



## Briefing Note for the UN Security Council Ministerial Level Open Debate on “Humanitarian Effects of Environmental Degradation and Peace and Security”

*PAX, 17 September 2020*

PAX welcomes the growing recognition of the relationship between armed conflict, environmental degradation and peace by the UN Security Council, Member States and the international community at large, especially efforts to more holistically address related security, humanitarian, and ecological dimensions. We want to particularly thank the Government of Niger for convening this timely and important debate, and the Government of Germany for the convening of the July 2020 UNSC debate on climate and security, and emergency Council session on the FSO Safer situation in Yemen. We look forward to further discussions on these and other important issues related to the the **Environment, Peace and Security (EPS) agenda** within the UN system. These discussions are important now, more than ever, as the existential threat of the climate crisis to our planet, particularly to those living in conflict-affected areas, has brought forward the urgency to address the impacts of armed conflict on the environment; the protection of civilians affected by environmental damage and toxic remnants of war; and States’ capacities to recover and rebuild. This includes both recovery from environmental damage from armed conflict and the capacity to combat the climate crisis and its effects.

Recent examples from conflict zones in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine demonstrate how environmental damage can have acute and long-term risks for civilian populations. Oil wells and sulphur stockpiles in **Iraq** were [set on fire](#) by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in 2016, resulting in mass-casualty events with an ongoing pollution legacy, while also impacting water and agriculture infrastructure. The climate crisis and mismanagement of water infrastructure in the south resulted in over 100,000 people getting sick and mass demonstrations. In **Syria**, agricultural fields were deliberately [burned](#) during harvest, while large scale deforestation driven-by fuel needs, shelling, forest fires, and charcoal production in the west. Conflict [pollution](#) from Syria’s severely damaged oil industry continues to affect rivers, lakes, and soils. Various reports have been published raising serious concerns around a potential [environmental disaster](#) from targeted chemical factories in eastern **Ukraine**. Meanwhile, a rusty oil tanker with at least 1.14 million barrels of crude oil off the coast of **Yemen** has frequently been raised as a high-risk hazard at the UN Security Council, while the country continues to grapple with a [collapsing](#) agricultural system from conflict-exacerbated water insecurity. Damage to water and sanitation systems pose serious environmental health risks, which have resulted in the spread of communicable diseases in urban, rural, and camp settings, particularly in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and the Ukraine; this is of especially notable concern in the COVID-19 era.

These and other concerns have been at the core of multilateral debates driving international processes in recent years that warrant further support and engagement from Member States. For example: in 2019, the **International Law Commission** published [28 Draft Principles on Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts](#) (PERAC), underscoring the importance of taking measures to prevent, mitigate, and minimize environmental damage before, during, and after armed conflicts; in his 2016 report, the **UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Toxics** [addressed](#) specific health concerns around toxic remnants of war and conflict affected communities, calling for States to increase cooperation and step up monitoring and remediation work and compensate affected people; and the **UN Environment Assembly** adopted by consensus [two resolutions](#), in 2016 and 2017, on protection of the environment in armed conflict and conflict-pollution, respectively, that helped to bridge the gap in the security and environment discourse. Furthermore, in September 2020, the **International Committee of the Red Cross** is expected to publish its updated [Guidelines for Military Manuals and Instructions on the Protection of the Environment in Times of Armed Conflict](#). This should contribute to State accountability at the highest levels in regard to the environmental footprint of military operations.

In recent **UN Security Council** Arria-formula meetings on PERAC in 2018 and 2019, Council Members overwhelmingly recognized the intrinsic link between [environment, peace and security](#) and the harmful environmental impacts of conflicts on civilian populations. In these meetings, many States noted the need for a coherent, coordinated UN approach through: improved monitoring and regular reporting; mainstreaming protection of the environment across the UN system, including in mandates of peacekeeping operations; and strengthening existing legal frameworks. These needs prompted Council Members to call for further dialogue in the UN Security Council on this topic. Furthermore, in May 2020 many Member States, including the [Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians \(PoC\)](#), raised the issue in their interventions during the annual UNSC Open Debate on PoC, with the Governments of Switzerland and Council Member, Viet Nam, co-organizing a [side event](#) with PAX and the Environmental Peacebuilding Association (EnPAX), entitled



“Protecting the Environment is Protecting Civilians”. This followed the inclusion of the threats posed by environmental dimensions of armed conflict and climate change in the UN Secretary-General’s [report](#) on the Protection of Civilians.

We call upon States to take the following measures for timely and robust action to address these concerns at the United Nations:

- 1. Raise concerns over environmental dimensions of armed conflict in national interventions in all relevant debates and briefings across the UN system, including: in relevant UNSC country and thematic briefings; various UN General Assembly fora, such as the UN Environmental Assembly, UN Human Rights Council, and relevant Committees; and cross-cutting bodies like the Peacebuilding Commission.** Such interventions should underscore the linkages between the humanitarian impacts of conflict-related environmental degradation and climate change, particularly the harmful risks to civilians. Member States should call on the UN to include the environment as a relevant topic to address in conflict analysis, humanitarian responses, and peacebuilding efforts as a means to help save civilian lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure.
- 2. Strengthen the mandate of humanitarian actors to address environmental dimensions of armed conflict in their field operations through identification and analysis of data on environmental impacts.** This work can draw on existing humanitarian coordination systems, such as those of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for identification and analysis of data to better include environmental impacts. Environmental actors, including technical and scientific entities and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), can work with field-based UN entities and humanitarian actors through the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator system to provide analysis and inform response and recovery.
- 3. Request the UN Secretariat to provide briefings to the Security Council on the security implications of conflict-related environmental damage and the climate crisis in relevant country situations and thematic debates on the Council’s agenda.** Addressing the wider environmental concerns around legacy pollution from past wars and armed conflicts, current conflicts and post-conflict responses, and capacities for addressing the climate crisis and its effects, fosters better understanding of challenges faced by States recovering from armed conflicts; helps give a voice to affected communities through consultations with civil society; can foster dialogue on the conduct of military operations; and helps to inform more sustainable (environmental) peacebuilding processes.
- 4. Establish a Core Group to begin developing a roadmap for policy development and implementation of the Environment, Peace and Security (EPS) Agenda.** Such an initiative must include a geographically balanced representation from conflict- and climate-change-affected States. A Core Group of States could work together to develop a meaningful set of criteria for mainstreaming the environment in humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction and remediation work, regularizing monitoring and reporting mechanisms on environmental and climate-related risks in conflict-affected or at-risk countries, and establishing a rapid response mechanism for urgent environmental risks scenarios, like the urgent FSO Safer situation in the Red Sea and other potential international EPS situations in the future. Similarly, a Core Group could seek to inform EPS and relevant country discussions inside the UN Security Council, and bridge gaps with other relevant UN fora, such as those outlined above, as well as multilateral discussions as around the UN Biodiversity Convention, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the upcoming anniversary of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 2022 in Stockholm.
- 5. Contribute to protection of the environment and natural resources in armed conflict through robust and progressive policies building on existing legal, political and norm-building process.** States should develop clear policies that support strong implementation of the 28 Draft Principles on PERAC put forward by the International Law Committee. Next, States should seek to implement the ICRC’s *Updated Military Guidelines on PERAC* in national policies and support awareness-raising and capacity-building measures for States with less means to develop national policies. States should also consider supporting international organizations and civil society groups with funding for conflict-monitoring on environmental damage as well as clean-up and remediation work.