

**Committee:** Environment Sub-Commission 2

**Issue:** Preventing the exploitation of the environment in armed Conflicts

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**Position:** Deputy President

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## INTRODUCTION

“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.”- Ban Ki-Moon



The environmental effects of the Gulf War in Kuwait

Image source: ---. "What's the Environmental Impact of Modern War?" The Guardian, 14 Feb. 2018, [www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/06/whats-the-environmental-impact-of-modern-war](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/06/whats-the-environmental-impact-of-modern-war).

As it is widely known, all armed conflicts induce severe consequences for the regions that the conflict is taking place. An armed conflict has disastrous effects on all the parties involved; thus it is without doubt that the environmental aftermath can only be harmful to the nation and its people.

Approximately 1.5 billion people, over 20% of the population, now live in post-conflict states and areas marked as “fragile”. Seeing as conflicts cause severe casualties, calamitous environmental damages due to the use of environmentally damaging warfare

and other outbreaks, thus too many lives, and species, are at stake.<sup>1</sup> Yet the lack of information provided to the wider public is very limited and the international law very weak thus leading to even life-threatening effects.

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

### **Armed conflict**

The term is used to describe the incompatibility about governance and/or territorial claims, which results in the use of armed forces between the two parties and in the death of at least 25 people in one year.

### **Biodiversity**

Biodiversity is a term which describes every living organism within a single ecosystem or habitat, including numbers and diversity of species and all environmental aspects such as temperature, oxygen and carbon dioxide levels, and climate. Biodiversity can be measured globally or in smaller settings, such as ponds.<sup>2</sup> Armed conflicts can destroy the biodiversity of an area by damaging the habitat of the flora and fauna from actions like hunting. Preventing the damage of biodiversity is of the utmost importance, considering the fact that biodiversity is the source of functioning ecosystems that provide oxygen, clean water, etc.

### **Deforestation**

The term is used when referring to the act of removing a forest, whose land is then used for non-forest actions.

### **Forest conservation**

Forest conservation is the practice of restoring a forest that has previously been deforested. An example of forest conservation is the planting of trees founded by the government.

### **Natural resources**

This term refers to resources already existing without the involvement of humankind. These materials are often used for economic gain. Natural resources include, but are not limited to oil, natural gas, soil, air, sun.

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<sup>1</sup> "Preventing The Exploitation Of The Environment In War And Armed Conflict". *UN Environment*, 2020, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/statement/preventing-exploitation-environment-war-and-armed-conflict>.

<sup>2</sup> BD Editors. "Biodiversity." *Biology Dictionary*, 31 May 2019, [biologydictionary.net/biodiversity/](http://biologydictionary.net/biodiversity/)

## **Chemical weapons**

A chemical weapon is a chemical used to cause intentional death or harm through its toxic properties. Munitions, devices and other equipment specifically designed to weaponize toxic chemicals also fall under the definition of chemical weapons.<sup>3</sup>

## **Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)**

The commonly known WMDs are weapons that can cause widespread devastation, destroy natural and man-made structures and can lead to the loss of lives. Weapons of mass destruction are separated into chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological weapons.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Military and the environment**

Modern warfare is becoming more and more disastrous and is severely impacting the environment. The extreme militarism results in greenhouse gas emissions, air and water pollution as well as many other effects, which are the driving forces behind the rapid anthropogenic climate change we have been facing for the past decades.

As the current military funding worldwide is higher than ever before, the land needed for its operations is constantly increasing, leading to the internal displacement of species, many of which are endangered. As a result, the ecosystem is greatly disturbed, which can lead to long-term effects on the environment. Another example of long-term effects caused by extreme militarism is the naval accidents during the Cold War when multiple nuclear devices were dropped into the ocean and are still there.

### **War in Afghanistan**

In August 2001, the war in Afghanistan started with the United States invasion in the area. The goal of the US army was to eliminate the threats that the terrorist organization called "Al-Qaeda" and the Taliban were posing to the government of Afghanistan. During the ongoing war, more than 40 countries have allied in order to provide assistance to the Afghan armed forces. Both the allied powers and the Taliban have committed atrocious war crimes both against humanity and the environment.

