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Humanitarian affairs segment

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President: Mr. Šimonović (Vice-President) (Croatia)

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In the absence of Ms. Narváez Ojeda (Chile), Mr. Šimonović (Croatia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Opening of the segment

Agenda item 9: Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (A/79/78-E/2024/53)

1. **The President**, opening the humanitarian segment on the theme “Putting humanity first in the face of conflicts and climate change: strengthening humanitarian assistance and respect for international humanitarian law, and promoting effectiveness, innovation and partnerships”, said that the theme had been chosen to bear witness to the extraordinary suffering in so many places around the world.

2. In the Sudan, tens of thousands had been killed and millions of people had been displaced since conflict had erupted over one year ago. The Sudan was currently the world’s largest internal displacement crisis and people – especially women and girls – faced a tidal wave of risks, including sexual violence.

3. Beyond the Sudan, the alarming rise in gender-based violence, including sexual violence, in many countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was extremely concerning. Prolonged drought in parts of Ethiopia and Southern Africa had left millions of people in urgent need of emergency food assistance. Meanwhile, conflict continued unabated in Ukraine, Syria and Yemen, unleashing unimaginable horrors and displacing millions. In Gaza, more than half of the population was on the brink of famine. Women and children continued to make up the majority of those killed, injured and displaced.

4. The widespread death, injury, destruction and damage inflicted in all the aforementioned conflicts had also raised serious concerns about compliance with international humanitarian law. The rise of impunity, a lack of accountability and selective interpretations of international humanitarian law had become more widespread. They were not only dangerous but counter to the collective commitments made 75 years earlier in the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.

5. The number of people displaced within their own countries by conflict and violence or by disasters was the highest that it had ever been. Indeed, the climate crisis continued to hit especially hard those already affected by protracted humanitarian crises and increasingly frequent and severe climate and weather-related disasters.

6. The humanitarian segment provided an opportunity to go beyond platitudes and statistics, and to recommit to putting humanity first in the face of conflicts and climate change. It was a time to sincerely reflect on the current humanitarian landscape and how Member States and humanitarian partners could tackle such challenges as ensuring respect for international humanitarian law, addressing the adverse impacts of climate change in humanitarian emergencies and identifying transformative actions to put women and girls at the centre of prevention, response and protection.

7. At the end of the segment, he intended to share an outcome document that captured the concrete recommendations put forth during the high-level panel discussions, the general debate and the informal side events. That document would serve as the segment’s contribution towards the Summit of the Future to be held in September 2024, among other processes, to ensure that humanitarian considerations were included in designs for the future of multilateralism.

8. While it was a hard time to be a humanitarian, it was also arguably the most important time to be one. He wished to express his utmost appreciation and thanks to all of those who continued to dedicate their lives to helping others amidst incredible brutality, danger and harm.

9. **The Secretary-General**, in a pre-recorded video statement, delivering a keynote address, said that the humanitarian affairs segment was taking place at a time of immense challenges to the international order, the planet and humanity. As the world marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, conflict, disregard for the rules of war and a runaway climate crisis were creating appalling human suffering.

10. In Gaza, Israeli military operations had reportedly claimed the lives of more than 36,000 people in just eight months. More than three quarters of the population had been forced to flee, many several times, and severe obstacles to humanitarian access had brought people to the brink of famine.

11. In the Sudan, more than a year of brutal fighting, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, rape, torture and ethnically motivated violence had created the world’s largest displacement crisis. Famine and disease were closing in while aid trucks waited weeks for clearance and access.

12. The same cruel patterns of civilian suffering were seen from Haiti to Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and beyond. In most cases, there was no accountability and the perpetrators enjoyed complete impunity.

13. Meanwhile, vulnerable communities and countries were being pounded by the humanitarian and economic impacts of the climate crisis. In Southern Africa alone, more than 60 million people had been severely affected in 2024 by drought, floods and other extreme weather conditions, exacerbated by El Niño and supercharged by the overheated climate. Across the world, those factors were driving vast levels of humanitarian need, including record levels of hunger and displacement.

14. For millions of people facing those challenges, the only ray of hope was humanitarian aid, often provided by the United Nations and its partners on the ground – the local humanitarian organizations working to save lives and reduce suffering. Humanitarian workers represented the spirit of multilateralism and humanity; they were the face of the duty of care for fellow human beings. But an unconscionable number of humanitarian colleagues were losing their lives and suffering injury, abduction and intimidation alongside the civilians they supported. That was totally unacceptable.

15. Humanitarian efforts were also being undermined by a shortfall in funding. Nearly halfway through 2024, donors had provided just \$8 billion of the \$48 billion required for lifesaving humanitarian aid programmes. Consequently, all Member States should step up, draw on their spirit of humanity and solidarity, and their commitment to multilateralism; every Government should commit to the political solutions required to address current conflicts, the climate crisis and the vicious cycles driving intolerable levels of humanitarian suffering; all those with influence should champion international law, the protection of civilians and the unobstructed provision of humanitarian aid; and Member States should provide the funding needed for humanitarian plans, as a matter of urgency.

16. The Summit of the Future to be held in September 2024 would be an opportunity for leaders to make bold commitments to ensure that people affected by humanitarian crises received the assistance and protection they needed. Doing so would require a holistic view of conflict, as set out in the New Agenda for Peace, in which the root causes of all forms of violence in the twenty-first century were better addressed. He called on all to put humanity back at the centre of their common endeavours.

17. Lastly, he thanked everyone across the humanitarian community for their dedication and indispensable work in support of the millions of people caught up in crises across the world.

