



Addressing the environmental consequences of conflict, towards the full protection of civilians.

This paper provides an overview of themes around the environmental consequences of conflict and situates them in the context of Article 36's previous writings on work towards the 'full protection of civilians' (Article 36, 2021; 2024; 2026).

The overarching position being advanced is that a full assessment of harm from conflict needs also to account comprehensively for environmental harms, and that the full protection of civilians also requires the full protection of the environment. The challenge of responding to the environmental consequences of conflict provides a valuable example, encompassing patterns of long-term and diverse 'harms' that are inadequately treated by the prevailing frame of international humanitarian law. 'Full protection' can provide a point of reference that validates and promotes protective policies separate from the narrow military interests of states.

Environmental rights and wrongs

In 2022, 161 countries voted to recognise the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right (UN General Assembly, 2022b). The UN General Assembly resolution was adopted with just eight abstentions,¹ and no votes opposed (United Nations, 2022). The moment marked the culmination of more than 40 years of work, which had seen states and civil society advocate for recognition of this relationship. This process of "greening" human rights law (HRL) has seen environmental considerations increasingly embedded within rights such as life, health, and private and family life (Savaresi, 2023). By 2021, 80% of UN member states had already recognised the right to a healthy environment through national law, court decisions or regional treaties, with this further affirmed through an historic UN Human Rights Council resolution (UNEP, 2021).

¹ Abstentions were recorded from Belarus, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Syria.

The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment encapsulates a simple idea: that people's health, wellbeing and livelihoods are intimately and profoundly connected with the environment, the vital services it provides, and ultimately with its protection. Yet as a principle, acknowledgment of this idea remains elusive in relation to armed conflicts. Partly this reflects a frequently pushed (but slowly diminishing) societal opinion that rejects any suggestion that we should care about the environment when people are at risk from war: that is to say, concerns need to be narrowed when direct deaths and injuries are at stake. Beyond that, international humanitarian law (IHL) provides a permissive and anthropocentric framework, which is coupled with poor compliance and a persistent determination of some states to undermine its ability to constrain environmentally destructive behaviours — a problem compounded by a lack of accountability for such acts. Our interest then is to develop a policy orientation that responds to these challenges and strengthens the protection of the environment from armed conflict.²

This simple idea from HRL, that people have a right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, can be considered in the context of work towards the full protection of civilians. That lens provides an additional basis for arguing for stronger environmental protection in contexts of conflict without narrowing our conception of environmental harm to suit existing IHL interpretations or the interest of belligerents. It provides space also for considering the long-term temporal aspects of harm, the increasing importance of environmental protection at a time of compounding environmental crises, and how the consequences of environmental harm for people are amplified under conditions where mechanisms to address them are limited or absent.

War's environmental impacts

The environmental consequences of any war are dependent on how and where it is fought, and by whom and for how long.³ Harms can be ephemeral, or long-lasting; they can be spatially limited or made mobile through components of the environment such as air or water, or even through their biota, including people (Nishijo *et al.*, 2014). More often than not they are complex, context-specific and uncertain and, because of the physical and security constraints created by armed conflicts, they frequently go undocumented or remain poorly understood.

Researchers typically define the environmental impacts of war as *direct* or *indirect*, although the distinction collapses at times. We are most famil-

2 For the ICRC's recent implementation guidance see: ICRC (2026), 'Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict Under International Humanitarian Law', online at: <https://shop.icrc.org/protection-of-the-natural-environment-in-armed-conflict-under-international-humanitarian-law-implementation-guidance-pdf-en.html>

3 For a more comprehensive introduction to war's environmental dimensions see: CEOPS' [How does war affect the environment?](#)

iar with the direct impacts — for example oil spills from damaged energy facilities, the ‘bombturbation’ and pollution of heavily shelled soils, the wildfires that burn along frontlines, the disruption and erosion associated with trenching and fortifications, or the millions of tonnes of contaminated debris left in devastated towns and cities. Impacts from blasts, fires, pollution and mechanical action are typically the direct result of the choices made by military actors. In the most extreme cases, the environment, or components of it, are actively targeted or weaponised to terrorise the civilian population or to rob it of the resources upon which it depends.

