UNSC Arria-formula Meeting on Protection of the Environment during Armed Conflict

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Thank you Mr. Chair and good afternoon Excellencies, distinguished representatives, ladies and gentlemen.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Governments of Estonia, Germany, Kuwait, and Peru for bringing the topic of environment, conflict and peace to the attention of the UN Security Council.

Last year's Arria-formula meeting on the protection of the environment in armed conflict provided a useful oversight on the work done over the last decades on conflict, natural resources and the environment and how this has been reflected in various UN resolutions and mechanisms.

This year it is our aim to outline why we believe the environment matters in relation to security, peace, the protection of civilians and conflict resolution. This debate is timely as there are ongoing discussions on the linkages between climate change, environmental degradation and conflicts.

In the course of our work at PAX, a peace organisation working in various conflict areas around the world, we have increasingly come across a multitude of human and environmental security issues linked with armed conflicts and the protection of civilians. Historically, the linkages were hardly recognized, as the environment is often overlooked and invisible in conflict analysis and response and considered a low priority. Only cataclysmic events such as the Kuwait oil fires, confronted us with reality. The less visual and prolonged impacts on human health, ecosystems and livelihoods of communities affected by armed conflicts can however be severe, and echo long into the future of war torn societies. We have come across this in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where natural resource exploitation prolonged the conflict, the oil rivers in Syria toxifying the landscape, charcoal smuggling fueling armed groups in Somalia, and popular uprisings in Basra in Iraq last year after over 100,000 people became ill as a result of water pollution due to crumbling environmental infrastructure. Yet in many of these cases, the legal threshold to act on this has not been met, with only the aforementioned 600 oil well fires set on fire in Kuwait surpassing that threshold. In our current established international framework, environmental change and damage resulting from armed conflicts has placed and continues to place both civilian and international peacekeeping forces at risk while also prolonging and worsening conflicts and causing such large scale destruction that reconstruction and return of displaced populations becomes either more difficult or simply impossible.

The environment is becoming the center stage of the debate over the future of humankind, as our existence depends on it. A stronger, clearer security-related link is difficult to imagine, and therefore the conflict-environment nexus must be included in discussions at the UN Security Council.

Today, I will briefly outline a number of recent issues to underscore the interlinkages between environment, peace and security based on the research and analysis that has been conducted in the last decade by UN agencies, military research institutes, academics, environmentalists and civil society organisations, including my own. Next, we will briefly present suggestions on what work can and should be undertaken to prevent and minimize the environmental impacts of armed conflict, and how this can foster security and peace.

Over the last decade, the world has witnessed numerous alarming examples of the impact of armed conflicts on the environment, the health of communities and regional security. The intense shelling of industrial areas in Donbas in eastern Ukraine resulted in dire warnings of an imminent environmental catastrophe. Artillery and rocket fire came close to hitting factories storing large amounts of hazardous chemicals, while pumping systems needed to prevent the flooding of coal mines storing toxic and radioactive waste were failing. According to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), ground water in the area could become permanently undrinkable within two decades if contaminated, making the entire region uninhabitable. The shelling did damage water infrastructure such as pipelines and filtration stations, cutting off access to water for hundreds of thousands of civilians depending on it.

These humanitarian consequences of environmental damage in armed conflict were underscored in this year's UN Secretary General Report to the Security Council on the Protection of Civilians, which outlines some of these concerns. It reiterated that '*the negative environmental impact of conflict and the consequences for human health, in particular for pregnant women, children and older persons. For example, the destruction of industrial facilities can result in pollutants contaminating the air, soil and groundwater. These may give rise to serious health problems for civilians and reduce access to resources vital for their survival. The effects may also extend beyond the area and duration of hostilities*"

In the Middle East, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen are dire warnings of how the environment can be used as a weapon of war by States and non-state actors. The pollution from the oil well fires started by ISIS that burned for 8 months is still in the process of clean-up and the long-term health impacts on the local population and displaced people are yet to be investigated. Research by civil society groups and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has documented the wide scale destruction of water infrastructure by ISIS impacting agriculture, preventing people from rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. The Iraqi government estimated that it would require $5.5 billion US dollars for environmental and natural resource rehabilitation.

This summer, we witnessed another scorched earth tactic applied by armed groups and States that deliberately set fire to crop fields in Syria and Iraq, used as either a tactic for extortion of farmers to get funding, or as a mere act of revenge. With the help of remote sensing and open source investigation, PAX has been documenting these trends in Iraq, which showed that at least 50,000 acres of crop lands were burned down. In Syria, humanitarian organisations documented similar events in the north, finding

that over 470,000 acres of crop lands were burned down. These cynical tactics directly impacted the food security of hundreds of thousands of people depending on it.

The direct targeting of water infrastructure in Yemen has also worsened the humanitarian situation and compounded environmental health risks, contributing to the outbreak of cholera that affected over 1 million people, as was reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ongoing shelling and air strikes have also impacted agriculture and food security due to damaged and destroying pumping and irrigation systems and attacks on farms.

Further concerns over targeting the natural environment were reflected by the ICRC in the May 2019 UN Security Council debate on Protection of civilians, stating that "*the environmental consequences of conflict are often overlooked. International humanitarian law protects the natural environment as a civilian object. This includes vital natural resources which, if damaged can have implications not only for the survival of civilian populations but also for environmental risks*."