18. **Mr. Francis** (Observer for Trinidad and Tobago), President of the General Assembly, in a pre-recorded video statement, delivering a keynote address, said that

demand for humanitarian assistance was rising exponentially, mirroring the increasing levels of human suffering driven by conflict, climate change and poverty, all of which was epitomized by heart-wrenching scenes such as those witnessed in the Gaza Strip, the Sudan and Ukraine. He himself had visited struggling countries, such as Haiti and South Sudan, where he had witnessed acute unmet humanitarian needs on the ground.

19. Around the world many civilians were being forcibly displaced from their homes and were trapped in living conditions that could only be described as hell. Hospitals and schools – civilian infrastructure and symbols of peace that once served communities – were routinely reduced to rubble in the ruthless destruction of entire neighbourhoods. Access to much-needed life-saving aid in food, shelter and water, upon which millions depended for survival, was being impeded with reckless disregard for international humanitarian law. Similarly, humanitarian and aid workers, who were essential for providing humanitarian services to communities in desperate need, could no longer be guaranteed protection and often faced harassment, injury and even death.

20. The international community must entrench a culture of compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Aid must flow unimpeded, the rights of the vulnerable must be protected and decisive action must be taken to end impunity for serious violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Platforms such as the Council's humanitarian affairs segment must be leveraged to counter the growing climate of impunity. Moral revulsion should be matched by an urgent commitment to redress the unacceptable situation.

21. To that end, he encouraged all to engage in productive discussions to strengthen the collective response to current and ongoing humanitarian crises. The Summit of the Future would provide an ideal opportunity to champion humanitarian action as part of the collective commitment to revitalize the multilateral system and international cooperation.

22. The tireless efforts of humanitarians must be adequately resourced, and their security and safety guaranteed so that they could continue their vital work. Equally important, the Central Emergency Response Fund must be adequately subsidized along with country-based and regional humanitarian funds to maximize the impact on communities in need. Investing in resilience and preparedness was crucial to empower communities to better recover and thrive after emergencies. Reform of the multilateral system, including investing in disaster

risk reduction, anticipatory action, peacebuilding and prevention, was also essential to crisis prevention.

23. Humanitarian assistance was a lifeline for millions around the world. The courage, resolve and dedication of humanitarians, who heeded an immensely noble and often dangerous calling to serve and uplift the vulnerable and ravaged communities, must never be taken for granted. Those who had lost their lives in the service to humanity must always be remembered and the highest tribute that could be paid to them was to continue their work. The critical humanitarian lifeline must continue to provide hope and support to those in desperate need facing unimaginable adversity.

24. **Ms. Msuya** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)), delivering a keynote address, said that eight years previously, the world had gathered for the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, where pledges had been made to put humanity at the very heart of global decision-making. Such promises had clearly not been fulfilled: the world was in a state of permanent crisis; conflict and climate disasters were driving record levels of displacement; humanitarian crises had become more frequent, complex, entangled and protracted; violations of international humanitarian law were rising, fuelled by a culture of impunity; starvation, sieges and sexual violence were increasingly used as weapons of war while civilians, humanitarian workers, hospitals and schools were treated as legitimate military targets; and poverty and inequality were rising. That dire situation was also being exacerbated by a climate and ecological crisis that called into question the inevitability of human progress, as millions were plunged into a world of fire, flood and famine while funding was drying up, forcing humanitarian operations to make massive cuts and placing an immense strain on the global humanitarian system.

25. She was saddened by the fact that, for the more than 300 million people in urgent need of assistance, humanity had been reduced to little more than a daily struggle for life. However, she remained immensely proud of just how much OCHA and its partners around the world had achieved despite the limited resources and growing challenges. OCHA had become more efficient, effective and accountable than ever: 80 percent of its humanitarian response teams were now guided by leaders from national and local organizations. OCHA was also getting better at anticipating threats so that people could prepare for disasters before they struck.

26. She was in awe of frontline responders, who continued to display astonishing levels of sacrifice,

resolve and courage to reach people in their darkest hour, such as aid workers in Gaza forced to navigate checkpoints, unexploded bombs, lawlessness and intense fighting; women in Somalia transforming the lives of people forced to flee violence and drought; and humanitarian workers who continued to care for others even as their own lives were upended by disaster. Those people knew exactly what it meant to put humanity first. They did so every single day, no matter what the cost.

27. Putting humanity first was not just a nice slogan. It was a radical response to increasingly complex, entangled and existential crises. Doing so could transform systems that stood in the way of progress, but it required innovation and courage by making institutional cultures fully accountable to the people they served; building new partnerships with local humanitarian organizations and then fully resourcing them so that they could lead the response to the world's disasters; and redistributing power so that people on the frontlines of the world's crises, especially women, could guide humanitarian action. Including people at every single level of decision-making was a way to ensure that actions were shaped by their priorities. If done successfully, it could improve the way that aid was delivered and harness the power of new technologies while limiting their potential to cause harm. It could also reverse the erosion of international humanitarian law while navigating the existential crises that threatened humankind.

28. The call to put humanity first came from a recognition that every single person had a right to a life free from violence, oppression, persecution and fear. It came from an understanding that people wanted to know that their lives had meaning and purpose – that they had the agency and self-determination necessary to improve life for themselves and for their families. Those were some of the most fundamental human aspirations. They were the bedrock of common humanity, found at the heart of world religions, national constitutions and the Charter of the United Nations.

29. **Ms. Ahmed** (Executive Director of Nada Elazhar for Disaster Prevention and Sustainable Development), speaking via video link and delivering a keynote address, said that everyone had a responsibility to protect civilians and care for individuals living through conflicts and crises. However, a person's humanity was often at the bottom of the list of priorities of parties to conflict. It was concerning that there was a growing disrespect for international humanitarian law, rising impunity and an increasing inclination to turn away from atrocities.

