



United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

Topic B. Measures to enforce the protection of safe zones during armed conflict

Introduction:

Armed conflicts are major forces that cause the displacement of civilians, the destruction of infrastructure and the proliferation of armament and weapons. This generates disruption in public services, breaks the rule of law and fractures families. For instance, Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq are clear examples of conflict zones in which the civilian population has been heavily impacted, as noted by the Secretary General at the Security Council meetings held in 2022.¹

Because armed conflicts are such threat, safe zones are specifically designed areas that seek to provide physical and humanitarian protection to the displaced civilian population during an armed conflict that is ongoing. Ideally, safe zones are supposed to provide additional protection from attacks, facilitate humanitarian and medical assistance, and enable education and work opportunities within an armed conflict. However, although safe zones seek to offer protection, in practice they are often attacked anyways or used to prevent displaced people from seeking asylum in other countries. Essentially, the establishment of safe zones in armed conflicts is crucial for protecting civilians and providing humanitarian aid, yet their effectiveness is undermined by the ongoing violations of these sanctuaries in modern conflicts.

In this regard, there are two types of safe zones with different cores. On the one hand, the conventional safe zones provide protection to civilians but require the consent of all parties involved in the conflict. On the other hand, imposed safe zones are established by international organisms, like the United Nations, to maintain peace and security.² Nonetheless, the term “safe zone” currently is not explicitly included in International Humanitarian Law or any relevant treaty, even though International

¹ UN. 27. *Protection of civilians in armed conflict*. United Nations, New York, 2022. In:

² Macey. “Safe zones”: A protective alternative to flight or a tool of refugee containment? *Clarifying the international legal framework governing access to refugee protection against the backdrop of “safe zones” in conflict-affected contexts*. ICRC, Geneva, 04/03/2022. (01/12/2024).





Humanitarian Law contains provisions regarding various types of “protected zones”, which encompass hospitals and safety zones, neutralized zones, and demilitarized zones.

Concepts and definitions:

- **Demilitarized zones:** areas where military operations are not allowed. It is agreed upon between the parties to an armed conflict, so none of them can occupy or use these zones for military purposes.³
- **Displacement:** condition that occurs when individuals and communities have been forced or obliged to leave their homes as a result of (or in order to avoid) the effects of situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, natural or man-made disasters, and/or huge development projects.⁴
- **International Humanitarian Law (IHL):** set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict.⁵
- **Neutralized zones:** areas in conflict zones that are established by agreement between the parties involves with the main purpose of protecting civilians and wounded soldiers from the effects of war.
- **Hospital and safety zones:** hospital zones are areas to protect wounded and sick military personnel and civilians during armed conflict, whereas safety zones are areas to protect civilians in specific situations of vulnerability during armed conflict, such as children, the elderly, expectant mothers, and mothers of children under seven.
- **Safe zones:** temporary areas designed to protect civilians, usually during armed conflict.⁶

³ ICRC. *Demilitarized zones*. ICRC, Geneva. “No update date”. In: [https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/demilitarized-zones#:~:text=A%20%E2%80%9Cdemilitarized%20zone%E2%80%9D%20is%20an,any%20party%20to%20the%20conflict.\(01/12/2024\).](https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/demilitarized-zones#:~:text=A%20%E2%80%9Cdemilitarized%20zone%E2%80%9D%20is%20an,any%20party%20to%20the%20conflict.(01/12/2024).)

⁴ UNHCR. *Forced and Unlawful Displacement*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4794b2d52.pdf> (01/12/2024).

⁵ ICRC. *Law and Policy*. ICRC, Geneva. “No update date”. In: <https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy> (01/12/2024).

⁶ Norwegian Refugee Council. *Explainer: Safe Zones*. (01/12/2024).





