Protection of the environment in relation to armed conflict
Conflicts and Environment
Observatory and PAX

Background
The past year has seen unprecedented attention to the deteriorating condition of the global environment, and its consequences for sustainable development, human security, and ecosystems. Alarms are sounding on land degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the climate emergency. Armed conflicts are contributing to all of these threats. They also weaken the capacity of states to respond to them.

Environmental concerns should feature in many of the topics on the agenda of the First Committee, yet they are rarely articulated by delegations. This is particularly true for the environmental consequences of the proliferation and use of conventional weapons and ammunition. By focusing only on the environmental dimensions of disarmament, the First Committee’s approach has been akin to debating the technicalities of weapons disposal while ignoring the humanitarian consequences of their use. This is a situation that is becoming increasingly untenable.

Questionable targeting practices fuel serious environmental harm that worsens human suffering. Yemen continues to witness deliberate attacks on water and agricultural infrastructure, undermining efforts to address cholera and improve food security. Libya and Ukraine have seen repeated attacks and interruptions to their water and energy infrastructure—made possible and sustained by the ready availability of weapons. Direct attacks on oil infrastructure during armed conflicts, and lack of proper environmental governance in post-conflict zones, have contributed to pollution of marine environments, surface, and groundwater in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

The accessibility of conventional weapons also threatens biodiversity. In South Sudan, efforts to rebuild globally important protected areas are being hampered by insecurity and the volume of weapons in circulation, while the influx of displaced civilians has spurred deforestation. Meanwhile the uncontrolled dispersal of arms from the conflict in Libya has led to increased poaching and rapid declines in large mammal species across the Sahel. Even when a conflict subsides, states are left to address the polluting consequences of millions of tonnes of contaminated debris, vast backlogs of solid waste, and damaged infrastructure.
States and armed groups have also used the environment again as a weapon to target vulnerable populations. In Iraq and Syria, the deliberate torching of thousands of acres of croplands resulted in widespread wildfires that impacted food security, contributing to significant air pollution and the direct killing of people fighting the flames, while deliberate use of specific weapons resulted in deforestation in Syria and northern Iraq.

Furthermore, even as our increasingly unpredictable climate amplifies the vulnerabilities of communities and heightens tensions over natural resources, military activities in peacetime and conflict generate greenhouse gas emissions that exceed those of many countries.

**Background**

In July 2019, the International Law Commission (ILC) adopted 28 legal principles intended to enhance the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts. The principles address measures that states and other actors can take to minimise harm to people and the environment before, during, and after armed conflicts, and in situations of occupation. States will have an opportunity to debate the draft principles during this autumn’s Sixth Committee, before their expected adoption in 2021.

In December 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will publish an updated version of their 1994 environmental guidelines for military manuals. The updated guidelines are intended to help militaries and other relevant actors minimise harm to the natural environment.

The increasing international attention on the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts and military activities has not been restricted to the UN Environment Assembly or Security Council. On 6 November, the UN day for protection on the environment armed conflict, 56 leading civil society organisations and experts called to enhance the protection of people and ecosystems by taking meaningful steps towards addressing the environment throughout the cycle of conflicts. In July 2019, a group of conservation biologists who witnessed the devastating effects on wildlife caused by arms proliferation in the Sahel published an open letter in Nature calling for a Fifth Geneva Convention on the environment.

The main takeaway message is that we have to do everything and do it now. This applies just as much to our personal actions as it does to the actions of First Committee, and right now First Committee is doing very little.

**Recommendations**

**During First Committee, delegations should:**

- Acknowledge and articulate the environmental dimensions of the topics they debate; and
- Make greater use of the annual resolution “Observance of environmental norms in the drafting and implementation of agreements on disarmament and arms control” to articulate these concerns, or work with civil society and experts to develop a new resolution focused on the environmental harm caused by weapons.

**Beyond First Committee, states should:**

- Engage with the International Law Commission’s study on the protection of the environment in relation to armed
conflicts in the Sixth Committee, and support the adoption of its draft principles;

• Adopt, implement, and promote the revised ICRC Guidelines for Military Manuals and Instructions on the Protection of the Environment in Times of Armed Conflict following their publication; and

• Implement the UN Environment Assembly resolution on conflict and environment and support conflict affected states by providing financial support, expertise, and capacity building.

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1 See https://www.un.org/disarmament/topics/