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<sup>3</sup>"What is a Chemical Weapon?" OPCW, [www.opcw.org/our-work/what-chemical-weapon](http://www.opcw.org/our-work/what-chemical-weapon)

More specifically, due to the bombings, endangered species, such as leopards, have had to leave their natural habitat and migrate. As a result, many were captured and illegally traded for a safer route across the border.

The main reason behind the environmental destruction taking place in Afghanistan is the use of heavy military equipment which is toxic to the environment. The US army has been reported to use at least two different types of chemical weapons in its operations.

### **The Gulf War<sup>4</sup>**

The Gulf War was the dispute mainly between Iraq and Kuwait; however, 34 other allied countries took part in it as well. The UN's position was to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. The war started in August 1990 with the Iraqi attack on Kuwait under the claims of illegal extraction of oil from Iraqi territory. Then, in early 1991, the operation Desert Storm was launched, which aimed to destroy the Iraqi Air Force.

The Gulf War is characterized as one of the most environmentally devastating wars of modern history. The Iraqi army is said to have dumped around one million tons of oil in the Persian Gulf, causing the largest oil spill to ever exist. As a result, approximately 25.000 birds were killed in the 16km long oil spill.

Another atrocity conducted by the Iraqi military was setting fire to 650 oil wells on the coasts of Kuwait. The driving force behind this action was to prevent US Marines from landing. After months, in the spring of 1991, there were still 500 wells on fire and were only extinguished in November of the same year. These fires were the cause of many toxic fumes entering the air. As the oil fires caused severe acid rain and intense air pollution (smog), the local population was also greatly affected, since the fumes do not only threaten the environment, but people's health as well.

### **The war in Vietnam**

As part of the United States of America's plan, more than 73 million litres of chemical weapons were sprayed on Vietnamese territory to destroy the vegetation that covered the Vietcong troops while they were on "enemy territory". During the war, the US army used chemical weapons to purposely destroy the crops, rice production and natural resources of Vietnam. 45 million liters of "Agent Orange", a toxic gas containing compound dioxin, were sprayed over Vietnam later in the war. The aftermath of the gas was still visible

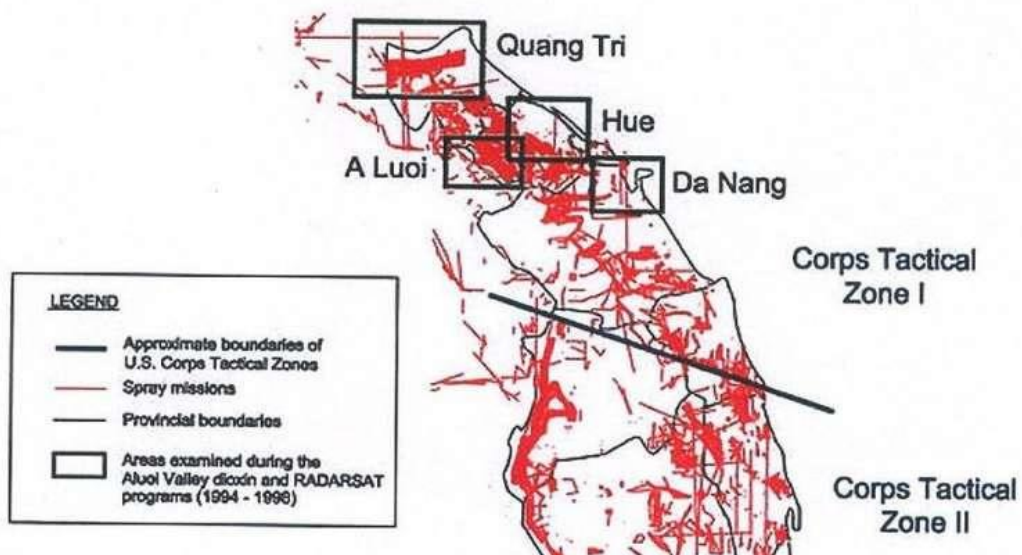
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<sup>4</sup> "Environmental Effects of War." Water Treatment and Purification - Lenntech, [www.lenntech.com/environmental-effects-war.htm](http://www.lenntech.com/environmental-effects-war.htm)

40 years after the war had ended. It is estimated that 2.1 to 4.8 million Vietnamese were exposed to the gases during the 10 year long chemical warfare usage of the US in Vietnam.