- **United Nations Peacekeepers (Blue Helmets):** troops and police elements, sometimes even civilian personnel, which are deployed by the Security Council to help provide, maintain or restore peace and security in conflict zones.⁷

Current issue:

The protection of safe zones during armed conflicts remains a critical humanitarian and legal challenge. Nowadays, safe zones, meant to shelter civilians from hostilities and provide medical aid, are designed to uphold the International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Basically, the IHL emphasizes the principles of distinction (separating civilians from soldiers), and precautions to minimize harm to non-soldiers. However, implementing and enforcing these measures face significant obstacles due to the evolving nature of conflicts, the actors involved, as well as geopolitical, technological and operational factors.

In principle, safe zones are grounded in IHL. These include neutralized zones, demilitarized zones, and hospital and safety zones, all established with the consent of conflicting parties.⁸ The principle of distinction obliges war parties to differentiate between combatants and civilians and forms the foundation of these protections. However, violations of safe zones often arise from deliberate attacks by State and non-State actors.⁹ As a result, the United Nations and other organizations advocate for greater accountability through monitoring mechanisms of legal action in cases of IHL breaches. Nonetheless, enforcement is inconsistent, particularly in conflicts involving private military companies or unregulated armed groups.

Therefore, operational challenges are consistent and include attacks on medical facilities, the use of misinformation to destabilize safe zones, and the logistical difficulty of providing consistent humanitarian aid. Additionally, the increasing prevalence of

⁷ UN Peacekeeping. *What is Peacekeeping*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping> (01/12/2024).

⁸ Gillard. *Enhancing the security of civilians in conflict*. Chatham House, London, 2024. (01/12/2024).

⁹ ICRC. *"Safe zones": A protective alternative to flight or a tool of refugee containment? Clarifying the international legal framework governing access to refugee protection against the backdrop of "safe zones" in conflict-affected contexts*. ICRC, Geneva, 2022. In: <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/safe-zones-a-protective-alternative-to-flight-or-a-tool-of-refugee-containment-919> (01/12/2024).



conflict in densely populated urban areas makes it difficult to delineate and secure safe zones. While the United Nations and other international bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) oversee the establishment of safe zones, their ability to enforce compliance is limited by State sovereignty. Moreover, local negotiators and community leaders play a vital role in creating and sustaining safe zones. Their understanding of cultural and social contexts allows for more effective mediation, although they often face heightened risks compared to international actors.¹⁰

Historically, safe zones have been declared in different regions. For example, in Bosnia, the United Nations declared Srebrenica a safe zone, but it was attacked in 1995, leading to the Srebrenica massacre. A similar situation occurred in South Sudan, when civilians searched for refugees at the United Nations peacekeeping bases, but these were attacked more than once, raising concerns about their effectiveness.¹¹



Figure 1. Safeguarding health in conflict¹²

¹⁰ UNHCR. *Humanitarian protection in armed conflict*. United Nations, New York, 29/06/2021. (01/12/2024).

¹¹ Norwegian Refugee Council. *Explainer: Safe Zones*. Norwegian Refugee Council, Norway, 12/04/2024. (01/12/2024).

¹² HumData.org. *Attacks on Health Care in Countries in Conflict (SHCC) Data*. (2019). In: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/shcchealthcare-dataset>. (01/12/2024).

Furthermore, in 2023, numerous medical facilities were targeted in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, underscoring the fragility of such protections. In Syria, despite numerous attempts to establish safe zones, many have been violated due to the lack of commitment from conflicting parties. In Ukraine, the ongoing conflict undermines efforts to establish humanitarian corridors for civilian evacuation and, consequently, the IHL has faced frequent disruptions. In Yemen, safe zones facilitated by humanitarian organizations have seen relative success in delivering aid, though access remains limited due to investment and insecurity.¹³

In this sense, the international community, particularly through the United Nations, plays an important role in advocating for and protecting safe zones. Thus, enforcement mechanisms require stronger mandates and greater political will from member States. Also, the implementation of diplomatic pressure, sanctions and military interventions sometimes is helpful for the protection of safe zones to be effective without disregarding sovereignty and international law.¹⁴

