done. In spite of their work, and as the Secretary General observed in 2014, the environment still remains “a silent casualty of war and armed conflict”.

The systemic marginalisation of the environment as an issue, has led to the fragmentation of responses. This can create obstacles to the spread of best practice, act as a barrier to issue ownership and can help breed complacency. In the coming decades, population growth, climate change and pressure over access to natural resources will all serve to increase the vulnerability of civilian populations to wartime environmental damage. We therefore urgently need new and creative policy approaches that can help minimise it; where damage does occur, we must ensure recognition and assistance for those harmed and we must provide timely, and effective, environmental assessment, remediation and restoration.

Our Network therefore welcomes the recent efforts of UNEP, the ICRC, the ILC and the Nordic governments to create and sustain a new discourse on strengthening protection for the environment in relation to armed conflicts. Unlike previous initiatives, the new discourse has not been the result of a particular conflict or incident but instead represents a growing consensus on both the inadequacy of current legal protection, and the necessity for change.

Mr Chairman,

Strengthening protection for the environment, and for those who depend on it, will be challenging. But the international community already has the necessary tools at its disposal to achieve this goal; from the field experience and practice of international organisations and civil society; to the observations and conclusions from four decades of legal debate; to the norms, principles and mechanisms established by human rights, environmental and disarmament treaty regimes. All these tools could be used to inform how environmental protection and post-conflict assistance could be improved, providing that there is the political will to do so.

Governments that support progress on strengthening the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts should emphasise the linkages between the protection of the environment and the protection of civilians. They should also acknowledge the weakness of current legal protection.

Finally, governments should endorse the utility and applicability of human rights law and environmental law in informing how the international community proceeds on this topic.