PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS TRENDS REPORT 2025



ANNUAL REPORT

CIVIC
CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

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ABOUT CIVIC

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to protecting civilians in conflict.

Founded in 2003 by humanitarian Marla Ruzicka, CIVIC works with conflict-affected communities and security forces to prevent and respond to civilian harm and ensure that the protection of civilians is a global priority.

Guided by Marla's belief that civilians are not collateral damage and that civilian harm can and must be prevented, CIVIC continues to advance practical solutions that save lives and strengthen protection in conflict.

METHODOLOGY

The topics covered in this report reflect protection priorities identified by CIVIC through strategic consultation processes with experts and analysis of datasets measuring different aspects of protection, such as civilian fatalities and casualties, violations against children, sexual violence, and displacement, among many others. However, the extent of the protection threats civilians faced throughout 2025 was such that CIVIC was unable to dedicate content to all of the direct and indirect harm that women, men, girls, and boys suffered throughout the year.

Although not able to be fully comprehensive, the report seeks to demonstrate the human cost of conflict and amplify the experiences of civilians living in situations of conflict and extreme violence. It also seeks to underscore threats emerging from the changing nature of warfare, and spur collective action in response to these emerging threats.

To identify which indicators to include in CIVIC's Civilian Protection Index, we reviewed existing global indexes related to peace and security, consulted internally across CIVIC's staff, consulted externally with members of an informal NGO working group on the protection of civilians, and relied on the expertise of Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) staff.

The index includes 15 indicators and covers 163 countries, including all countries with populations exceeding 1 million. It thus represents 99.7 percent of the world's population.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- For the third consecutive year, CIVIC's Civilian Protection Index (CPI) showed the overall global protection environment had deteriorated.

- In 2025, civilian harm remained close to historic highs, while support for the international legal architecture for the protection of civilians was undermined.

- In a historic first, since the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mandate was established, State forces were the leading source of harm and violations against children.

- For the first time in the 21st century, there were two simultaneous famines declared in conflict zones (in Gaza and Sudan), while hunger and starvation became increasingly weaponized against civilians.

- In 2025, conflict-related sexual violence rose sharply from 2024, and was "marked by extreme brutality, and overwhelmingly targeted women and girls."[1]

- Conflict is also rapidly evolving, with drones and AI-enabled targeting transforming the scale and character of civilian risk, raising serious concerns about a lack of human oversight.

Civilians suffered acute levels of harm across conflicts globally in 2025. The year was marked by widespread civilian deaths and injuries, forcible displacement, and the destruction of vital infrastructure, as well as record levels of violence against children.

Explosive weapons continued to take a devastating toll on civilians, while concerns grew about the rapid spread of emerging technologies—including drones and artificial intelligence (AI)—and failure to regulate their use.
Escalating assaults by several States on international humanitarian law (IHL) and the institutions meant to uphold its principles underpinned these trends in 2025.

[1] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, UN Doc. S/2026/321, April 21, 2026, https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/report/auto-draft/SG-Report-2025.pdf

The United Nations (UN) recorded more than 37,000 civilian deaths due to conflict in 2025. While this marked a decline compared to the previous year, it was still close to recent historically high levels. In the occupied Palestinian Territory (oPT), for example, more than 20,000 Palestinians were killed during the year (according to the 2025 Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of civilians in armed conflict), while conflict-related deaths also spiked in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Some groups suffered disproportionately, as more children were reported victims of grave violations than ever before in 2025. In a historic first, government forces, rather than non-state armed groups, were documented as the leading perpetrators of these violations against children.

Hunger remained a defining feature of global conflict, with several State and non-state actors accused of using starvation as a weapon of war. For the first time in the 21st century, famine was declared simultaneously in two conflict zones: Gaza and Sudan. While some other indicators of conflict-related harm declined slightly compared to the previous year—including forced displacement numbers, attacks on hospitals, and the use of explosive weapons—they remained close to record-high levels.

In 2025, some States and non-state actors continued to flout IHL, and other norms meant to protect civilians, including by taking steps to undermine accountability frameworks and institutions. Some European States (Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine) announced their withdrawals from international treaties banning the use of inhumane weapons, including anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions. The United States imposed targeted sanctions on judges and others affiliated with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and withdrew from several international bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council. Civil society came under increasing pressure from authoritarian governments in both the Global North and Global South, while sweeping cuts to foreign aid by donor States forced many civil society groups to scale back or even shut down completely, with local organizations often suffering the worst impacts.

