



Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee on the Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts (PERAC)

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Dear Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts, on behalf of the Toxic Remnants of War Network, a civil society group of environmental experts, lawyers, mine-clearance and humanitarian disarmament organizations.

The effects of armed conflict on the environment pose a critical global challenge, threatening public health and as conflict drivers, threatening international peace and security. As [UN Environment](#) acknowledged: “*The effects from damage done to the environment and natural resources during times of war...continue far beyond the period of conflict itself. Such effects are passed on to future generations and may extend beyond the borders of the country impacted. Armed conflict has the potential to reverse years of development and destroy livelihoods.*” These are high-stakes that call for urgent action from this Committee and beyond.

As armed conflict affects the environment, and vice versa, this forms a vicious cycle in which civilians all too often bear the brunt, including those who find themselves wherever water infrastructure is damaged, a chemical factory or oil installation is destroyed, munitions containing toxics are used or unexploded ordnance blocks access to their land.

Much of what we know about the long-term effects of conflict has to do with situations in Viet Nam, Laos, Lebanon, Iraq, the Balkans, Syria, and Afghanistan. We know about the harmful effects of Agent Orange, that abandoned ordnance can present pollution risks, that even conventional munitions are toxic and that rubble, conflict waste, and the collapse of environmental governance threaten health—but all too often these forms of slow harm are neglected or ignored.

As I speak, civilians in Syria are breathing air [poisoned by makeshift oil refineries](#); Iraqi refugees returning to newly liberated Qarraya face blackened skies and streets from oil wells damaged by the Islamic State; communities in Ukraine face exposure to pollutants from [deliberate attacks on chemical facilities](#), and these are just three of many examples.

Because environmental considerations are often low on the priority list of States and international agencies, we must do more to emphasize the link between a healthy environment and the protection of civilians.

At the same time, it is also important to recognize that 2016 has been a remarkable year for progress. We welcome the unanimous passage of the landmark resolution on the [protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict](#) at the UN Environment Assembly, the International Law Commission’s [Third Report on the Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts](#), and the report of the UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights [report on toxics and children’s rights](#).

However, there is still more to be done. Before an armed conflict arises, States must implement policy and legislation considering the environmental impact of armed conflict in their weapons reviews and targeting procedures. During an armed conflict, rules of engagement must be interpreted in light of environmental considerations and relevant legal obligations giving due deference to the effects on the environment that their military operations may have. Finally,

post-conflict, establishing a robust framework for tackling the environmental consequences of conflict is imperative in order to assist in reconstruction and conflict prevention.

Civil society and international organizations also have a role to play. Establishing structural monitoring of the environmental risks caused by conflicts could allow their early identification and help minimize civilian harm. Coupled with clearer obligations for States to assess harm, to remediate damage, to provide assistance to those affected and to utilize the environment and its resources as a tool for cooperation and development, would be a significant contribution to the pursuit of sustainable development.

Chair, the environment is a crosscutting issue. It influences why wars are fought and is affected by how and where they are fought, the weapons used, and the production and disposal of those weapons. Disarmament should be driven by the need to secure the protection of civilians. Therefore these issues fall squarely within the ambit of this Committee. We challenge members here to play their part in sustaining this long overdue debate.

Thank you.