30. While the Sudan was suffering from one of the worst humanitarian crises, the world's attention to the

conflict there remained marginal. The United Nations had reported that 4.2 million people needed gender-based violence services in the Sudan and the humanity behind that shocking statistic must not be ignored. It included, for example, underage girls afraid of being married off because their families had few other solutions and disabled women, who were three times more likely to face violence than others. Gender-based violence was being used as a weapon in the current war, particularly in hot zones and hard to reach areas.

31. Her organization had reprogrammed all its protection interventions to focus on gender-based violence, disabilities and mine risk education responses within weeks of receiving the timely support of country-based pooled funds. It had also led and supported access to justice efforts. One such example had been advocacy to change legislation that required survivors of rape to pursue their cases within the geographical jurisdiction where the rape had occurred. In a context where tens of millions of people were displaced, that restriction had made accessing justice nearly impossible. However, thanks to advocacy work by her organization and other women-led organizations, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence now had a chance to pursue justice for the violations against them in any part of the country.

32. Through community-based programming, her organization's teams were providing awareness-raising sessions to warring parties' fighters on the prevention of gender-based violence. The teams, which used the cultural and social phrases with which fighters were familiar to change their practices, aimed to develop indicators that measured the reduction in incidences of gender-based violence as a result of their awareness-raising efforts. They were also providing education to civilians on the risks from explosive ordnance, often at tremendous personal risk.

33. Her organization alone was supporting hundreds of women and girls living with unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and hundreds of traumatized women and children who had attempted to end their own lives. Hundreds of women and girls were being held in inhumane conditions in which they were subjected to sexual violence and at risk of sexual slavery inside the Sudan. Her organization's work continued despite the fact that international humanitarian law was not being respected, civilians were not being protected and infrastructure of all kinds had collapsed.

34. To avoid making decisions that reinforced discrimination and inequality, the programmes, policies and strategies put forward by the Economic and Social Council should be implemented in consultation with

those most affected by conflict, including women, internally displaced persons and traditionally marginalized groups, and non-governmental and women-led organizations should be represented in humanitarian assistance and access platforms. Furthermore, the conflict in the Sudan should be recognized as a gender-based violence crisis, which meant strengthening protection and accountability measures, including focusing on the crime of conflict-related sexual violence, and establishing a trust fund to support children born as result of such violence. The Council must do everything possible to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, put women and children at the centre of its work, and prevent and address any current or future gender-based violence.

High-level panel discussion: "The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Geneva Conventions: reversing the erosion of respect for international humanitarian law and its humanitarian consequences"

35. **The President** said that in the past decade, and even in the past few years, the world had seen a pronounced erosion of respect for international humanitarian law. Civilians were paying an unconscionably high price as increasingly brutal tactics characterized conflicts, with women and girls disproportionately impacted. Attacks on critical civilian infrastructure had displaced hundreds of thousands and had left many more without electricity, health care, and in acute hunger. The growing disrespect for international humanitarian law and the rise of impunity went in tandem with the lack of humanity being witnessed.

36. The panel would dive deeper into the concrete impacts that the lack of respect for international humanitarian law was having on civilians and for the humanitarians who had fallen victim to the attacks. It would explore the increasing pressure on humanitarians and humanitarian principles amid those violations, and what could be done to foster a culture of compliance with international humanitarian law and reverse negative trends.

37. The panel would also discuss the role that States and other parties had in upholding and respecting international humanitarian law, including a focus on conflict-related sexual violence, ensuring the prevention and mitigation of atrocity crimes, as well as strengthened accountability, and allowing and facilitating humanitarian access and providing safety and security for humanitarian workers.

38. **Ms. Wosornu** (Director, Operations and Advocacy Division, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs (OCHA)), panellist, said that across the globe conflicts were being waged with little regard for the suffering of civilians, tens of thousands of whom had been killed, maimed and injured. Millions had been displaced, many of them multiple times, in search of security that in many places simply did not exist or could not be reached. While famine loomed closer each day, the operating environment for humanitarian workers was marked by rampant insecurity and sustained obstruction.

39. In some of the worst conflict-affected areas of the Sudan, 80 per cent of hospitals and clinics were no longer functioning and the health-care system had reached the point of collapse while the number of casualties increased and those suffering from disease and malnutrition spread. In Gaza, the breakdown in law and order and active hostilities continued to prevent aid workers and organizations from collecting and distributing the assistance so desperately needed.

40. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, the Niger, the Sahel, Somalia, Syria and Ukraine, she had seen disturbing patterns of civilian harm being repeated. The same widespread use of heavy weaponry could be seen in populated areas, with the same devastating consequences for civilians, including the destruction of essential infrastructure, such as waterworks, networks and electrical grids, the bombing of hospitals and schools, and mass displacement. An estimated 90 per cent of attacks using explosive weapons in populated areas were against civilians. Hospitals and medical workers were also being used to shield military operations, resulting in the deaths of patients and staff alike and taking much-needed medical facilities out of action. Two hundred and seventy-six humanitarian workers had been killed in 2023, which was more than twice the number in 2022, and many more had been injured.

41. If parties to a conflict respected international humanitarian law, the horrors just described would not occur. Yet, violations of international humanitarian law continued at an intolerable rate. In many cases, international humanitarian law was violated outright and, in an increasing number of cases, it was instrumentalized to justify harmful tactics rather than limiting harm to civilians. It was simply inexcusable that serious violations of international humanitarian law continued to occur in a climate of almost total impunity, with very few perpetrators ever brought to justice.