In a world dependent on natural resource exploitation and transportation, oil infrastructure can be a tinderbox. Continued attacks on oil ships and mooring stations in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea have resulted in significant marine and coastal pollution from oil spills. Meanwhile strikes on oil refineries and processing facilities with long-range drones and cruise missiles have shown how vulnerable societies and the environment have become. In Syria, the conflict has left the country's oil industry in rubble, with a wide range of local environmental hotspots, resulting in the use of polluting coping strategies such as the widespread practice of artisanal oil refining by civilians, including many children. Access to oil fields has likely also played a role in the recent decision to invade north-east Syria as the Kurdish-led self-Administration, considered a security threat by Turkey, is dependent on oil revenues from the region.

This is not an exhaustive list of examples, and there are numerous other issues, including conflict-linked deforestation in Afghanistan, Columbia, Syria and Uganda that impacted local ecosystems and created tensions with host communities, and the emerging linkages between water, conflict and security as highlighted by a recently launched World Resources Institute project supported by the Netherlands. There has also been progressive action taken on the legal protection of water infrastructure in conflicts, which has been developed in the *The Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure and its Commentaries*, undertaken by the Geneva Water Hub and supported by Switzerland.

Our message today is to outline what the direct security risks are from conflict-born environmental damage and change to local populations as the natural resources and ecosystems they depend on are severely degraded. In both the short and long-term, this leads to tensions over access to the use of natural resources -- or lack thereof -- which can threaten peace, stability and regional security. Degraded farmlands and damaged water infrastructure can prevent displaced populations from returning, while lack of clean-up of conflict pollution can fuel resentment towards responsible authorities that can be exploited by groups to incite violence. There are also growing risks that hydropolitics, through large scale

construction of dams and reservoirs, is a problematic development as it results in diminishing water resources and fertile land, which could worsen environmental conditions in conflict-affected areas. Such situations are currently developing in Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan.

Furthermore, it is important to underscore the inherent value of our natural environment. Conflicts further contribute to loss of biodiversity and wildlife, affecting protected areas and nature reserves. These elements are all already under severe pressure due to the climate crisis, as many animal and plant species face extinction.

The abundance of the problem is clear, yet why isn't there a sufficient mechanism or forum to address these issues? And what would be a proper avenue for action?

We are now witness to major changes to our environment that are rapidly changing international politics and security dilemmas. This should be an incentive for action, and we believe there are already opportunities for what can be done now. First of all, through frontier technologies and increased access to remote sensing and earth observation data from satellites and citizen science initiatives, we have a wealth of opportunities to document how wars and armed conflicts are impacting the environment. Over the last decade, open-source investigative journalism, such as the groundbreaking work carried out by the Bellingcat research collective, or data-driven research initiated by UN Environment Programme and the World Resources Institute have helped to show the enormous possibilities to identify, monitor, document and respond to environmental changes in times of armed conflict in a more timely manner. These developments should spur further improvement of humanitarian responses, predict conflict-prone environmental hotspots and areas with severe natural resource degradation and lead to inclusion in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. The data collected can help develop proper mechanisms for response, build accountability over military actions, and support the development of environmental policies and nature-based solutions through international cooperation. We would also take the opportunity here to highlight the important work done by coupling UNEP's technical expertise with OCHA's humanitarian coordination mandate by the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, that is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Second, it is important that States and international organisations acknowledge the serious threat of armed conflicts and military activities to our ecosystems, including by raising these issues in various UN forums and relevant frameworks. Existing UN Security Council resolutions on exploitation and tracking of natural resources linked with armed groups and terrorists, and addressing the role of environment in peacekeeping, have been instrumental in creating awareness in this forum. Past work documenting the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts have been driven by UNEP and UNDP through post-conflict environmental assessment, while the linkages between environment and conflicts have been included in various UN Environmental Assembly resolutions and reports by UN Special Rapporteurs on toxics and hazardous waste.

This year, the UN Special Rapporteur for the International Law Commission presented her draft principles that aim to improve the legal protection of the environment in armed conflicts. We strongly support dialogue over this process as it seeks to explore where progress on this topic can be made. We further encourage States to work towards proper implementation of these principles throughout their own national policies and actions, and recommend the analysis on this process provided by civil society organisations and academic institutions such as the Conflict and Environment Observatory and the Environmental Law Institute.

In 2020, the ICRC will also present its updated guidelines for Military Manuals and Instructions on the Protection of the Environment in Times of Armed Conflict, which provides another avenue for States to engage on improving their practice to limit environmental damage.

To conclude, the current approach to tackling this issue is fragmented, ineffective, and insufficient. The question is: what is the glue that could bring this all together in one clear framework?

This brings us to the last point, namely what are the options to move forward? The complexity of dealing with the environment in the life-cycle of conflicts -- whether it be the weapons production process, targeting guidelines, information sharing and mainstreaming the environment in humanitarian response and reconstruction efforts -- will prove challenging but is an urgently needed endeavour. We would encourage UN Security Council Members to consider building knowledge and expertise through formal briefings, open debates and explore avenues for building a mechanism that helps prevent, minimize and restore environmental damage and loss caused by armed conflicts and resolves resulting security threats.

We believe this would help in conflict-prevention over natural resources, support environmental peacebuilding, contribute to de-escalation of political tensions, address local grievances and improve protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Civil society organisations, academics, experts and affected communities stand ready to help you with exploring these opportunities and ideas and create meaningful change.

Thank you for your attention.