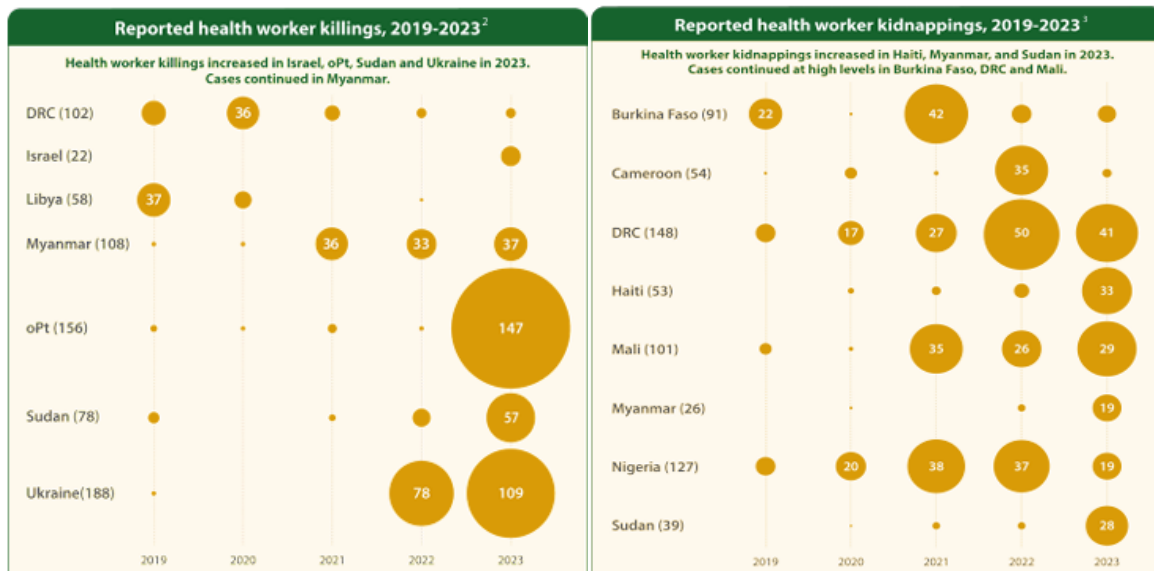


Figure 2. Reported health worker killings and kidnappings 2019-2023¹⁵

¹³ Frontline Negotiations. *Six essential lessons to remember while negotiating "safe zones"*. Frontline Negotiations, Geneva, 17/10/2023. In: <https://frontline-negotiations.org/blog/blog-essential-lessons-negotiating-safe-zones/> (01/12/2024).

¹⁴ Frontline Negotiations. *Six essential lessons to remember while negotiating "safe zones"*. (01/12/2024).

¹⁵ Safeguarding Health in conflict. *Critical condition. Violence Against Health Care in Conflict*. (2023). In: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/shcchealthcare-dataset> (01/12/2024).





However, the protection of safe zones in armed conflicts remains a critical yet challenging endeavor. While legal frameworks provide a strong foundation, enforcement requires adapting to the realities of modern warfare, fostering international cooperation and leveraging technological advancements. Strengthening accountability and ensuring compliance with IHL are essential steps towards safeguarding the lives and dignity of civilians in conflict zones.¹⁶

Initiatives taken by the international community:

Witnessing the devastating consequences of war and that they continue to unfold across nations, various measures have been taken to ensure the establishment of safe zones. These aim to minimize civilian suffering and ensure the fundamental principles of human dignity and protection. In this regard, the key initiative of international efforts to protect civilians during armed conflict is International Humanitarian Law, which sets rules to limit the effects of armed conflict. IHL is also known as the law of armed conflict and is based on the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their additional protocols, which have been adopted by all nations in the world.

Specifically, the four Geneva Conventions and their three additional protocols dictate rules that emphasize the obligation of protecting individuals affected by armed conflicts. They are the basis of the latest international humanitarian law developments. In particular, the fourth Geneva Convention is the one that addresses the protection of civilians, whereas the first two additional protocols detail the rules that concern the protection of civilians and the establishment of safe zones. Also, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) plays a central role in enforcing IHL.¹⁷

Moreover, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is actively working to ensure that humanitarian access is facilitated in conflict areas, which means negotiating with parties to guarantee the establishment of humanitarian corridors. Humanitarian access is essential during crises to ensure that

¹⁶ UNHCR. *Protection in armed conflicts*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/protection-mechanisms/protection-armed-conflict> (01/12/2024).