42. However, effective solutions existed in the form of a robust international legal framework regulating conduct in war, which had benefited from more than 150 years of development. Where there was political will, the tools and strategies for implementing international

humanitarian law worked. There were plenty of positive examples of legislation, policies and training regimes adopted by Member States and non-State armed groups to build on. At the same time, all States, irrespective of whether they were parties to a conflict, had a critical role to play in preventing others from committing violations. There were also many ways in which Member States could exert leverage to ensure compliance, including in such areas as political dialogue, public advocacy and cooperation in the pursuit of accountability. In addition, the Secretary-General had repeatedly said that arms transfers should be withheld where there was a clear risk that the arms transferred would be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law. The upcoming Summit of the Future would offer an opportunity for States to reaffirm their commitments to fully respect international humanitarian law during armed conflict and to commit to implementing practical and effective measures to strengthen the protection of civilians.

43. Another key component of international humanitarian law was the duty to investigate alleged war crimes. There were some encouraging examples in that regard: the Central African Republic had established a special criminal court; the Democratic Republic of the Congo had rolled out a mobile military court; German courts had convicted perpetrators of crimes committed in Syria; and the International Criminal Court continued actively to pursue accountability for international crimes. She called on Member States to support efforts to fight impunity across all crises and respect the work and independence of the courts.

44. While there was an urgent need to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law in order to better protect civilians, it was not enough. As civilian harm did not always result from violations of the rules of war, the Secretary-General had also stressed the need to work towards the full protection of civilians. The focus of international efforts must be on minimizing the full spectrum of civilian harm: death, injury, disease, hunger and displacement. Two good examples of ways in which States had committed to minimizing civilian harm included endorsing the 2022 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and the 2015 Safe Schools Declaration. More States needed to commit to those declarations. More initiatives were also needed from States and parties to address the full range of harms faced by civilians.

45. **Ms. Chanda** (Chargée d'Affaires, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations), panellist,

said that 12 August 2024 would mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which were built on the understanding that even wars had limits. What made them so unique was the universal commitment by States to a common humanity and the fact that all States had freely and voluntarily agreed to be bound by their rules. As the Geneva Conventions were the fruit of the political will of all States, commemorating the anniversary of their adoption was an opportunity to underline their continuing relevance and to call for their respect.

46. The Geneva Conventions continued to save millions of lives threatened by hundreds of conflicts around the world every single day. They were living instruments, addressing the evolving nature of armed conflict in the face of ever-changing geopolitical realities and emerging humanitarian challenges. However, the anniversary had arrived amidst a challenging international political landscape marked by polarization and fragmentation. Armed conflict continued to cause staggering human suffering and violations of international humanitarian law continued to occur with alarming frequency in conflicts around the world. Nevertheless, violations of international humanitarian law were not signs of the ineffectiveness of the legal rules. On the contrary, compliance must be prioritized and those responsible for the violations must be brought to justice.

47. Switzerland was an unwavering supporter of the International Criminal Court, which played a fundamental role in the fight against impunity. Switzerland had been working relentlessly to ensure that international humanitarian law was fully and accurately reflected in the resolutions of multilateral bodies, including the Security Council. It had therefore rejected language in resolutions that sought to relativize international law by restricting its scope to a given situation or to certain specific actors, or which weakened the content of respective obligations.

48. The binding nature of international humanitarian law, which applied to all parties to a conflict and in all circumstances, was simply not negotiable. The same was true for States' obligations with regard to accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and obligations relating to humanitarian access. Parties to a conflict had an obligation to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid to civilians in need. In that context, she recalled the obligation of all parties to respect and protect humanitarian and United Nations personnel, including national and locally recruited staff.

49. All States had an obligation to respect and ensure respect for the Geneva Conventions, regardless of who had begun the hostilities and even if the other party did not respect the rules of war. The commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary presented a unique opportunity for all States to renew their commitments and do more to improve the implementation and respect of international humanitarian law, first and foremost at the national level. To prevent violations, it was essential that States promoted respect for the norms of the Geneva Conventions well before the outbreak of conflict, and that they established a culture in which it was clearly expected that those rules would be rigorously observed from the very outset of hostilities, should the need arise.

50. Concrete actions to be taken at the national level towards that end included ratifying the Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, adopting laws implementing the Geneva Conventions at the national level and disseminating them within the armed forces, notably through training, and among the civilian population. Effective implementation also required the establishment of national implementation commissions and the drafting of voluntary reports on the implementation of international humanitarian law. It was not enough to have good policies or solid international law. States must be held accountable for upholding the rules and principles of international humanitarian law in practice.

51. **Mr. Rakotonirina** (Director for Health and Humanitarian Affairs, African Union), panellist, speaking via video link, said that Africa currently faced humanitarian challenges linked to armed conflict, terrorism and violent extremism, particularly in the Sudan, the Sahel and the Great Lakes region. Violations of international humanitarian law had a devastating impact on the protection of civilians and led to forced displacement, among other harmful consequences. In that context, the African Union and its member States had adopted key instruments which sought to promote respect for international humanitarian, such as the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa.

52. The African Union promoted strategies aimed at providing unimpeded access to populations in humanitarian situations, including in cooperation with the United Nations, and actively monitored and encouraged compliance by its member States with international humanitarian law. Best practices were shared through training programmes and closer cooperation was being sought with other humanitarian actors to strengthen humanitarian access.

53. The African Union stood ready to collaborate further on the implementation of measures for the protection of international norms on conflict management while ensuring the security, well-being and dignity of affected communities.