New technologies played an ever more prominent role on battlefields in 2025, often amplifying the devastating civilian harm already wrought by more conventional methods of warfare. The number of drone attacks more than doubled compared to 2024, with some

42,000 drone attacks causing widespread deaths and injuries and laying waste to life-saving civilian infrastructure like hospitals and energy grids. While drone usage remains the most prominent in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, their use has also spread to other theaters, including Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan, and the Central Sahel. In 2025, AI-enabled methods of warfare—including decision-support systems and weapons—came under increasing scrutiny for causing significant civilian harm with minimal human oversight. Progress toward international regulation of AI for military use and autonomous weapons remained slow, despite the UN Secretary-General's call for States to finalize a legally binding treaty on lethal autonomous weapons by 2026.

Civilians Protection Index

CIVIC's Civilian Protection Index (CPI) captured 2025's deteriorating global protection landscape. Included with this annual report, the index sheds light on the level of protection civilians experienced in 163 countries across the globe. The index comprises 15 indicators that measure aspects of protection—including direct and indirect measures of violence like civilian deaths, sexual violence, and the number of firearms circulating among the population—as well as attributes of protective environments, such as trust in government institutions and the quality of civic space.

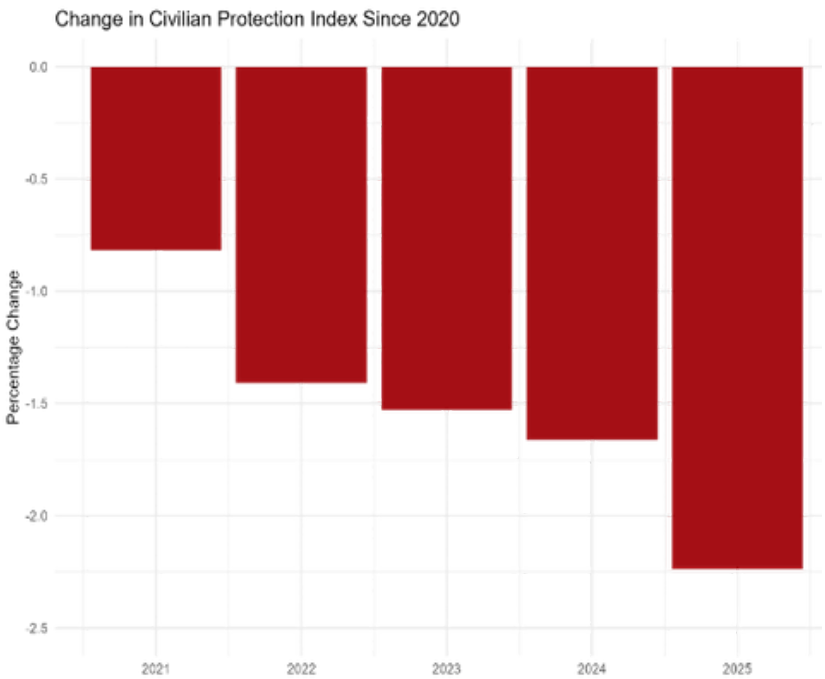

Figure 1: Change in civilian protection index since 2020.

The index shows that the overall global protection environment deteriorated in 2025 (see Figure 1 above). **Some indicators related to violence and harm—including casualty and displacement numbers—improved slightly compared to 2024 but remained close to historically high levels.** Instead, it was mainly the erosion of trust in governmental institutions and attacks on fundamental freedoms in developed countries that drove the deterioration in 2025. This took the shape of sharp declines in confidence in government, police, and judicial authorities in several countries, reflecting an increasingly polarized and fragmented political landscape in many countries in the Global North. Overall, the CPI declined by 0.6 percent from 2024, with measured declines in five of the seven regions included in the index. **The global average has now fallen every year since 2020, when CIVIC first started collecting data.**

The data revealed that civilians in Afghanistan, Myanmar, North Korea, the oPT, Russia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen faced the worst overall protection environments globally in 2025. According to the CPI, the protection environment in Iran, Serbia, Cambodia, Argentina, and Georgia had deteriorated the most from 2024 to 2025. Conversely, civilians enjoyed the strongest protection environment in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, and Timor-Leste according to the CPI. The inclusion of some countries with mixed human rights records in this category can be explained, at least partially, by the CPI's reliance on subjective opinion survey data. The data, therefore, can be skewed by those with lower expectations for government institutions, sometimes rating these institutions more positively than those with higher expectations. More in-depth analysis of trends captured by the CPI is included throughout the report, and individual country situations can be explored in the interactive map on CIVIC's website.

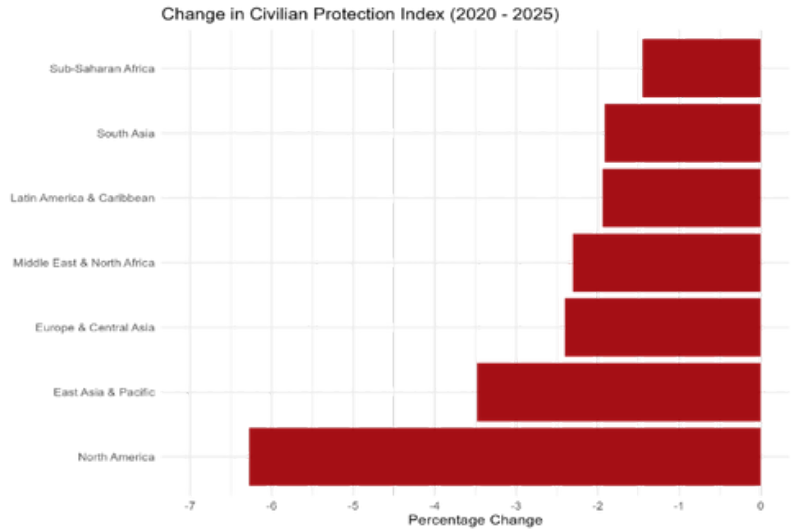

Figure 2: Overall change in the civilian protection environment per region (2020-2025).

About this report

This report—the third annual CIVIC Protection of Civilians (POC) Trends report—documents the impacts global conflict and situations of extreme violence had on civilians in 2025. It also features spotlight articles throughout, in which humanitarian and other civil society experts provide first-hand analysis on relevant protection topics and trends. The report is divided into four main chapters.

1. **Recognize** focuses on the conflicts that are neglected by global policymakers, funders, and media despite high levels of civilian harm, and includes spotlight articles for a more in-depth look.

2. **Prevent** delves deeper into emerging issues driving civilian harm in conflict, with an emphasis on new technologies this year. The chapter examines the impact of the breakneck adoption of drones and AI-powered weapons technology across global battlefields and lagging international regulation and accountability efforts.

3. **Protect** examines the key trends shaping the experiences of civilians across conflicts globally. These include alarming levels of casualties, displacement, and use of explosive weapons; conflict's impact on healthcare, education, the media, and humanitarian aid; the financial trends shaping warfare, including expenditure on weapons and funding for civil society; and developments around UN peacekeeping operations.

4. **Amend** examines the reverberating impact of armed conflict on individuals, communities, and societies, as well as how victims and survivors address the physical and psychological scars left by violence, destruction, and a lack of accountability. The chapter also covers key developments in international justice efforts for victims of armed conflict.

This report should be considered a 'live resource,' subject to edits, updates, corrections, and changes as deemed necessary and appropriate, with or without issuing an erratum or announcement. For suggestions on the narrative, figures, or analysis, please contact CIVIC.



ROADMAP FOR ACTION

The report captures trends in civilian harm in 2025 and sets out concrete steps international and national actors should take to reverse these trends. To that end, this Roadmap for Action includes recommendations for States, the UN Security Council (UNSC) and General Assembly, UN peacekeeping operations, and regional organizations. Many of the recommendations mirror those outlined in previous CIVIC POC Trends reports, reflecting a lack of progress in 2025 and even regression in many areas.

Recommendations for States:

General

- Implement at a national level all international legal obligations related to the protection of civilians, including those contained in international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). States should establish relevant policies, guidelines, and doctrine for operationalizing legal protection obligations and non-binding best practices. In addition, States should take all necessary steps to protect civilian infrastructure in conflict, in line with IHL.

- Promote respect for IHL and the protection of civilians by other States, particularly in light of the attacks on international accountability frameworks and institutions, as seen in 2025.