During the 10 years of the war the US army had sprayed across 4.5 million acres and 30 different provinces, destroying hardwood forests and damaging the coastal biodiversity. With such destruction, the natural habitats of endangered species like tigers, leopards, elephants, etc. were majorly disrupted and even to an unrecoverable extent. The central and southern part of Vietnam, which was already exposed to frequent flooding, suffered from nutrient loss in the soil. This led to erosion and thus, made flooding even worse. The areas affected the most from the sprayings still remain less developed and are home to the majority of the victims.

(Source: U.S. Dept. of the Army).



Aerial spraying in Vietnam by US forces (red) Image source: "How U.S. Chemical Warfare in Vietnam Unleashed an Enduring Disaster." Phys.org - News and Articles on Science and Technology, 4 Oct. 2017, [phys.org/news/2017-10-chemical-warfare-vietnam-unleashed-disaster.html](https://phys.org/news/2017-10-chemical-warfare-vietnam-unleashed-disaster.html).

## MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

### Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo)<sup>5</sup>

The DR Congo suffers from several environmental issues related to its conflicted past and present. A main problem is the loss of biodiversity in the area. DRC is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> worldwide for plant and animal diversity. However, due to the ongoing conflicts, the flora and fauna experience devastating effects. Elephant, gorilla, okapi and other endangered animal populations have been decimated.

Another problem the DRC is facing is deforestation. In 2002, almost half of the Congolese forests were deforested for industrial logging. Despite that, Congo remains below the world average deforestation rate (world's: 0.5%, DRC's: 0.3%); however, experts suggest that the deforestation rates can drastically increase due to the existing instability and the lack of governmental efforts.

### Colombia

The conflicts taking place in Colombia, only impact the environment negatively. Given the fact that armed gangs and cartels have occupied certain territories, exploiting the natural resources for their benefit, many consequences have occurred. These occupied areas face destruction in illicit crops, deforestation, the extraction of minerals and related natural resources and the effects of chemicals, like mercury, due to their unregulated use. These rebel groups also pose a threat to wildlife and forest conservation since there is now illegal logging, unregulated mining, massive poaching and breeding grounds for invasive species.

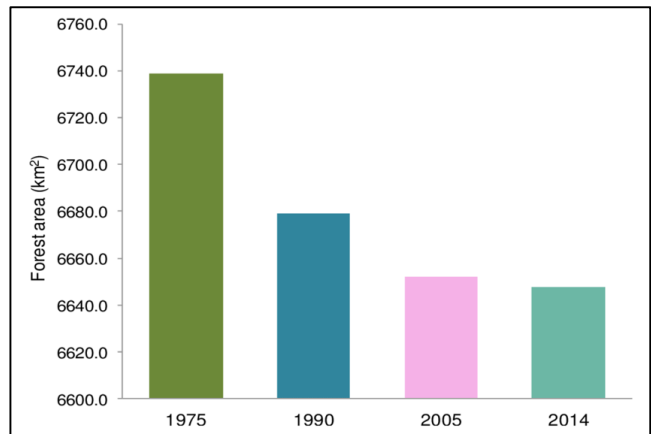
The Colombian government has tried to reduce the use of mercury in the country by adopting Law 1658 in 2013. This law was aimed at eliminating or greatly reducing the use of mercury in all production within ten years, and in the mining industry within five years.

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<sup>5</sup> Sida - Styrelsen För Internationellt Utvecklingssamarbete - Sida, [www.sida.se/globalassets/global/countries-and-regions/africa/dr-congo/environmental-policy-brief-dr-congo.pdf](http://www.sida.se/globalassets/global/countries-and-regions/africa/dr-congo/environmental-policy-brief-dr-congo.pdf)

## Afghanistan

With Afghanistan's ongoing war, natural resources are playing a crucial role in fueling military as well as civilian vehicles and many more activities. The leading resource used is wood since it is Afghanistan's main source of energy. Nevertheless, in recent years deforestation has reached 95% in some areas, thus killing about 3,000 people every year. Additionally, research has shown that in 2013 half of Afghanistan's forests had disappeared.<sup>6</sup> The country, however, does not only suffer from high deforestation rates, but from floods and droughts, which may come as side effects of the increased deforestation.



In order to combat deforestation, the government of Afghanistan has planted over 8.2 million pine trees in the regions of Paktia and Paktika, both eastern provinces of the country. The governmental efforts are also aiming at educating the wider public and raising awareness on the issue.

## Syria

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Syria has turned into one of the countries suffering the most from toxic warfare. One of the main materials used by militaries in the war has been chemical weapons, such as but not limited to mustard gas and chlorine gas. These gases have severe effects on the atmosphere, as well as the soil and more specifically the soil's fertility which later has negative effects on the country's agriculture.

Syria's ministry of environmental affairs, in response to the environmental disasters taking place, has signed and ratified several conventions such as the Rotterdam Convention of 1998, in 2005. However, the Assad government has failed to comply with the 2030 sustainable development goals since, as reported in 2012<sup>7</sup>, they have neglected every issue unrelated to improving the country's economy.

<sup>6</sup> Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Agnieszka. "We're in Crisis': The High Price of Deforestation in Afghanistan." Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera, 4 2019, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/crisis-high-price-deforestation-afghanistan-190703123040274.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/crisis-high-price-deforestation-afghanistan-190703123040274.html)

<sup>7</sup> Home.: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/982syria.pdf](http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/982syria.pdf)

### United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

The UNEP, in order to determine the environmental impacts of war, has conducted various post-conflict analyses since 1999. Some operations have taken place in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Sudan and the Gaza Strip. After these analyses, the UNEP concluded that wars damage greatly both the environment and the communities based on natural resources. Moreover, its contribution to finding the weakest points of the current international law on the protection of the environment in times of armed conflict remains vital.

### TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
1947-1991	Cold War
1 November 1955 – 30 April 1975	War in Vietnam
July 1960 – Ongoing	Katanga Insurgency, where a number of rebel groups in the DRC aim for the creation of a separate state within the region of Katanga.
5 June 1972	UNEP was founded
August 1990 – February 1991	Gulf War between Kuwait and Iraq
3-14 June 1992	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Earth Summit
7 October 2001 - ongoing	War in Afghanistan
20 March 2003 – 18 December 2011	War in Iraq started by the US invasion aiming to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government
14 July 2006	Jiyeh, Lebanon power plant bombing by the Israeli forces during the Israel – Lebanon conflict.
March 2011- ongoing	Start of the Syrian Civil War
10 December 2012- ongoing	Central African Republic Civil War between Seleka rebel groups and the anti-balaka military
6 November 2020	Annual International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict. It was established by the 2001 GA session, during Kofi Annan's term as the Secretary-General



## UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

- **United Nations (UN) General Assembly (GA) resolution 56/4, 13 November 2001**<sup>8</sup>  
 This UNGA resolution declared November 6th as the International Day for preventing the exploitation of the environment in war and armed conflict, in the hope of raising awareness on the issue. This resolution was passed without a vote by the General Assembly. UN General Assembly resolution 47/37, 9 February 1993<sup>9</sup>  
 This resolution refers to the report of the Legal Committee (GA6) which emphasizes the already existing international law and conventions to prevent the exploitation of the environment in armed conflict. The resolution was adopted by the General Assembly without a vote.
- **UN Environment Assembly resolution 2/15, 4 August 2016**<sup>10</sup>  
 The UNEA resolution promotes the cooperation between nations and NGO's, such as UNESCO and the UNEP, in order to comply with the already existing plans and legislations. Since all the UNGA and UNEA decisions are not legally binding, member states may avoid implementing and following the resolutions passed.
- **UN Security Council resolution 2100, 25 April 2013**<sup>11</sup>  
 This UNSC resolution focuses on the UN-led peacekeeping in Mali, recognizing the environmental impact of the casualties and requesting cooperation from the African Union (AU) as well as other organizations in order to reach a ceasefire agreement with the rebel groups. This resolution was passed with all votes (15) in favour.
- **UNCED Earth Summit**  
 During the summit, three agreements were adopted by the Member States present. These agreements were: Agenda 21, a global plan of action to promote sustainable development; the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a series of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of States; and the Statement of Forest Principles, a set of principles to underpin the sustainable management of forests worldwide.<sup>12</sup>
- **The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade**<sup>13</sup>  
 The Rotterdam Convention was put into force in 1998 and since then it counts 161 parties. The key value promoted by the convention is international cooperation between nations. More specifically open exchange of information concerning the importation of hazardous chemical substances that can be used to destroy the environment later on.

