

Joint NGO Declaration

UN Security Council discussion on the Protection of Humanitarian Space

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We welcome this discussion today which is more critical than ever. We hope it will enable the Security Council to take actions, to lead efforts to protect humanitarian space and to firmly react when such space is attacked.

Humanitarian needs have never been as high as they are today. The world is on the verge of a hunger pandemic—with conflict, climate and environmental crisis, social inequalities and COVID-19 ravaging the poorest. The humanitarian imperative remains paramount: we must save lives and provide people with the protection and dignity that they are rightfully and fundamentally entitled to.

And today, we, humanitarian organisations guided by the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence and humanity, are deeply worried that our space in which we provide life-saving protection and assistance is shrinking. We know the causes: disregard for International Humanitarian Law by all, especially parties to conflicts, and blatant instrumentalization of aid at all levels have resulted in growing threats to humanitarian action.

The Security Council is also falling short to either prevent or respond to shrinking humanitarian space.

From the perspectives of humanitarian organizations providing assistance, we believe that:

- First, inaction or blockages within the Security Council put people in need and humanitarian personnel at risk. It was not before Covid-19 cases surpassed 10 million worldwide that the Security Council managed to reach an agreement on the UN call for a global ceasefire to allow humanitarian access.

Looking at the Security Council's agenda, some conflicts are routinely discussed for years, but little action is taken – putting the humanitarian space in peril.

The words “we are concerned” aren’t good enough. We need swift, clear and outspoken condemnations followed by bold action when humanitarian space is flouted.

- Secondly, while we welcome some landmark resolutions such as 1325, 1502, 2175, 2286, 2417 or the recent 2573, the Security Council often fails to follow up on them. They get ignored by States and parties to the conflict, who are certain that the Security Council is not serious about their implementation. This discrepancy endangers the lives of people, the work of humanitarian actors and undermines the credibility of this Council.
- Third, the Security Council continues to pass resolutions that do not take into account the negative and potentially deadly effects on humanitarian and medical activities and personnel. This is the case for counterterrorism measures and sanctions.

The lack of coherence and decisive action by the Security Council emboldens States and parties to conflicts in their attacks on humanitarian space:

- In conflicts areas, parties to conflict and other armed actors obstruct access and instrumentalize aid.
- Many States criminalize humanitarian aid and impede discussions with parties to the conflict, crippling humanitarian space and adversely affecting our neutrality.
- At the donor level, the translation of sanctions and Counter terrorism measures poses threats to our operations. One of the most egregious examples is the request to screen final beneficiaries — which is an absolute red line— as it would completely undermine, in all contexts, our ability to provide impartial assistance based on needs.
- Those measures further hamper our acceptance and the confidence populations place in humanitarian aid and lead to increased risks to our staff providing assistance in conflict zones.
- At all level, blatant violations of IHL with impunity result in increased attacks against civilians and humanitarian workers and assets.

On this, unfortunately, we can give you too many examples:

- Next month marks 15 years since 17 Action Against Hunger aid workers were lined up and executed one by one in our office in Muttur, Sri Lanka, despite the fact that they were properly identified as humanitarians. 15 years later, the authorities in Sri Lanka have blocked any judicial action.

- Two years ago, in Nigeria, 5 of our colleagues have been killed and one of our colleague, Grace Taku, was abducted.

She remains forcibly detained and **we continue to ask for her immediate release.**

The awful and tragic litany of attacks against humanitarian personnel seems never ending: Médecins sans frontières, in Tigray; People In Need, in Afghanistan; Acted, in Niger ...

- Since the beginning of the year, 191 humanitarian workers have been either killed, wounded or kidnapped. The vast majority of whom are national humanitarian workers on the front lines, who are the most at risk.
- Local NGOs often have access to areas that others do not. It is now imperative that they receive the same level of international support as others to help them cope with the risks they face.

We thus call on you to take action to reverse this deadly downward spiral:

- We urge you to clearly reaffirm your support to principled humanitarian action by ensuring that decisions at the UN Security Council do not impede humanitarian space and place humanitarian assistance at risk.
- We demand the Security Council to adopt systematic humanitarian exemption that would exclude impartial humanitarian action from the scope of sanctions and counterterrorism measures. This will enable us to safely provide lifesaving services and engage with all parties to conflicts without fear of criminalisation in accordance with humanitarian principles.
- We call on the Security Council to collectively and systematically denounce all crimes against civilians, medical and humanitarian workers and assets. Breaches of IHL must not go unaddressed, especially when humanitarian access is impeded and when our colleagues are at risk. They must be systematically addressed here, in this council, but also at the highest levels of governments.
- We call on the Security Council to prioritize the fight against impunity for crimes against medical and humanitarian personnel by systematically

calling for, and supporting, national and international investigations to ensure those crimes do not remain unpunished.

We welcome the SG's announcement of a strategic advisor focused on enhancing the protection of humanitarian space. We look forward to working closely with this advisor to address those issues and reverse these deadly trends I just described.

The Security Council has shown that when there is collective will, progress is possible. Civilians across the globe need protection and humanitarian assistance on an unprecedented scale.

They are depending on you to take decisive action to protect humanitarian space and to preserve the fundamental principles of our common humanity.

List of signatories:



