



Issue description

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Issue of: Protecting the environment from the harmful effects of armed conflicts
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Introduction:

Armed conflicts can result in rapid environmental degradation and endanger fragile ecosystems. They pose a threat to biodiversity of the affected regions, hinder conservation efforts and damage sustainable environment management systems. Despite that, environmental considerations are often neglected in favour of operational requirements.

In 2014, UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon (2007-2016) said: “The environment has long been a silent casualty of war and armed conflict. From the contamination of land and the destruction of forests to the plunder of natural resources and the collapse of management systems, the environmental consequences of war are often widespread and devastating.”

The destruction of nature has multiple social, environmental and economic implications for millions of people in the most affected areas, including increasing vulnerability to various natural disasters such as floods, avalanches and landslides. In an attempt to survive, locals and refugees tend to further exploit the environment to meet their basic needs.

The connection between environmental issues and armed conflicts is strengthened by the fact that conflicts are often fuelled by violent attempts to gain control over increasingly scarce natural resources such as freshwater or arable land.

In addition, the maintenance of modern armies, both standing and deployed, exerts enormous strain on environmental resources and typically produces an enormous carbon footprint.

Definition of key terms:

Environmental degradation: the deterioration of the environment through the depletion of resources, destruction of ecosystems, habitat destruction, pollution and the eradication of wildlife.

Carbon footprint: total greenhouse gas emissions caused by an individual, an organization or a community expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide.



General overview:

Over the course of history, the environment has often remained the “unpublicized victim of war”. Several recent and still ongoing conflicts have resulted directly or indirectly in the deterioration of ecosystems, damage to biodiversity and the exploitation of natural resources over large areas.

During the Vietnam war, the US military sprayed millions of litres of chemicals across southern Vietnam as part of a deliberate destruction of forests in order to deprive the guerrillas their cover and thus gain a military advantage.

In the early 1990s, Saddam Hussein’s troops drained the Mesopotamian marshes in response to a Shia uprising in southern Iraq, reducing the marshes to less than 10% of their original extent and transforming the area into a desert.

Due to the series of civil wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo since the mid-1990s, local wildlife populations have decreased significantly as they have become a meat source for combatants, civilians struggling for survival and commercial traders. The conflicts also contributed to deforestation and the practice of harmful mining processes.

During an armed conflict in Nepal between 1996 and 2006 armed forces were drawn away from the protection of forests, which resulted in the exploitation of wildlife and plant resources by insurgents and civilians.

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have contributed to the destruction of more than 50% of the country’s forests (up to 95% in some areas) as a result of the breakdown of environmental governance during the war.

Rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have illegally exploited natural resources through mining and logging for decades as their major source of funding, resulting in the pollution of rivers and land.

As a result of the conflict in Syria, industrial facilities such as chemical industries and the oil industry as well as critical infrastructure such as power plants and water and sewage systems have sustained severe damage. The shelling of residential areas has caused the destruction of the majority of Syria's housing stock. This has created millions of tonnes of rubble, some of which contains hazardous materials such as asbestos, heavy metals and the toxic residues from conventional weapons.

In 2017, Islamic State militants set ablaze oil wells in Mosul releasing toxic chemicals into the air, water and land.

These are just some of the several examples of ecosystems suffering long-term consequences of armed conflicts. The most prevalent forms of environmental damage linked to armed conflicts are deforestation and habitat destruction, exploitation of resources by armed groups and refugees, the introduction of invasive species transported by troop movements, damage to wastewater treatment plants or factories resulting in spills, and production, testing and transport of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons and their waste products. Moreover, the vehicles used in war zones consume petroleum-based fuels at an extremely high rate and produce many hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and sulfur dioxide in addition to CO₂. Air pollution from military vehicles and weaponry adversely affects public health among soldiers as well as civilians in the war zone.

However devastating the effect of war is on the natural environment, environmental damage itself can be a contributing factor leading to conflicts. The vulnerability resulting from resource



dependence and the conflicting nature of natural resource management policies may fuel hostilities, and military force has been used for material gain on several occasions. Once armed conflict begins, soldiers and populations under siege must find immediate sources of food, water, and shelter, which often leads to adapting their thinking to short-term solutions instead of long-term sustainability. The resulting deprivation and disillusionment may further increase the conflicts in the area.

Environmental degradation can be especially severe and significant in case of nature reserves that are protected in peacetime but lose their protection during an armed conflict. Many of these reserves are used for military purposes despite the severe consequences.

The significance of war-induced environmental damage is further increased by the fact that these impacts are often present for several decades after the conflict has ended, and their consequences may reach other areas that were left unaffected by the primary effects of the war.

Despite the importance and relevance of the issue, the already existing international legal frameworks for the protection of environment have been described as “rudimentary” by Marie Jacobsson, a special rapporteur to the UN’s International Law.

There have been several attempts to raise awareness of this issue. The United Nations General Assembly declared 6 November the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict. UN Environment has teamed up with the Environmental Law Institute, the Earth Institute at Columbia University, Duke University, and the University of California at Irvine to develop a groundbreaking new massive open online course on Environmental Security and Sustaining Peace.

Major Parties Involved:

UNEP: works in collaboration with other organizations and independent experts to investigate the effect of armed conflicts on the environment and to raise awareness.

International Committee of the Red Cross: works on raising awareness to the “rules of war” including environmental considerations described in the Additional Protocol I.

Timeline of events:

1961-1971: the United States sprayed more than 20 million gallons of various herbicides over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

1977: Additional Protocol I was added to the Geneva Conventions.

2001: the United Nations General Assembly declared 6 November the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict.

27 May 2016: the United Nations Environment Assembly adopted a resolution which recognized the role of healthy ecosystems and sustainably managed resources in reducing the risk of armed conflict, and reaffirmed its strong commitment to the full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Previous attempts to solve the issue:

Article 35 of Protocol I (1977) provides: “It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.”

In addition, Article 55 of Protocol I states that “Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage. This protection includes a prohibition of the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby to prejudice the health or survival of the population.”

Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 31/721 of 10 December 1976) provides: “Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to engage in military or any other hostile use of environmental modification techniques having widespread, long-lasting or severe effects as the means of destruction, damage or injury to any other State Party.”

A symposium was held on 3 June 1991 in London under the auspices of the London School of Economics, the Centre for Defense Studies and Greenpeace International to assess the need for a fifth Geneva Convention specifically for the protection of the environment in times of war, however, this convention was never created.

Possible solutions and approaches:

A comprehensive resolution on this issue should include measures to prevent further harm to the environment and to restore already affected ecosystems. During the debate, possible solutions to protect the environment in the currently ongoing armed conflicts should be discussed.

It is important to establish that the destruction of the environment runs counter to long-term security. However, it should also be taken into consideration that legal frameworks might not reach into the anarchic civil wars of Africa and the Middle East.

A significant part of environmental damage is brought about by civilians living in the most affected areas who depend on the environment as they do not have access to other resources. In order to stop this type of exploitation, the issue of their vulnerability and dependence should be addressed.

The pollution caused by the military and its enormous resource consumption contributes greatly to the environmental degradation associated with armed conflicts. Possible ways to create more sustainable practices or otherwise decrease the military’s contribution towards environmental degradation should be included in the resolution.



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