¹⁷ American Red Cross. *Summary of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Their Additional Protocols*. American Red Cross, United States, 2011. (01/12/2024).





people receive assistance and services. According to the United Nations 46/182 Resolution, the Emergency Relief Coordinator helps facilitate access for aid organizations to reach affected areas, often through measures like temporary relief corridors or designated safe zones. However, this access can only be granted with the agreement of the parties involved in the conflict.

Consequently, following the principles of humanitarian aid (humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence) is crucial for negotiating safe access to crisis zones. Nowadays, there are still several challenges to humanitarian access, including bureaucratic obstacles, misinformation, sanctions, ongoing fighting and attacks on aid workers. These barriers can severely delay the delivery of aid, so the OCHA provides guidance and tools for Humanitarian Coordinators and Country Teams to help overcome these challenges. They also have an Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework that tracks these issues and contributes to taking informed decisions about how to ensure aid control.¹⁸

Furthermore, peacekeeping operations have often been deployed to enforce the protection of safe zones during armed conflict, particularly when international law and diplomacy alone have not been sufficient to ensure the safety of civilians. If these missions are carried out by the United Nations, the authorization of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is needed, but they can also be led by regional organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the African Union (AU). Peacekeepers are tasked with maintaining order, providing humanitarian assistance and ensuring that warring parties respect the boundaries and integrity of safe zones. However, peacekeepers often experience lack of trust, insufficient political support, limited resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and evolving threats, and some of them, unfortunately, have been involved in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse.¹⁹

Nonetheless, in addition to the designation of safe zones, No-Fly Zones (NFZ) have been designed to prevent the attack of civilians. In sum, a NFZ is a designated airspace in

¹⁸ OCHA. *Humanitarian access*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://www.unocha.org/humanitarian-access>. (01/12/2024).

¹⁹ Better World Campaign. *UN Peacekeeping: A Force for Global Stability*. Better World Campaign, Washington, D.C. “No update date”. In: <https://betterworldcampaign.org/peacekeeping>. (02/12/2024)





which flying aircraft is completely prohibited, usually established to prevent military planes from attacking civilians or civilian infrastructure during a conflict. These zones are mainly set up to protect civilians or to enforce international directives in conflict areas. The establishment of an NFZ can be authorized by organizations like the United Nations, individual countries, or military alliances. Their effectiveness depends on the available military resources and the willingness of the parties to adhere to specific restrictions. NFZs are often created in response to humanitarian crises or the threat of human rights violations, serving as a safeguard for civilians. The legal justification for imposing NFZs typically comes from the IHL. Although NFZs are not specifically detailed in many international agreements, they are usually implemented based on the Security Council's Resolutions or actions taken by military coalitions like NATO.²⁰

Guiding questions:

1. Is your delegation currently involved in an armed conflict?

→ If so...

- Has your delegation violated the protection of any safe zones?
- What about the other parties involved in conflict? Have they?
- What are the main challenges of enforcing the protection of these safe zones and how should these challenges be addressed?
- How does your delegation coordinate with international organizations and/or non-governmental agencies to preserve safe zones during armed conflicts?

→ If not...

- Does your delegation provide any kind of support for the establishment of safe zones in other parts of the world where there is ongoing conflict?
- How has the involvement of your delegation been?

²⁰ Kiger. *How No-fly Zones Work*. 09/07/2023. In: <https://science.howstuffworks.com/no-fly-zone.htm> (02/12/2024).





- Has the participation of your delegation or the effort as a whole given any positive results?
2. How can the international community reinforce the legal frameworks regarding safe zones so that every State truly adheres to the dispositions on this matter?
 3. Which measures can the Security Council implement to succeed on guaranteeing the protection of safe zones?

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