54. **Ms. Svoboda** (Head of the Policy, Research and Humanitarian Diplomacy Division, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), panellist, said that there were over 120 armed conflicts around the world, which involved over 60 States and 120 non-State armed groups. People were suffering beyond what words could describe. The 1949 Geneva Conventions, the Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other treaties subsequently adopted had been essential in preventing some of the worst consequences in armed conflicts. When parties to armed conflict respected international humanitarian law in good faith, lives were saved and a level of dignity was preserved. Respect could also facilitate a return to peace by reducing the material cost of war and building the trust needed to negotiate an end to the violence.

55. However, international humanitarian law could only protect people if parties to armed conflict complied with it. The reality was that respect for international humanitarian law was by and large a question of political will. To create a culture of compliance, international humanitarian law must therefore become a political priority. To that end, States would need to keep working to incorporate considerations related to international humanitarian law into the deliberations and decisions of civilian and military leadership at all levels.

56. Before a conflict, States must take measures to prevent violations of international humanitarian law by adopting relevant legislation implementing and training their armed forces on the rules to foster a culture of respect and accountability. Many States had also set up national international humanitarian law committees, which had an important role to play in creating an environment conducive to the implementation of and respect for international humanitarian law. Those committees could support States in developing training programmes and identifying areas where their domestic legal frameworks would need strengthening.

57. Once a conflict had erupted, the issuing of orders and the planning of military operations that respected international humanitarian law was essential. In an era of coalition and partnered operations, supporting countries must not encourage or contribute to violations of international humanitarian law. States had a unique role to play in using their influence to put an end to the violations of their partners. Compliance with

international humanitarian law included an obligation not to assist, aid or encourage any violations, and due diligence to take proactive steps to influence parties to a conflict to adopt an attitude of respect for international humanitarian law.

58. Indeed, States not involved in conflicts had a role to play. For instance, diplomatic and other forms of pressure could help to convince a party to a conflict to comply with international humanitarian law. That could be done through a number of measures: from an assessment prior to providing support, to reviewing and limiting support, if necessary.

59. In some cases, international humanitarian law itself required investigations to be carried out with a view to criminal sanctions, while in other circumstances States had a responsibility to put a stop to ongoing violations, ensure their non-repetition and make appropriate reparations. Effective investigations were essential not only to punish and deter misconduct, but also to identify systemic shortcomings and allow armed forces to correct course. Many States had implemented their obligations related to accountability by adopting the necessary legislation and giving their courts jurisdiction over violations. What was often lacking, however, was the decisiveness to carry out effective investigations and prosecutions.

60. In the planning of all military deployment, ICRC urged States to anticipate the need for independent and impartial investigations as a critical tool for compliance with international humanitarian law, whose procedures needed to be set in advance to make sure that they were possible and effective once needed. Complemented by international tribunals, with all their strengths, weaknesses and limitations, there were plenty of tools available for States to confront non-compliance with international humanitarian law. But those tools must be implemented.

61. **Ms. Brands Kehris** (Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights), panellist, said that accountability for violations of international humanitarian law was essential. Impunity undermined the international normative frameworks that had been put in place for a good reason: to prevent human suffering and despair.

62. Human rights representatives in the field helped to monitor not only human rights violations but also violations of international humanitarian law, which was especially important in the context of the steady erosion of those norms. Indeed, wars were being waged without any respect for human rights or international humanitarian law. While the parties to a conflict did not often openly dispute the need for compliance with international normative frameworks, they often failed to

uphold them, either unwittingly or even deliberately. However, in the long term, there could be no post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding, justice or healing without accountability for the violations committed. Impunity fuelled cycles of violence and emboldened perpetrators to commit ever more egregious violations.

63. The erosion of international humanitarian law must therefore be addressed through a number of tools. For example, the Agenda for Protection launched in February 2024 renewed the commitment by the United Nations and Member States to prioritize protection in times of crisis and beyond, and also reconfirmed the centrality of human rights in any humanitarian response.

64. States should use the human rights mechanisms and take all necessary measures to ensure respect for international humanitarian law. When States failed to provide accountability for violations of international humanitarian law within their own jurisdictions, third States should support accountability through their own domestic judicial proceedings, including through the International Criminal Court. All stakeholders should vigorously defend the institutions and mechanisms that provided for accountability.

65. Lastly, efforts to promote respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law must be consistent. States and other stakeholders that selectively employed and invoked those laws undermined them and weakened their own ability to be credible advocates for them. Unless urgent action was taken to strengthen international humanitarian law and provide accountability for violations, future armed conflicts would be more numerous, brutal and protracted. The upcoming Summit of the Future provided a welcome opportunity to make commitments that could still reverse that trend.

66. **Ms. Nicolai** (General Director of Médecins Sans Frontières-Belgium), panellist, said that there was no shortage of examples from around the world of international humanitarian law being flouted or manipulated; of humanitarian access being denied or exploited; and of civilian protection faltering when it was most needed. Across conflicts, civilians paid a very steep price for the failure of belligerents to comply with their obligations under international law.

67. In the Sudan, an already fragile health system had been completely destroyed by unrelenting violence against civilians and the systematic obstruction of access to that system by the parties to the conflict. Over the past two months, Médecins Sans Frontières had shut down its activities in two key hospitals in the Sudan because it had been unable to transfer the necessary medical supplies and ensure the safety of patients and

staff due to the behaviour of the warring parties. The flagrant lack of respect for medical facilities was putting hundreds of thousands of Sudanese at risk of losing their access to health care.

68. From Myanmar to Ukraine and beyond, the disregard shown by belligerents for the rules of armed conflict simultaneously deepened humanitarian needs and prevented humanitarian actors from responding. While international humanitarian law required belligerents to allow and facilitate humanitarian and medical assistance, they rather denied and obstructed it, even attacking those providing it. Such violations were already routine and should not be accepted as the new norm.