- In humanitarian crises and conflicts in which civilians face high risks, strengthen support for inclusive, people-centered approaches to protecting civilians, incorporating greater recognition of the specific needs in each context. Meaningfully integrate the direct participation of affected civilians and communities in these efforts.

- Endorse and effectively implement international agreements aimed at the protection of civilians in conflict,

including but not limited to: the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA); the Framework for the Prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV); the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines (Ottawa Convention); the Convention on Cluster Munitions; and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

- Strengthen efforts to protect UN and humanitarian personnel, with a particular focus on ensuring the safety of national staff and other frontline responders, in line with UNSC Resolution 2730.

- Ensure that measures addressing misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and harmful narratives (MDMH), including AI-generated content, are consistent with international human rights law and protect freedom of expression.

- Enhance the capacity of States and security forces to better understand and address the interaction between climate-related risks, armed conflict, and civilian protection.

- Ensure violence that falls below the threshold of armed conflict receives appropriate policy attention and resources in local, national, and international forums. This includes criminal and gang-related violence, community and interpersonal violence, and domestic and gender-based violence, among others.

Emerging Technology

- Guarantee AI military capabilities are used in compliance with international law, including by ensuring the use of AI-enabled systems does not cause disproportionate harm to civilians or civilian objects, in line with IHL. Ensure human oversight remains substantive over AI-enabled weapons systems, including decision support systems, and put stringent verification protocols in place at all levels of the chain of command.

- Ensure private companies developing military AI systems meet their responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, including through rigorous and transparent testing, evaluation, verification, and validation processes.

- Negotiate an international legally binding instrument to regulate lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), ensuring a meaningful role for civil society in its development.

Amends, justice, and accountability

- Ensure accountability and amends for civilian harm, including by increasing investments in national and international victim funds, and guaranteeing that funds set aside to redress harm to civilians are distributed to survivors in a timely manner.

- Develop national policies on civilian harm response, including civilian harm reporting mechanisms, rigorous investigations into civilian harm incidents, acknowledgement of civilian harm when it occurs, and the provision of amends in accordance with civilian victims' and survivors' needs and preferences, including but not limited to official apologies, condolence payments, and other forms of post-harm assistance.

- Pursue accountability for violations against civilians in conflict by supporting timely national investigations and prosecutions, including by exploring relevant universal jurisdiction cases through national courts.

- Provide political support to international justice bodies such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

Funding

- Maintain and where possible increase financial support to civil society actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

- Reverse substantive reductions in humanitarian and development aid, publicly advocating for States to increase such funding in the future. Increase funding to local and national organizations, as well as to conflict situations that receive less international attention.

Recommendations for the UNSC, UN General Assembly, and Member States engaging with these bodies:

- Ensure the protection of civilians remains at the core of the UN80 process and other reform initiatives, and that any budget reductions do not negatively impact the capacity of protection actors to carry out their vital work.

- More fully utilize UN sanctions regimes to promote accountability for violations against civilians—including CRSV and grave violations committed against children—while upholding humanitarian exemptions, as recognized in UNSC Resolution 2664.

- Support the protection of civilians through UN peace operations by prioritizing protection tasks in mandates, providing guidance on the comprehensive implementation of protection tasks, providing consistent and unified political support for peace operations, and providing missions with appropriate funding and resources to implement protection mandates.

- When the UNSC is unable to act in cases of violations against civilians in conflict, the General Assembly should hold the Security Council accountable.

Recommendations for UN Peace Operations:

- Improve the implementation of comprehensive and integrated POC strategies, strengthen peacekeeping performance and accountability, and better communicate with key stakeholders about the impact of peacekeeping in protecting civilians.

- Better integrate activities with UN Country Team organizations and partner more substantively with national and civil society actors to build sustainable national protection capacity that will pave the way for smoother UN transitions.

- Invest in the development of tools for POC built on emerging technologies, while paying careful attention to the risks they pose and that hinder their uptake.

- Ensure transparent investigations and full accountability for any violations, including sexual or gender-based violence by UN peacekeeping personnel.

Recommendations for Regional Organizations:

- When deploying forces to help address insecurity, learn from and build on the experiences of UN and regional missions in mitigating harm to civilians and protecting civilians from harm, including by deploying tools like civilian harm tracking and response mechanisms.

- Use regional diplomacy and political mechanisms to promote compliance with international humanitarian law, prevent escalation, and address civilian protection concerns across borders.



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