



## **Civilian Protection in 2026: The Deadly Convergence of Advanced Technology and Ancient Warfare Practices**

### **Advocacy Note - May 2026**

**Background:** This note was developed by the Global Protection Cluster (GPC), with contributions from its inter-agency Advocacy Working Group (AWG). It highlights several pressing trends impacting the Protection of Civilians (PoC) across crisis contexts where Protection Clusters are active. These trends reflect a deadly mix of ancient methods of war considered unlawful under international humanitarian law (IHL), including the use of siege and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and modern means including advanced technologies, particularly the use of armed drones. How such dynamics are driving expanding levels of harm must be taken into account with a renewed push for increased compliance with IHL, strengthened accountability of duty bearers and protection-centered response, from high-level humanitarian diplomacy to community-based protection on the frontlines. The note aims to complement the Secretary General’s Report on the Protection of Civilians and other PoC-focused products to further inform discussions during the UN Security Council Open Debate on PoC and the Protection of Civilians Week in New York. With grave violations of IHL inflicting increasingly widespread and acute levels of harm on civilians, the opportunity to renew and strengthen actions and accountabilities to protect civilians is urgent.

#### **1. IHL Violations are Driving Civilian Harm and Humanitarian Needs**

A detailed analysis of protection risks across 23 Protection Clusters pointed to a scale and severity of civilian harm in 2025 that far surpassed previous years.<sup>1</sup> Armed conflict remained the primary driver of violence, deprivation, and coercion across Protection Cluster contexts last year, with related violations exposing civilians to violence while simultaneously driving the spiraling levels of humanitarian need evident globally: when people are forced to flee their homes, when farmer’s fields are set on fire or planted with landmines and when civilians suffer debilitating injuries and trauma, humanitarian needs grow.

Analysis confirms the most severe and recurrent protection risks monitored by Protection Clusters in 2025 included attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, abductions, arbitrary detentions, severe movement restrictions and forced displacement, all driven by shocking violations of IHL, often perpetrated in urban, populated areas.<sup>2</sup> Gender-based violence (GBV), impediments to and denial of legal identity, and intensifying psychosocial distress, compounded by the denial of essential services, were also consistently reported at severe levels.

In a worrying trend highlighted from the 2025 analysis of Protection Clusters and continuing in 2026, there is a distinct concentration of multiple, serious protection risks in certain conflict-affected communities

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<sup>1</sup> Please see further information on the GPC’s categorization and tracking of 15 key protection risks [here](#); GPC, High-Level Humanitarian Donors Briefing Note: The State of Protection in 2025, December 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>2</sup> GPC, High Level Humanitarian Donors Briefing Note: The State of Protection in 2025, December 2025, [available here](#).

and the stratification of protection risks across certain groups. As evidenced in contexts such as Burkina Faso and South Sudan, numerous protection risks were reported at severe or extreme levels in the same areas and districts, compounding harms and leaving populations with almost no protective capacities. The historic deterioration in the protection of children affected by war continued: 1 in 5 children globally are now affected by armed conflict or violence while the number of children exposed to grave violations has increased by 370% over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Persons with disabilities in areas of active conflict continued to experience heightened protection risks, due to factors including inaccessible early warning systems, physical barriers preventing escape, and the destruction of medical infrastructure. At the same time close to 50,000 deaths and injuries, including long-term disabilities, were recorded as a result of the use of explosive weapons around the world in 2025. This is the second-highest level recorded since 2010.<sup>4</sup> The global consensus against antipersonnel landmines is facing significant erosion with renewed production, transfers, and use, along with Member State withdrawals and an attempted suspension from the Mine Ban Treaty.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. The Drivers and Impacts of IHL Violations are Gendered, Demanding Gendered Responses**

IHL violations are gendered in nature, and this is a consistent driver of harm for civilians. Underlying norms and roles shape every aspect of conflict and its differentiated impacts on people. Parties to the conflict exploit and weaponize gender dynamics in their execution of violence and in 2025, GBV, including forced marriage and conflict-related sexual violence, remained one of the most severe and expanding protection risks reported by Protection Clusters.

Across contexts, complex forms of GBV were noted across diverse groups of women and girls. In Sudan the number of women and girls requiring support after experiencing gender-based violence nearly doubled in the past two years and quadrupled since the start of the war three years ago.<sup>6</sup> Widespread and systemic sexual violence has been documented across Darfur, with such violence occurring not only in areas of active fighting, but also in markets, along displacement routes and within displacement camps, highlighting how insecurity and the collapse of protective environments are exposing women and girls to pervasive risks far beyond frontlines.<sup>7</sup> In Ethiopia, GBV persists as a pervasive protection threat across the country, with an estimated 20% of women having experienced at least one form of GBV, with higher incidences in conflict-affected areas such as Tigray and Amhara.<sup>8</sup> In eastern DRC, conflict-related sexual violence spiraled to unprecedented levels as the conflict escalated: Through the first nine months of 2025, a reported 81,388 rapes occurred in eastern Congo, a 31.5% increase over the same period in 2024, with UNFPA stating ‘conflict-related sexual violence is being employed as a deliberate tactic of war, intended to terrorize, displace, and control populations, and to violate the dignity and rights of women and girls.’<sup>9</sup>

Men and boys also face distinct and gendered threats and vulnerabilities. Throughout 2025, several Protection Clusters raised concerns with the seeming escalation of specific forms of violence faced by men

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Save the Children, ‘Stop the War on Children: Security for Whom?’, 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>4</sup> See Action on Armed Violence reporting, [available here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Landmine and Munition Monitor Newsletter, April 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, Gender Alert, April 2026, available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> MSF, ‘Surviving the sexual violence crisis in Darfur’, March 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Ethiopia Protection Analysis Update, September 2025, available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> UNFPA, ‘Statement on sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo’, February 2025, [available here](#); Reuters, ‘Congo’s hidden victims’, December 2025, [available here](#).

and boys, the at times limited response to such risks and the prevalence of political rhetoric that treats these groups as potential or actual combatants, further enabling such violations. As highlighted by the Occupied Palestinian Territory Protection Cluster, men and boys continued to face a concentrated and escalating set of severe protection risks in the West Bank, with arbitrary arrests and detention representing the most severe and frequently cited concern, often accompanied by torture and ill-treatment, including conflict related sexual violence.<sup>10</sup> Palestinian men and boys comprise over 99% of persons held in detention in the occupied West Bank while the excessive use of force by Israeli forces has led to exceptionally high rates of death and injury – 97% men and boys – indicating systematic unlawful and discriminatory targeting and a process of gendered securitization whereby male identity is construed to justify resort to force, including lethal force.<sup>11</sup>

Ransom-motivated abductions and kidnappings, often targeting men and boys, have become one of the most severe and normalized protection threats across the conflict-affected North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon. Kidnapping has become systematically embedded in daily civilian life, affecting men and boys at home, in transit, and during livelihood activities. In Sudan, concerns have also increased regarding arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, and conflict-related targeting of adolescent boys and young men based on perceived affiliation or ethnicity. As documented by OHCHR, during the offensive on El Fasher, multiple survivors and witnesses stated that the Rapid Support Forces and allied Arab militia “specifically targeted men aged under 50 years and adolescent boys, who were suspected of being affiliated with the SAF, Joint Forces or mustanfreen.”<sup>12</sup>

Compounding such gendered protection risks are dignity-related harm and abuse, where violence is inflicted against members of the community with the express aim of humiliation and eroding the social fabric, inducing forcible transfer of the population. Related gendered norms and narratives may obscure aspects of risk and agency for conflict-affected women and men, girls and boys, inadvertently shaping the political and operational response in ways that can drive further exclusion.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, gendered harms are central to understanding and responding to conflict, from past to present to future.

### **3. Siege is Being Used to Control, Deprive and Punish Civilians**

When civilians flee situations of violence, they often face serious protection risks during flight and in areas where they seek safety – from IDP camps to informal settlements in urban areas. At the same time, flight also represents a self-protection mechanism, however imperfect, enabling civilians to leave a situation of violence. And yet, across conflict contexts, the use of siege and severe movement restrictions by parties to the conflict are taking away the option to flee, effectively trapping civilians in areas of active fighting and acute food insecurity. Siege and encirclement are a deliberate military tactic that is unlawful when used against a civilian population, with often severe implications for access to essential and life-saving services and the protection of civilians. Such tactics are also closely linked with the use of starvation as a method of warfare and are ultimately being employed to exert control over, and often punish, civilian populations.

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<sup>10</sup> OPT (West Bank) Protection Analysis Update, January 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> OHCHR, ‘They were shooting us like animals’, February 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>13</sup> ODI Global, ‘Victim, perpetrators or agents of change?: Gender norms and protection’, July 2025, [available here](#).

Today the Gaza Strip remains under a full blockade, with movement and the entry of goods and materials including humanitarian aid necessary for the survival of the civilian population strictly controlled - and limited to quantities far below that required to meet basic needs. Civilians remain trapped under ongoing bombardment despite the declared ceasefire and in need of urgent medical evacuation that have not been permitted to leave Gaza to access care. The imposition of a siege on North Gaza and Gaza governorate blocked the entry of necessities of life and directly resulted in famine in 2025.<sup>14</sup> The cumulative impact of the siege, alongside the long-standing blockade and accompanying practices inflicted conditions of life incompatible with Palestinians' continued existence as a group in Gaza.<sup>15</sup>

For 500 days in 2024 and 2025, civilians trapped in the city of El Fasher, Sudan, were deliberately and progressively cut off from food, water, healthcare and humanitarian assistance. Alongside extreme deprivation, the siege was marked by atrocity crimes: the Independent Fact Finding Mission for Sudan identified a pattern of identity-based targeting linked to ethnicity, gender and perceived political affiliation which took place throughout the siege alongside suspected mass killings, widespread rape and other sexual violence, arbitrary detention, torture and cruel treatment, extortion and enforced disappearances.<sup>16</sup> Similar patterns of siege and severe restrictions on freedom of movement have continued across conflict areas in Sudan – from Darfur to the Kordofan region to Blue Nile – with civilians unable to flee and left facing catastrophic food insecurity, family separation and repeated attacks.<sup>17</sup>

Conflict zones in Myanmar have been subjected to systematic blockades through road and sea closures, the placement of landmines around towns, roads and coastline, severe movement restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles strictly enforced by the de facto authorities. Administrative barriers, including the selective application of travel authorizations, prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching those in need in a timely way. These measures effectively imposed collective punishment on towns and villages in conflict-affected regions, obstructing humanitarian access and crippling the delivery of vital humanitarian assistance to need. For Rohingya communities in particular, they face severe movement restrictions which confine them to camps and villages in Rakhine, unable to access nearby health clinics or markets and, as put in stark relief amidst recent attacks, unable to flee aerial bombardments and areas of active conflict in Rakhine.<sup>18</sup>

In Mali, civilians are facing prolonged blockades in certain villages and towns, particularly in Diafarabé and Léré. These restrictions continue to limit people's access to basic needs and essential services, including food and health care, as well as protection mechanisms and humanitarian assistance.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the blockades are increasing civilians' exposure to sexual violence, exploitation, and child abuse, as well as the risk of recruitment by armed groups.

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<sup>14</sup> In August 2025, famine was confirmed in Gaza Governorate. The severity of conditions in North Gaza were found to be similar or worse than in Gaza Governorate. However, limited data prevented its classification. See IPC reporting, [available here](#).

<sup>15</sup> OHCHR, 'Human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the obligation to ensure accountability and justice', February 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>16</sup> Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan, 'Sudan: Hallmarks of Genocide in El Fasher', February 2026, [available here](#).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Sudan Protection Cluster Alerts from [December 2025](#) and [April 2026](#).

<sup>18</sup> Myanmar Protection Analysis Update, February 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>19</sup> Mali Protection Analysis Update, May 2026, [available here](#).

Siege, blockade and severe movement restrictions are a brutal and deadly form of control exerted by armed actors, both state and non-state, over communities. Blockades are driving hunger, and in some cases famine, and they are denying people the basics of life, which are often times available just kilometers away. Humanitarian response and protection efforts are deeply circumscribed while the armed actors engineering such blockades are facing minimal consequences. Rather than consigned to the past, sieges and related tactics are proving to be a deadly form of modern warfare.

#### **4. How New Technologies Are Further Driving IHL Violations and Amplifying Civilian Harm**

The use of new technologies in armed conflicts, and the use of armed drones in particular, has grown significantly in recent years. Armed drones - also referred to as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) — whether remotely operated or increasingly autonomous, are subject to the normal rules of IHL, including proportionality, distinction, and precaution. And yet, in incident after incident, across contexts where Protection Clusters are operating, drone attacks have resulted in devastating civilian casualties and severe access constraints while contributing to a constant sense of insecurity and terror amongst affected communities. Across contexts, children are particularly affected by the expanded use of armed drones as schools, hospitals and residential areas central to children's lives are being struck.<sup>20</sup>

In Ukraine, the intensified use of long-range drones has had an enormous impact on civilian life. There has been a reported tenfold increase in long range drone and missile attacks since mid-2024, while the use of short-range drones in frontline areas is a major contributing factor to the high toll of civilian casualties. In August 2025, civilian casualties from short-range drones surpassed those caused by any other weapon type.<sup>21</sup> The threat posed to civilians is so significant that people are forced inside or underground to access underground markets and schools, disrupting daily patterns of life. In some locations, authorities have reported the use of drones to scatter anti-personnel landmines equipped with delayed detonation. The increased use of drones has further constricted humanitarian access and the provision of humanitarian assistance in frontline areas while making humanitarian-supported evacuation efforts even more dangerous.<sup>22</sup>

The situation in Gaza represents one of the most acute examples of how modern and conventional warfare are combined to produce catastrophic civilian harm. UAV adapted with advanced surveillance capacities have been used to kill and maim civilians across Gaza, with 1,143 UAV attacks killing 2,079 Palestinians including 347 children and 185 women between November 2024 and October 2025.<sup>23</sup> The widespread use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas, including in combination with AI-assisted targeting and surveillance systems, has resulted in mass civilian casualties and the large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure while the integration of AI-enabled surveillance and targeting is increasing the scale and speed of operations in ways that heighten risks to civilians. Persistent surveillance

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<sup>20</sup> Save the Children, 'Children and Blast Injuries', 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>21</sup> UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 'In Ukraine, Short-Range Drones Become Most Dangerous Weapon for Civilians UN Human Rights Monitors Say', February 2025, [available here](#); UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 'Short-range drone attacks killed 395 civilians, injured 2,635 between February 2022 and April 2025, UN human rights monitors find', June 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>22</sup> Ukraine Protection Analysis Update, September 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>23</sup> OHCHR, Human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the obligation to ensure accountability and justice, February 2026, [available here](#).

contributes to fear, displacement, and restrictions on civilian movement while a growing use of UAVs has been observed in the occupied West Bank.<sup>24</sup>

In Myanmar parties to the conflict are increasingly relying on armed drones and the conflict now ranks third globally for the number of drone events recorded by ACLED, only behind Ukraine and Russia.<sup>25</sup> In the Central Sahel the increased use of drones is associated with a rise in attacks affecting civilians, including with strikes on markets, gold-mining sites and other populated areas, while driving further constraints on humanitarian access.<sup>26</sup> In Sudan, incidents such as in December 2025 when armed drones struck a kindergarten, hospital and other civilian infrastructure in Kalogi, South Kordofan, are resulting in shocking levels of civilian casualties.<sup>27</sup> Recent patterns of drone strikes in areas of North and South Kordofan states have increasingly affected populated urban areas and civilian infrastructure, including markets, schools and media facilities contributing to civilian casualties, psychological distress and heightened insecurity among communities. The increasing use of drones in Sudan is also affecting humanitarian access and operational presence, including through attacks or threats impacting humanitarian convoys, humanitarian personnel, civilian infrastructure, and populated urban areas.