In some cases, the indirect environmental consequences of conflicts can be more serious and widespread than direct harms. Many are linked to socio-economic and demographic changes in conflict areas, or to the loss of access to resources indispensable to the civilian population. For instance, where cooking gas becomes unavailable due to blockades or disrupted supply chains, people resort to fuelwood and charcoal, driving deforestation. In many cases, these are coping strategies for survival. Prolonged insecurity and the ungoverned spaces common to many conflict areas facilitate the unsustainable use of natural resources, such as minerals, timber and wildlife, damaging the environment during conflicts, and in the transitions to peace. Conflicts also undermine environmental governance, and with it the ability of national authorities to police environmentally destructive behaviours and to respond to their consequences. These conditions can affect the environment nationwide, and for years after the conclusion of hostilities.

The environmental consequences of conflicts can also be transboundary in character, for example through the pollution of a waterway. Increasingly we are exploring their ‘telecoupled’ effects, such as the link between increased global commodity prices and land conversion for agricultural expansion (Chai *et al.*, 2024). Armed conflicts also undermine global environmental governance, disrupting the consensus-based work of multilateral environmental agreements on existential threats such as the climate crisis, exposing whole populations to greater risk. Finally, periods of geopolitical instability see funding diverted towards increased military expenditure and away from global conservation and development projects intended to protect communities and ecosystems. Global military spending reached a record \$2.9 trillion in 2025 - an 11th consecutive year of growth - as states responded to conflict and uncertainty with large-scale rearmament (SIPRI, 2026), while over the same period official development assistance fell by 23.1%, the steepest annual drop on record, with the poorest countries hit hardest (OECD, 2026). The UK’s own 14% cut to climate aid to fund defence spending illustrates this trade-off at the national level (Harvey and Elgot, 2026).

Environmental drivers of civilian harm

While IHL views the “natural” environment as a civilian object (ICRC, 2020, 2026), public discourse on conflicts frequently neglects or deprioritises both the environment and its relationship to the protection of civilians. While there is a degree of inevitability to this focus on acute impacts on people, there is also a sense that more can and should be done to articulate and communicate how conflict-linked environmental degradation impacts people.

Health is perhaps the most obvious pathway. Conflicts are highly polluting, and often create and sustain the conditions where polluting activities emerge or go unaddressed. While some attention is afforded to acute health risks from the most serious exposures, such as chlorine gas from a damaged water facility, our understanding and curiosity over the chronic exposures people face from living in the complex polluted environments that wars create are far more limited. These forms of slow violence (Nixon, 2013), from which health outcomes may take years to manifest, are challenging to study — a situation made more difficult by the disconnect that we often see between urgent conflict healthcare and the long-term monitoring structures needed to identify and understand the health outcomes linked to chronic exposures to conflict pollutants.

For many communities, natural resources underpin livelihoods and local economies, providing the foundation for development and wellbeing. These might encompass fisheries, forests or agricultural lands, or the landscapes and biota within administrative constructs such as protected areas or nature reserves. Resources like these can be damaged or degraded by both the direct and indirect consequences of warfare; for example, it is common for conflicts to disrupt systems of local sustainable resource management (Conflict Sensitivity Facility and CEOBS, 2025).

Damage to the environment, and to the natural resources that people depend on, not only affects health and livelihoods; it also undermines the resilience of communities to environmental shocks, such as those being driven by the climate crisis. Healthy and functioning ecosystems are far more capable of responding to change and of remaining viable in its wake. The loss of key species, habitats or ecosystem functions, as a result of conflict-linked damage, undermines these processes, and ultimately the resilience of communities dependent on them.

