

Wherever there is war or armed conflict, civilians are always caught in the middle: UK Statement at the UN Security Council

Thank you very much, Madam President, and thank you again for convening us on this critical issue today. And, we're very grateful to our briefers – it was very good to hear their views on the really practical and impactful steps that this Council, but also other Member States, should take if we want to protect civilians and humanitarians.

As, I think, Mr Miliband said, this is not about us taking new initiatives, but it's about the determination to ensure the application and delivery of existing commitments. Because, wherever there is war or armed conflict, civilians are always caught in the middle.

2022 has been another devastating year for civilians in conflict, including in Myanmar, in Syria and Ukraine, and, as we heard again today, in the number of displaced, passing 100 million, a desperate threshold.

In Ukraine, Russia is targeting civilian infrastructure and attacking civilians indiscriminately. No one can escape this fact.

In Myanmar, humanitarian workers are murdered along with the women and children they are aiding. And we heard, just today, about the IRC humanitarians attacked in the DRC, and our thoughts are with the victims – but they need more than just our thoughts.

In many conflicts, access to aid is being weaponised as a military strategy, increasing the human cost of war.

And, we have also seen parties to conflict treat with increasing contempt the international rules and humanitarian law designed to protect civilians in conflict.

Only last month, this Council debated ways to help prevent the scale of conflict related sexual violence around the world.

And, if I may say to Ms Boketa, although she's not in the seat, I was really struck by the very practical response that her organisation is taking, and by the incredible stories of Solange and Chinema, but we owe them our side of the bargain as they strive to improve their own situation.

Action can also be supported in other ways by us as States, and I want to talk about three ways in which we can do that today:

The first is that States can do more on prevention by embedding civilian protections into their own domestic law and operations.

This includes putting in place appropriate legislation and institutional arrangements to comprehensively address violations and abuses of International Humanitarian Law and of human rights, and critically holding those who commit such violations and abuses accountable.

And this is the really important point – we cannot overstate the power of deterrence, or the cost of impunity.

The UK continues to produce voluntary reporting on our own domestic implementation of International Humanitarian Law, and we encourage others to do the same to establish that pattern of behaviour.

With the assistance of the British Red Cross, we are offering support to other States to produce their own reports to help identify best practice, to identify gaps in domestic law and ultimately to improve compliance.

The second area we can take action, is that we as members of this Council, as many of our briefers said this morning, can make better use of the tools we already have at our disposal for identifying and addressing threats to civilians.

That includes the tools established in Resolutions 2286, 2417 and 2573. They are designed to give us timely, evidence-based warnings when parties to conflict are blocking access, destroying indispensable civilian objects, or using starvation as a method of warfare.

As Mr Miliband said, they should not be allowed to gather dust, and we should all reflect on that.

And once the threats are identified, we have to be ready to take action. This Council must take decisions that advance humanitarian access, and, once again, we call on the whole Council to renew and expand resolution 2585, granting UN cross-border access to millions of Syrians.

And the third and final point, is that we need to do more to protect those working to aid civilians in some of the highest risk environments in the world, including through tackling, as we heard again today, the dangerous spread of misinformation and disinformation on the work of humanitarian organisations. This puts the lives of both humanitarian actors and the vulnerable civilians at risk.

And indeed, when it comes to disinformation, I'm afraid we have experts on this dangerous technique on this very Council. The Russians, today, have followed their discounted and patent nonsense about bio-labs in Ukraine with more attempts to obfuscate and distract us with further revisionist accounts of what happened in Bucha.

When it comes to the Russian delegation, fiction is stranger than the truth. But, such distraction attempts cannot obscure the blood of civilians on their hands, wrought day-after-day during this illegal invasion in Ukraine.

Frankly, it's remarkable they have the chutzpah to speak on this agenda item. And, it's no surprise they didn't address the real issues.

Madam President, this Council has adopted many resolutions calling for accountability for attacks on humanitarian workers and civilians. We need to turn these words into action and ensure those responsible for such attacks are held accountable.

But, the reality is that time and time again, Members – especially some Permanent Members of this Council – block our attempts to protect civilians. They often use spurious arguments, designed to obscure their real self-interested reasons, and when they do this, they negate the true purpose of this Council – to save civilians from the horrors of war.

And at times, the track record of some States in our work does not align with the rhetoric that they themselves make in this Chamber, and we should reflect on that too.

For our part, the UK will continue to use our seat here to do the opposite – to support those providing relief, and to use the tools we have to take steps to prevent conflicts before they begin and assist civilians and humanitarians caught up in them.

Thank you, Madam President.