69. In Gaza, where medical and humanitarian needs were rising by the hour, health facilities were being besieged, shelled, stormed, vacated and otherwise rendered inoperable. Health and humanitarian workers were being killed and detained. On the basis of opaque allegations that medical facilities were being used for military purposes and therefore should lose their protection under international humanitarian law, an entire health system was being decimated and an entire population deprived of health care. In the pursuit of military advantage, entire segments of the Gaza Strip were being reduced to rubble, thousands of civilians were being killed and millions were being forcibly displaced again and again.

70. In that context, the core principle of proportionality had been twisted by a deeply unbalanced view of international humanitarian law that elevated claims of military necessity and advantage well above any considerations of anticipated civilian harm. The result had been an exceedingly deadly and punishing military campaign that had left little room for a meaningful humanitarian response. Manipulation of international humanitarian law was challenging the common understanding of its core principles and shaking confidence in its protective value. The conflict in Gaza made clear that international humanitarian law was under threat as much by blatant disregard as by perverse interpretations that led to massive and enduring harm to civilians.

71. The concept of “full protection of civilians” had been proposed by the Secretary-General in recognition of the complexity of civilian harm and the fact that it resulted from both violations of international humanitarian law and from military actions that might be in compliance with the law. The ambition of elevating civilian protection above the minimum requirements of international humanitarian law was certainly worth pursuing. However, the maintenance of existing

protections and the desire to enhance them must be rooted in a common, good-faith interpretation of the spirit of international humanitarian law and of the humanitarian objectives at its core.

72. While humanitarian organizations had long been warning of the erosion of international humanitarian law, they continued to be astonished by the frequency, volume and severity of the violations they witnessed in conflict settings. The laws and norms shielding civilians from the worst impacts of conflicts, protecting medical care and guaranteeing humanitarian access were under constant threat and must be routinely and forcefully defended. Simply bemoaning the descent of international humanitarian law into irrelevance was not an acceptable approach. Nor should anyone be satisfied with stale references to its importance or mechanical condemnations of violations as they occurred. Member States must not reduce international humanitarian law to an empty slogan. They had a responsibility to ensure compliance, pursue accountability for violations and remain true to the spirit of international humanitarian law. Failing in that responsibility would spell continued horrors for civilians across conflicts and ever-shrinking space for humanitarians to meaningfully respond.

73. **Ms. Mbangi** (Coordinator of Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani), panellist, said that for more than 30 years, the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been going through a cycle of conflict exacerbated by many forms of violence. According to the International Organization for Migration, the fighting had displaced more than 7 million persons in the country and an even larger population was in need of humanitarian aid, access to which remained extremely difficult. Challenges included ongoing violence, even in sites for internally displaced persons, and a lack of services and capacity for care. The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo remained the most neglected on the planet, with very little aid provided, while needs continued to grow due to the worsening crisis.

74. In the face of the many violations of international law taking place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, humanitarian actors had developed a number of good practices, such as early warning mechanisms regarding incidents of violations in sites for internally displaced persons; holistic complaint management and care mechanisms to address sexual violence and sexual exploitation and abuse; and protection working groups to gather information and share experiences.

75. Women-led organizations were front-line providers in the humanitarian response to sexual violence and other crimes against humanity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They supported survivors of

violence, provided initial assessments of the needs of women and girls in sites for internally displaced person and cared for internally displaced victims of the horrors of war. However, those organizations were often neglected and invisible, working without funding or technical support.

76. On behalf of women-led organization and internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she wished to share the following recommendations: (a) implement a special programme on preventing conflict-related violence and protecting women and children from it; (b) demand that the parties to the conflict respect the civilian nature of sites for displaced persons and international humanitarian law; (c) establish liability for perpetrators and work to protect human lives, particularly those of women and girls; (d) apply sanctions against perpetrators of violations of grave crimes and crimes against humanity; (e) support the demobilization programme for children in armed groups; (f) strengthen local, sustainable approaches; and (g) provide more resources for humanitarian aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

77. **Ms. Van De Sar** (Observer for the Kingdom of the Netherlands) said that too many humanitarians faced a working environment in which their safety could not be guaranteed. A lack of respect for international humanitarian law severely undermined the humanitarian response, thereby directly affecting those in need. Compliance with international humanitarian law, especially ensuring safe and unimpeded access, was a prerequisite for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The international community had a collective responsibility to uphold humanitarian principles and promote compliance with international humanitarian law. It could do so in a number of ways, including by underscoring the neutral and impartial role of humanitarian workers; by holding parties that violated international humanitarian law accountable, including by sharing real-time information on violations and informing organizations about current access and safety risks; and by expanding knowledge about international humanitarian law among armed groups, especially non-State actors, to create a safer working environment.

78. **Mr. Popowski** (Representative of the European Union, in its capacity as observer) said that despite the growing disrespect for the rules-based order it was important to emphasize that international humanitarian law remained the best shield to protect civilians affected by conflict. The 1949 Geneva Conventions remained more important than ever. Promoting compliance with international humanitarian law and ensuring unimpeded access therefore remained central to humanitarian efforts. In that regard, the European Union supported

international humanitarian law through diplomacy and also promoted initiatives that strengthened the protection of civilians and the monitoring of violations of international humanitarian law. It remained committed to working with all to restore the centrality of international humanitarian law.

79. Some of the challenges currently faced, such as hybrid warfare, were not known 75 years earlier. It was therefore essential to adapt and strengthen the protection of civilians to new threats as they arose. For example, the European Union strongly supported the meaningful implementation of the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. Furthermore, as people affected by conflict were not a homogenous group, the European Union also supported research to explore the topic of an inclusive interpretation of international humanitarian law.