The climate crisis helps signpost a broader understanding of harm, where we move from community dependencies on locally relevant resources, to humanity’s dependence on the global commons, including the atmosphere. Measurement of the greenhouse gas emissions footprint of armed conflicts is in its infancy but studies to date suggest that they can far exceed the annual emissions of many countries (de Klerk, Shlapak and Onopchuk, 2024). The Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, generated an estimated 230 MtCO₂e over its first three years, comparable to the com-

bined annual emissions of Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia (Initiative on GHG Accounting of War, 2025). Climate damage impacts humanity as a whole and, as the climate crisis accelerates and societies decarbonise, it seems inevitable that more attention will be focused on the acceptability of the most emissions-intensive wartime activities.

Finally, and refocusing from the commons back to the individual and to an area that has received insufficient attention in relation to armed conflicts, more consideration is needed of the psychological impact of environmental loss. ‘Solastalgia’ — the emotional or existential distress caused by negative environmental change — has been better explored in relation to natural disasters, where losses challenge people’s established sense of place and identity, leading to feelings of helplessness and depression (Warsini, Mills and Usher, 2014). It is likely that conflict-linked environmental losses will be most keenly felt by those most connected to land, resources and place, which includes peoples living under occupation.

Environmental considerations framing the full protection of civilians

Alongside understanding how conflicts damage the environment, and how this damage affects people, it’s also important to understand the nature of the harm caused. Before doing so it’s necessary to interrogate questions of acceptability. In those cases where the environmental consequences of a particular action are questioned, all too often they are deemed acceptable when set against the perceived benefits of the action itself, or the wider conflict, with the weighting in favour of military necessity in IHL enthusiastically leveraged by conflict parties.

For example, in March 2026, Israel bombed four oil facilities in and around Tehran, a city of nine million people geographically predisposed to poor air quality, particularly at night. The resulting pollution and “black rain” affected millions (CEOBS, 2026). Responding to the intense public and media scrutiny footage of the fires at the civil facilities triggered, the IDF aggressively countered that: “The military forces of the Iranian terror regime make direct and frequent use of these fuel tanks to operate military infrastructure. Through them, the Iranian terror regime distributes fuel to various consumers, including military entities in Iran” (Fabian, 2026).

The legitimisation of environmental harm is not just a question within conflicts; it also applies between them. A fortnight after Israel’s attacks in Tehran, recurring waves of Ukrainian drones caused massive and persistent fires at three Russian oil terminals on the Baltic. The attacks were an intensification of a long-running strategy of attacking Russian energy and industrial facilities, itself mirroring Russia’s own strategy against Ukrainian energy sites. Criticism over the environmental consequences of Ukraine’s strategy was minimal, as has the attention on its potential for civilian harm.

This example underscores the normative value of recognising that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is universal, and is not contingent on which side civilians find themselves on.

Returning to the nature of environmental harm, several considerations warrant examination. These include:

- The environment is a complex and dynamic system, about which it is rare to have full understanding prior to harm being caused, and almost as rare to have comprehensive understanding afterwards.
- Uncertainty over the consequences and reversibility of our interactions with the environment, and its interactions with people, has long encouraged the use of the precautionary principle, which supports preventative actions even in the face of uncertainty. The precautionary principle is distinct from the IHL principle of precaution.
- The tendency for general observers (and IHL modes of assessment) to fetishise single shocking incidents of environmental harm, favouring this over the diffuse multiplicity of smaller incidents that tend to characterise conflict-linked environmental damage and which can collectively add up to widespread and severe damage.
- That conflict-linked environmental harm can last decades and that this should influence the calculus over its acceptability, but rarely appears to.
- The environment and ecosystems are complex and dynamic, and change is an essential part of their functioning. Nature can recover but what emerges will often be different to that which preceded it; for example, in the diversity of its species. It may be impossible to fully recover that which has been lost.
- There are many conflict-affected areas that endure cycles of violence and environmental degradation, with recurring periods of harm allowing little space for recovery.
- A further complicating factor is that there are few areas of the planet untouched by human activities. There are a great many where ecosystems have developed in concert and sometimes in balance with human activities. Similarly, manmade infrastructure can create ecological niches of importance to biodiversity, and thus to people. How should we conceptualise harm and loss in these cases?