The push for renewed compliance with IHL by armed actors must include the use of new technologies that remain governed by IHL and should be subjected to the same legal obligations and accountability. As drones become cheaper and more readily available, there is an urgent need for further regulation, including standards for quality and traceability, in line with other weapons.

## **5. Calls to Action for Increased Compliance with IHL and Protection for Civilians**

- Parties to a conflict must comply with IHL, including by protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure, and ensuring humanitarian access. All states party to the Geneva Conventions, including third party member states, must act upon their legal obligations, use their political, diplomatic and legal leverage to enforce compliance with IHL, conduct investigations into violations, ensure accountability for and prevent war crimes. In light of current trends across Protection Cluster contexts, particular calls include:
  - Parties to conflict must facilitate safe civilian movement and allow rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations stranded by siege-like conditions, active hostilities and movement restrictions
  - The use of starvation, deprivation and denial of objects indispensable to civilian survival as methods of warfare must cease immediately.
  - States should promote adherence to political declarations on Explosive Weapons In Populated Areas and integrate these commitments into military doctrine, manuals, training, and arms transfer decisions.
  - The use of sexual violence must be unequivocally condemned and prevented. Parties to conflict must take concrete measures to prevent conflict-related sexual violence, including its use as a tool of intimidation, displacement, or social fragmentation. Member

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, reporting by Drone Wars in 2025, [available here](#).

<sup>25</sup> ACLED, 'The war from the sky: How drone warfare is shaping the conflict in Myanmar', July 2025, available here.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, ACLED reporting, [available here](#).

<sup>27</sup> Sudan Protection Cluster, 'Protection Alert: Civilians face extreme protection risks in Kordofan Region, Sudan', December 2025, [available here](#).

States should strengthen monitoring, documentation, and accountability for such violations, while supporting community-based prevention, social cohesion initiatives, and survivor-centered responses that mitigate stigma and contribute to breaking cycles of violence.

- Gendered patterns of harm in conflict situations demand a response, at both operational and political levels, that take such dynamics into account and advance an explicit focus on strengthening protection for all those experiencing threats and vulnerabilities. Member States must reject gendered and ultimately exclusionary narratives that contribute to obscuring risks and limiting agency, while understanding GBV and gendered harms as a core tactic of warfare used by parties to a conflict that demand accountability and justice.
- The use of new technologies in warfare – particularly UAVs and AI surveillance systems – is outpacing existing prevention, protection, and response capacities, creating new and poorly regulated risk environments for civilians, including with particular impacts on children. These dynamics demand a drive for increased compliance with IHL and strengthened regulation.
- For Member States to fully leverage the comprehensive range of humanitarian diplomacy instruments and approaches available to contribute to protection outcomes, including through positive impacts on humanitarian space, the perception by all parties of humanitarian principles and actors and their capacity to protect. Protection risk reduction must be at the center of humanitarian policies, high-level negotiations, and political engagement, as well as operational response.
- For Member States to support [civilian and community-led](#) protection aimed at preventing and interrupting violence at the different stages of the conflict, including through frontline protection-focused negotiations, engagement, dialogue and advocacy with parties to the conflict. These efforts should maintain a gendered and feminist lens, recognizing the differential threats, vulnerabilities and capacities that need to be centered in response efforts and should include sustained, flexible resourcing for local protection actors, women-led organizations, survivor networks, and community-based initiatives that are often the first and last line of protection.

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