

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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JOINT STATEMENT ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF WEAPONS AT UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY FIRST COMMITTEE

TOXIC REMNANTS OF WAR NETWORK STATEMENT TO THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S FIRST COMMITTEE ON DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY, NEW YORK, 17TH OCTOBER 2018.

DELIVERED BY DOUG WEIR, RESEARCH AND POLICY DIRECTOR, CONFLICT AND ENVIRONMENT OBSERVATORY

Chair,

This statement is delivered on behalf of 15 organisations working to strengthen the protection of civilians and the environment from the impact of conflicts and military activities.

Across the UN system, initiatives are underway to address the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts. The Security Council is exploring early warning and risk management in connection with climate change, resource conflicts and water scarcity.

The Environment Assembly has adopted consensus resolutions on environmental protection during conflicts, and on conflict pollution. Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs have identified practices to minimise the impact of toxic remnants of war on environmental human rights. The International Law Commission is studying the progressive development of the legal framework protecting the environment in relation to armed conflicts.

Elsewhere, the environment is being addressed in the context of UN peacekeeping, in humanitarian operations and in peacebuilding. The Red Cross is revising its military guidelines on environmental protection.

All this activity begs the question: what is First Committee doing?

With a few exceptions, precious little. An annual resolution highlighting environmental standards in the destruction of arms may be a comfortable option for many. But standards based on national environmental laws are no substitute for international leadership on the environmental and human cost of weapons and military activities.

Yet First Committee could, and should, articulate the environmental dimensions of the topics on its agenda. Highlighting the environmental impact of particular weapons or military practices can aid scrutiny over their acceptability, and help identify measures to minimise harm.

Chair,

In conflicts across the world, weapons – and the policies that guide their use or permit their abuse – are causing or facilitating damage to the environment.

In Yemen, air strikes have destroyed agricultural infrastructure, contributing to famine and food insecurity, while damage to water and sanitation networks has contributed to its ongoing cholera outbreak. In Syria, air and ground assaults by multiple conflict parties have targeted oil facilities; damage that has created pollution hotspots, and led to a surge in highly polluting artisanal oil refining.

In eastern Ukraine, the risk of damage to water facilities and chemical plants by heavy weapons threatens an environmental and humanitarian catastrophe.

In Iraq, IEDs were used in the systematic destruction of oil infrastructure, causing fires and spills that affected thousands of people, and whose impacts will be felt for years to come. Across the world, mines, cluster munitions and explosive remnants of war pollute soils, and impede access to the natural resources that communities depend on.

Across numerous conflicts, explosive weapons with wide area effects have devastated towns and cities. While the human cost is the most appalling direct consequence of their use, they also damage industrial sites and residential areas, destroy water, sanitation and energy infrastructure, and creates tonnes of hazardous debris. This has direct and reverberating consequences for the environment, and for civilian health.

In Africa's Great Lakes region, the proliferation and trafficking of arms is closely linked to the unregulated exploitation of minerals and timber, to poaching and to the illegal wildlife trade. Elsewhere weapons originating from Libyan stockpiles have driven species to the edge of extinction in the Sahel and killed elephants in East Africa.

Chair,

First Committee is not an environmental forum. But it must take the initiative in addressing the environmental impact of weapons throughout their lifecycle. In linking disarmament to the SDGs, the Secretary General's Agenda for Disarmament is a first step towards this more coherent analysis of the environmental damage that weapons and military activities cause. We urge First Committee to build on this initiative as part of its contribution to the 2030 Agenda.

Statement endorsed by:

Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy

Action on Armed Violence

Al-Haq

Amnesty International

Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas

Control Arms

Environmentalists Against War

Iraqi Environment and Health Society UK

Mines Action Canada

Zoi Environment Network