One final constant, relevant to how we understand harm, relates to the capacity of conflict-affected states to address damage. Conflict often robs affected states or territories of the capacity to effectively deal with environmental harm, including monitoring or responding to incidents, and assessing and remediating damage. This loss of capacity amplifies threats to people and to ecosystems. When considering actions to prevent harm,

comparisons with peacetime responses to equivalent incidents in Global North countries can provide useful insights into the kind of actions that would be necessary under a regime designed to fully protect civilians; for example, responses to industrial accidents (MIIB, 2008).

Legal protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts

The legal framework protecting the environment in relation to armed conflicts has been developing since the late 1970s but three major developments during the last 20 years have been of particular relevance.

The first has been the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to update its *Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict*, which were first developed in response to the environmental destruction of the 1991 Gulf War. The decade-long project was completed in 2020 and the guidelines now cover: IHL rules that provide specific protection to the natural environment; general IHL rules that afford protection; rules on specific weapons; and guidance on respect for, implementation and dissemination of the legal rules (ICRC, 2020). The ICRC's guidelines and their commentaries are instructive for their evolutive examination of the rules, which reflects our growing understanding of the environment and of the importance of its protection during armed conflicts.

The second trend was triggered by a 2009 report (UNEP and Environmental Law Institute, 2009), which argued that other bodies of law could provide protection to the environment both during and beyond the phase covered by IHL. It argued that HRL, and international environmental, criminal and security law could all be drawn on, leading UNEP to invite the UN's International Law Commission (ILC) to review the situation. Developed in parallel with the ICRC's *Guidelines*, the ILC's 27 Principles on the *Protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts* (PERAC Principles) were taken note of by the UN General Assembly in 2022 (UN General Assembly, 2022a). A mixture of codification, progressive development and evolutive interpretation, they vary in strength from non-binding guidance, to reflecting binding international law. The principles apply before, during and after armed conflicts, and in situations of occupation, as well as in both international and non-international armed conflicts (CEOBS, 2022). The PERAC Principles were a remarkable achievement but their dissemination and implementation have subsequently been hampered by a lack of ownership. The PERAC process was complemented by two civil society initiatives to develop suites of principles on two additional themes relevant to civilian protection: water (Geneva Water Hub, 2019), and the toxic remnants of war (Harvard IHRC and CEOBS, 2020).

A third trend has been the increasing focus on accountability for wartime environmental damage. Russia's war against Ukraine has seen attention to

financial reparations that are now focused on the Hague-based ‘Register of Damage for Ukraine’ (RD4U, 2026), as well as domestic criminal liability cases using the crime of ecocide, which both Russia and Ukraine have on their domestic statutes. In turn this has contributed towards growing calls for the addition of an international crime of ecocide to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Killean and Short, 2025), even as the court has focused on exploring how it can better integrate the environment into its existing work (OTP, 2025). Elsewhere, broader consideration has been given to other forms of post-conflict environmental redress through transitional justice mechanisms, such as that in Colombia (Camacho Rincón and Parra Gallego, 2024).

While these developments and initiatives are welcome, it is an open question whether the lack of a dedicated international forum for addressing the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts has been a strength or a hindrance. This kind of distributed norm development makes the environment more similar to ‘gender’ in multilateral policy-making than it is to traditional single-issue humanitarian disarmament campaigns, and this is a reality that any efforts to enhance environmental protection will need to consider.

