

Statement by Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

Protecting Civilians in Armed Conflict is a Responsibility that Member States and the UN Security Council Must Uphold

20 May 2026

As the Protection of Civilians Week unfolds in New York, we strongly condemn and raise the alarm about the growing and blatant violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law meant to protect civilians in armed conflict.

Across conflicts, civilians, including children, are killed, injured, and displaced at an alarming scale. Sexual violence is used as a tactic of war, overwhelmingly affecting women and girls and devastating lives. Homes, schools, places of worship, hospitals, including maternal wards, are destroyed or damaged, as are civilian infrastructure and assets, such as water systems, transport network, markets, food production. Essential services are collapsing. Forced displacement is accelerating.

Conflict-induced hunger and famine are spreading, often driven by unlawful siege tactics, starvation, and the arbitrary denial of humanitarian access. This is happening despite the existence of clear obligations under International Humanitarian Law and the framework reaffirmed by UN Security Council resolution 2417 (2018), which condemns the deliberate starvation of civilians and the use of hunger as method of warfare. And a decade after the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2286 (2016) that demands the protection of the wounded, sick, and medical personnel, violence, attacks and threats against healthcare workers and facilities continue with impunity. More than 10,000 incidents against health care facilities and workers have been verified to date.

Aid workers are also under attack and killed in unprecedented numbers. More than 1,000 humanitarian colleagues have been killed over the past three years. Many others are arbitrarily detained. Often the first to respond, staff from national and local organisations and community initiatives pay an unacceptably high toll. Many women-led-organisations addressing lifesaving protection and gender-based violence are being attacked.

From Gaza to El Fasher, and from Kharkiv to Beirut, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is devastating civilian lives. At the same time, new technologies, including drones and artificial intelligence, are reshaping warfare and expanding the battlefield.

Wars have rules that apply to all parties to conflict. The problem is not a lack of law. The problem is the failure to uphold them consistently, the erosion of accountability and inaction, even in the face of atrocities.

Protecting civilians is a legal obligation and a moral imperative. For the sake of our shared humanity, rules that protect civilians must be upheld.