

Remarks delivered at UN General Assembly Ministerial Side Event on “Civilians Under Fire: Humanitarian Protection and Respect for IHL”

Remarks delivered by Ms. Savita Pawnday, Deputy Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, on 26 September 2018 at UN Headquarters in New York.

Your Excellencies, good morning. I would like to thank the European Union, the Kingdom of Belgium and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for organizing this important discussion on humanitarian protection and respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Upholding respect for IHL in situations of armed conflict is a core aspect of the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. Both IHL, as a legal branch of international law, and R2P, as an international political norm, have the protection of individuals as their normative foundation.

Your Excellencies, despite the existence of an extensive body of international law, and the unanimous adoption of the principle of R2P more than a decade ago, the changing nature and context of contemporary armed conflict has had devastating consequences for civilians trapped in violence. It is a shocking and unacceptable reality that in today's armed conflicts, 90 percent of all casualties are civilians, rather than combatants. Asymmetric warfare, urban battlefields and protracted armed conflict continue to cause large-scale civilian death and displacement in conflict zones over the world, where states are often unwilling to protect their populations.

It is also a sad reality that in the majority of today's armed conflicts, violations of IHL have become the rule, rather than the exception. In the Central African Republic, deliberate attacks against humanitarian workers has had devastating consequences for the civilian population, who are often times left without protection and assistance. In Yemen, indiscriminate attacks against civilians, recruitment of children and the deliberate blockage of humanitarian aid have resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented scale.

Your Excellencies, these examples of wilful and deliberate disrespect for IHL have resulted in mass atrocity crimes perpetrated against civilian populations. By contrast, in conflicts characterized by respect and compliance with the principles enshrined in IHL we witness fewer of these conscience-shocking crimes. Upholding IHL is thus absolutely fundamental to our collective responsibility to protect.

In this respect, let me stress the importance of ending the cycle of impunity for past perpetrators of serious violations of IHL and other mass atrocity crimes. Accountability not only offers a small glimpse of justice for victims, but also constitutes a crucial factor for preventing their recurrence. It is therefore absolutely fundamental for member states to ensure and promote investigation and prosecution of those responsible for breaches of international humanitarian law.

Thank you.