From silent victim to sustainable recovery

To some extent, the permissive, inadequate and frequently ignored provisions that are supposed to protect the environment and its dependents from conflict are the result of the environment’s comparative invisibility, and thus its under-prioritisation. Thanks to the affordances of satellite remote sensing and open-source intelligence we are now in an experiment that will clarify whether greater, near real-time visibility for the environment in conflicts can influence its protection, or at least the perceived value in protecting it. The signs are promising, with the environmental dimensions of the wars in Ukraine and Iran attracting significant media attention. Drivers of this include greater media sensitisation, the fit of stories into metanarratives linked to the triple planetary crisis, a rising tide of societal environmental awareness, and the focused efforts of civil society. But while the *dictates of public conscience* may be evolving, it remains less clear whether the conscience and actions of policy-makers are keeping pace.

In Ukraine, one outcome of its high environmental profile, itself a result of EU alignment, government attention, an active civil society and a broad sweep of environmental harm, has been the emergence of a discourse around sustainable recovery. This phenomenon, which has been led by civil society, seeks to use the war as an inflection point to reorient the country towards the green transition. Whilst conditions in Ukraine are very different to Gaza, or Lebanon or Syria, if sustainable recovery processes become the norm they could go some way towards expanding the temporal protection of civilians into the post-conflict phase.

Towards the full protection of civilians, and the environment they depend on

The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment underlines the fact that the protection of the environment and the protection of civilians are mutually dependent. Acknowledging this invites examination of the components of this relationship, whether it is through physical and mental health, livelihoods and wellbeing, or community resilience to environmental shocks. These are starting points that need to be explored both through the specific nature and characteristics of conflict-linked environmental harm, and through existing legal frameworks.

Such legal analysis will benefit from battles already won; for example, on the co-applicability of different legal regimes during armed conflicts, progressive interpretations of IHL, and from recent and ongoing attention in a range of international fora. But perhaps most of all it will benefit from the growing visibility of the environment in relation to armed conflicts and the extent to which these narratives are resonating with the public. Yet while there is a far greater openness from stakeholders working on the protection of civilians to engage with environmental issues, we are still constrained by the availability of data from the field, whether on exposures, health outcomes or other forms of loss. Addressing these gaps will be an important component of how we conceptualise and advance the full protection of civilians from the environmental consequences of war.

More broadly, the full protection of civilians provides a lens that is conceptually and politically distinct from the application of existing law. Where IHL fixes its analytical gaze on discrete acts, assessed against tests of necessity and proportionality calibrated to military advantage, the full protection of civilians starts from civilians themselves and from the conditions on which their lives, health and futures depend. That shift matters for the environment because so much conflict-linked environmental harm is precisely the kind that IHL handles poorly: diffuse rather than discrete; cumulative rather than instantaneous; manifesting in health, livelihoods and ecosystems years or decades after the proximate act. By taking the standard articulated through HRL — that people have a right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment — and asking what it requires of belligerents, of post-conflict actors and of the international community, the full protection lens admits these forms of harm to consideration in their own right, rather than only where they can be squeezed into the architecture of grave breaches.

The framing also offers potential political traction. It connects environmental protection to a trajectory of work through which an expanded conception of protection has been progressively normalised. Placed within that trajectory, environmental harm should become one of the strands through which civilian protection is itself more fully realised. This recasting has consequences for how environmental claims are made and heard within the

Security Council, in the Secretary-General's reporting and in national statements: it allows advocates and progressive states to anchor environmental concerns confidently and ambitiously within a protection vocabulary.

If the full protection of civilians requires the full protection of the environment they depend on, the directions of travel are reasonably clear. Multilateral discussions on the protection of civilians need to integrate environmental harm not as an optional addition but as a recurring expectation, including in Council resolutions, in the framing of open debates and in the structure of national statements. Sustainable recovery — the proposition that the response to conflict should leave civilians better placed to live decently within their environment — needs to be carried from its current foothold in Ukraine into other contexts. And the distributed normative work on environment and armed conflict, from the ICRC's Guidelines to the ILC's PERAC Principles to the work on environmental rights and on ecocide, also needs to be drawn into the protection conversation. A full accounting of conflict harms requires a full accounting of environmental harms, and that accounting is a necessary foundation for work towards full protection.

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Article36



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