<sup>8</sup> "A/RES/56/4 - E - A/RES/56/4." ESubscription to United Nations Documents, [undocs.org/A/RES/56/4](https://undocs.org/A/RES/56/4)

<sup>9</sup> "A/RES/47/37 - E - A/RES/47/37." ESubscription to United Nations Documents, [undocs.org/en/A/RES/47/37](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/47/37)

<sup>10</sup> "UNEP/EA.2/Res.15 - E - UNEP/EA.2/Res.15." ESubscription to United Nations Documents, [undocs.org/en/UNEP/EA.2/Res.15](https://undocs.org/en/UNEP/EA.2/Res.15).

<sup>11</sup> "S/RES/2100(2013) - E - S/RES/2100(2013)." ESubscription to United Nations Documents, [undocs.org/S/RES/2100\(2013\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2100(2013))

<sup>12</sup> "United Nations: Key Conference Outcomes in Sustainable Development." *Welcome to the United Nations*, [www.un.org/en/development/devagenda/sustainable.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/development/devagenda/sustainable.shtml)

<sup>13</sup> *Forside - Det Juridiske Fakultet*, [www.jus.uio.no/lm/hazardous.chemicals.and.pesticides.prior.informed.consent.trade.rotterdam.convention.1998/portrait.a4.pdf](http://www.jus.uio.no/lm/hazardous.chemicals.and.pesticides.prior.informed.consent.trade.rotterdam.convention.1998/portrait.a4.pdf).

## **PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE**

There have been several attempts on a national level by Member States with the help of Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) and/or Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). However, the attempt listed below is one of the few remarkable on an international level.

### **MOOC on Environmental Security and Sustaining Peace**

In 2018, the UN alongside the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) academy, the online education platform of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), launched an 8-week open online course on Environmental Security and Sustaining Peace. About 10,000 people from 170 different countries attended the course and learned more about environmental peace-building, the role of natural resources, post-conflict recovery and more.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

### **The use of technology**

The UNEP has expressed the idea of monitoring and detecting systematically the environmental damage and other related risks that may occur during an armed conflict. The goal of this idea is the improvement of security, human and environmental well-being. UNEP has suggested the creation of a digital ecosystem for the planet to map, monitor and mitigate environmental, peace and security risks is one of the next priority investments.<sup>15</sup>

Such a system should also establish better mechanisms for monitoring, collecting, sharing and assessing information on potential environmental impacts and protection of natural resources and minerals in armed conflicts around the world.

### **International Cooperation**

Although this issue may not directly affect all the countries in the world, international cooperation is still vital for its alleviation. States not directly involved could provide workforce in the scientific field as well as peacekeepers to countries affected in order to help detect and reduce further destruction of the environment and mediate existing armed conflicts. Moreover, for the aforementioned solution to be implemented, there needs to be transparency among nations.

### **International framework**

Strengthening the international framework behind the protection of the environment in armed conflicts is another permanent solution. Although there have been many conventions, resolutions and summits, modern warfare and subsequently its effects

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<sup>15</sup> "Rooting for the Environment in Times of Conflict and War." UN Environment, 6 Nov. 2019, [www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/rooting-environment-times-conflict-and-war](http://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/rooting-environment-times-conflict-and-war).

on the environment are constantly evolving. The establishment or renewal of related conventions will help keep track of this evolution while also being more useful than ever.

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