80. International humanitarian law should protect those most at risk, including children. In that connection, the European Union had just finalized the revision of its Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict. It was also supporting a survivor-centred approach to accountability for grave violations affecting children.

81. He hoped that the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Geneva Conventions would provide a new impetus for all available tools to be used to promote compliance with international humanitarian law and accountability for violations.

82. **Ms. Ong** (Canada) said that the state of the protection of civilians in 2023 had been resoundingly grim, according to the recent report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict ([S/2024/385](#)). New and ongoing conflicts were having catastrophic consequences for civilians, causing grave and lasting harm. Compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law was often lacking and demands for the protection of civilians issued in Security Council resolutions went largely unheeded.

83. Improving access for humanitarian operations was a key challenge. There was a fundamental need to safeguard the operating space of impartial humanitarian organizations. However, bureaucratic restrictions, security conditions, checkpoint delays, misinformation, disinformation and a corresponding lack of acceptance of humanitarian workers by parties to conflicts were having terrible consequences for their safety and operational viability. In some cases, humanitarian staff were outright denied permission to operate and, in the most extreme cases, they and their facilities were directly targeted by parties to armed conflict. Ultimately,

they could not reach the civilians that they were mandated to protect and assist.

84. Parties to armed conflicts were obliged by international humanitarian law to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief to civilians in need. The safety and operational viability of humanitarian organizations depended on the perception of their neutrality, impartiality and independence, including at times from the very States that supported them. The more States interfered with humanitarian protection and assistance and imposed conditions on its delivery, the less operationally viable those organizations became. States must therefore allow humanitarian organizations to remain apolitical, neutral, impartial and independent.

85. **Mr. Yahiaoui** (Observer for Algeria) said that a critical erosion in respect for international humanitarian law was evident from the ongoing aggression against the defenceless Palestinian people, where civilians were bearing the brunt of the hostilities. The Israeli occupying Power was committing blatant violations of international humanitarian law, particularly regarding the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. The disproportionate impact on women and children during the conflict was especially troubling. Moreover, the obstruction of humanitarian access in the areas under Israeli control had severely hampered the delivery of vital aid and services to affected populations.

86. Such violations not only caused immediate harm but also undermined the very foundations of international humanitarian law. It was imperative for the international community to take urgent action to reverse those trends, ensure accountability for violations and affirm the centrality of international humanitarian law in the conduct of hostilities. States must exercise their influence to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, particularly in the case of the Israeli occupying Power. That included facilitating unhindered humanitarian access, protecting civilians infrastructure and pursuing the investigation and prosecution of alleged war crimes.

87. Upholding international humanitarian law was crucial for maintaining the rules-based international order and protecting the most vulnerable in times of conflict. All parties, especially Israel, should recommit to the principles enshrined in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and take concrete steps to ensure their full implementation.

88. **Ms. Cervenka** (Observer for Norway) said that there was a collective responsibility to address the failure to protect civilians as a result of the erosion in respect for international humanitarian law. More must be done to ensure compliance and end impunity. In

principle, there was widespread support for international humanitarian law, which was a foundation that could be built upon. In that regard, the international community must keep working on practical measures for the implementation of international humanitarian law. For example, the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and the Safe Schools Declaration both represented a growing community of States that had committed to do better and were contributing to international humanitarian law by improving the protection of civilians. She urged more States to endorse and implement those instruments.

89. Lastly, Norway firmly believed in a world order based on international law, of which international humanitarian law was the backbone. International humanitarian law applied everywhere equally to everyone. The international community must work together to strengthen compliance and make sure that, even in war, common humanity must prevail.

90. **Ms. Delaney** (Observer for Australia) said that 75 years after the adoption of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the central purpose of international humanitarian law – to limit suffering in times of armed conflict – was more relevant than ever. Civilians were bearing the brunt of armed conflict and global displacement was at a record high.

91. Australia recognized the importance of international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians and for its broader contribution to global security, stability and prosperity. It had been a strong supporter of the Geneva Conventions since becoming a signatory in 1950, and had ratified all three Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It encouraged others to do the same.

92. The erosion of respect for international humanitarian law was being witnessed in too many conflicts by both State and non-State actors. More must be done to halt that deplorable trend, including by supporting the institutions and mechanisms established to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and hold those who violated it accountable.

93. The international community must collectively redouble its efforts to resolve conflicts and build peace. It must also urgently do more to safeguard humanitarian access and protect medical and humanitarian aid workers. The death of any aid worker was outrageous and unacceptable.

94. **Mr. Mohamed** (Observer for Egypt) said that it was important to ensure that international humanitarian

law was universally applied in an equitable and non-selective manner. International humanitarian law was unlikely to be upheld merely by encouraging respect for it. Compliance would require identifying violations and specifying the violators by name.

95. More than 37,000 civilians in the Gaza Strip had been murdered by brutal Israeli aggression, leaving hundreds of thousands displaced and on the brink of famine. The media was reporting that the United Nations would suspend its aid operations in Gaza because it could not protect humanitarian workers. His delegation therefore called for an immediate ceasefire, for the cessation of all hostilities in the Gaza Strip and for humanitarian workers to be ensured access there. A peace process must then begin without conditions, leading to a two-State solution in which the Palestinian people were able to enjoy their inalienable rights.

96. **Ms. Campbell** (United States of America) said that, from Afghanistan to Mali, armed conflict and violence, compounded by the cascading impacts of climate change, had uprooted millions, disrupted livelihoods and thrust many into hunger and despair.

97. While the core tenets of international humanitarian law prioritized the protection of human life in the context of armed conflict, the operating environment for humanitarians had never been more complex. Deteriorating security conditions, the denial of humanitarian aid, the massacre of civilians and attacks on aid workers and on medical facilities all reflected a world that had become less supportive of humanitarian efforts. One of the main reasons behind that troubling trend was a sense of impunity and a lack of accountability.

98. The 1949 Geneva Conventions mandated collective action to minimize the horrors of armed conflict. The United States sought to complement such efforts with a range of initiatives to strengthen accountability globally, including by supporting civil society organizations and investing in the rehabilitation of survivors.

99. **Ms. Elmi** (Observer for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) said that the recent erosion in respect for international humanitarian law was a grave concern for UNICEF, given that numerous provisions of that law had established special protection for children during armed conflict. Indeed, the 1949 Geneva Conventions were historically important instruments that contained the first universally ratified protection for children and the Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 had set out the very first prohibition on child recruitment.

100. Women and girls were being disproportionately affected by the loss of respect for international

humanitarian law. The number of verified incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children had increased by 25 per cent between 2022 and 2023, despite the fact that grave violations remained broadly underreported.

101. The first step towards fostering a culture of compliance that safeguarded previously cherished norms was at the ground level. Engagement with parties to a conflict was essential so that they were made aware of international humanitarian law and held accountable for their actions. Member States should also be called upon to strengthen national accountability measures, reaffirm the prohibition of grave violations against children and integrate relevant measures into domestic legislation, military codes and training manuals in line with international obligations. At the intergovernmental level, UNICEF welcomed Security Council resolution [2730 \(2024\)](#), which set out measures to better protect humanitarian personnel working in complex high-threat environments. Lastly, Member States must continue to support the Safe Schools Declaration and protect the right to education for all children.

102. **Ms. Chanda** (Chargée d’Affaires, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations) said that the Geneva Conventions of 1949 served as the bedrock of international humanitarian law. They established the minimum standards of humanity to be respected in all situations of armed conflict and carried the clear message that wars had limits. They were universal instruments that remained as important as ever in over 120 armed conflicts worldwide. The content of their rules and the binding nature of international humanitarian law, which applied to all parties to a conflict and in all circumstances, were not negotiable. Switzerland would continue advocating for the respect of international humanitarian law in all circumstances and forums, including in the Security Council and beyond. It would also continue to stress the importance of full, safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians in need. Respect for international humanitarian law must be a political priority. A robust national approach to implementation was pivotal in upholding international humanitarian law.

103. **Mr. Rakotonirina** (Director for Health and Humanitarian Affairs, African Union), speaking via video link, said that the free circulation of weapons was a root cause of violations of international humanitarian law around the world, including in Africa. As opposing parties to a conflict were often found to hold weapons produced by the same manufacturers, a robust mechanism was needed to monitor the manufacture, circulation and import of weapons throughout the world.

104. The African Union Commission was also operationalizing the African Humanitarian Agency, which would assist victims of violations of international humanitarian law. He called on all stakeholders to contribute towards establishing its agenda.

105. **Ms. Svoboda** (Head of the Policy, Research and Humanitarian Diplomacy Division, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) said that non-State actors had obligations under international humanitarian law. Humanitarian organizations must be able to engage with non-State actors not only to gain access to communities living in territories under their control, but also to remind them of their obligations under international humanitarian law. It was also important to incorporate a gender perspective into international humanitarian law because military operations had different impacts on men, women, girls and boys.

106. **Ms. Brands Kehris** (Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights) said that the consensus on the need for compliance with international humanitarian law must be translated into urgent action to get back on track. Beyond merely recommitting to compliance with international humanitarian law, a common understanding was needed of what the obligations to comply with international humanitarian law implied. Furthermore, rights must be secured for all, without selectivity, through a people-centred and a gendered approach. Every tool must be used to ensure safe access for humanitarian workers to perform their essential functions and a collective effort was required to end impunity for violations using all available mechanisms.

107. **Ms. Nicolai** (General Director of Médecins Sans Frontières-Belgium) said that States were often part of alliances whose military doctrines and standard operating procedures might not respect international humanitarian law, despite their affirmations of its importance. International humanitarian law was a contract that States were failing to uphold. While some parties to a conflict ignored international humanitarian law entirely, others manipulated its interpretation to meet their own political and military objectives. However, under international humanitarian law the bottom line was that those not taking part in a conflict, including humanitarian workers seeking to alleviate suffering, must be protected.

108. The staff of Médecins Sans Frontières put their lives on the line every single day. In Gaza, they had endured 26 violent incidents. They asked that the protections afforded them under the Geneva Conventions be respected, which meant, inter alia, not bombing their clinics, not shooting at their ambulances, not placing their hospitals under siege and not imposing

bureaucratic hurdles that killed patients by leaving hospitals without clinicians or clinicians without medicine. Humanitarian workers were not bulletproof. They would not survive in a world where the rules were spurned, distorted or applied arbitrarily.

109. **Ms. Wosornu** (Director, Operations and Advocacy Division, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), drawing attention to the first preambular paragraph of the Charter of the United Nations, said that for the sake of humanity the international community must stand by its obligations and hold violators of international humanitarian law accountable. The tools and policies in place must be used to make a difference. Enough was enough.

110. **Ms. Mbangi** (Coordinator of Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani) said that international humanitarian law must be respected in the Democratic Republic of the Congo through peace enforcement and also by imposing sanctions, establishing an international criminal tribunal to punish the perpetrators of violations and fully supporting women-led organizations such as hers.

111. **The President**, summing up, said that international humanitarian law was a key element of the rules-based order that the Secretary-General had repeatedly called on all to preserve. Member States and civil society must stand together to defend it.

The meeting rose at 12.30 p.m.