

Introductory remarks from Ms. Agnès Marcaillou, Director, UNMAS
Virtual side event “Persons with Disabilities in Armed Conflict: Inclusive Protection
Perspectives”
Thursday, 28 May 2020
As Delivered

Thank you very much, Chair. Good day to all of you. Thanks again for organizing this event with UNMAS during the week dedicated to the protection of civilians. It's also a pleasure to see not only faces I know, but also the supporters of mine action in general. I have to recognize you, Excellency, Foreign Minister of Poland, for your strong engagement with mine action and for your concrete support to what you have mentioned. Gaza - this is one area of work where we know we can count on you, including as the regular sponsor of the General Assembly resolution on mine action. The U.K., you've always been engaged, and you have always been supportive of the coordination and the actions we're taking on the ground, and the European Union, of course, we need you onboard and we need you to lead the charge on the topics that keep us busy today.

We know that conflict does not affect everyone equally. We know that it has a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities. Our previous speakers were very eloquent. This is not news for us in the world of mine action. We know that the unexploded ordnance, landmines, anti-tank mines do not just kill but injure and alter the lives of people forever. And we know that people living with disabilities in the aftermath of conflict are doubly vulnerable. This is really where mine action also has a responsibility, those of us working in mine action have a responsibility to remind the world that most survivors live in countries that are still reeling from the effects of contamination, and they are living in places with very weak public health systems, very little support, very little regard, very little efforts for their reintegration with equal rights in society, and for the respect to their dignity.

The Ambassador of the U.K. gave us the example of Sierra Leone, which reminded me of two things. One, I remember when very angry women came to me and were shouting at me in a remote part of Afghanistan and showing me their hands, with missing fingers or missing hands altogether, and trying to let me, this woman coming from New York, know that they had lost their ability to live a regular life when they were gathering firewood and in areas that were contaminated. And they were rightly angry at me, the United Nations, for not doing enough.

The other thing that I cannot forget, and other speakers will speak more about this, are the Syrian women who have lived for nine years now with one explosive incident, as we call that diplomatically, one explosion every hour - every hour of every day for nine years. They may still have their limbs. But these people, whether they are in displaced locations or camps, they wake up at night screaming with nightmares. These are the unseen injuries that we, the UN, see and that we cannot forget. When we meet a kid, a little girl, who at 5-years-old, has lost her legs, she will need roughly 50 prosthetics in her life. This is not the typical injury that you would sustain in a car accident or the workplace; these are injuries that are aggravated by the context in which people live.

So if you have not understood already, the role of UNMAS is not only to intervene at ground level, together with our UN partners, and to make sure that our action is coordinated and that it is having a greater impact, but also to make sure that international meetings, panels like this one, that when we speak to parliaments like in Germany or the U.K., when we go to Brussels, we need to make sure that the voices of those who have no voice - this is not just a cliché, this is true

- are not forgotten. We cannot continue to talk about no one left behind and yet forget those who not only live with disabilities but also have the added responsibility in a post-conflict environment to contribute to the reconstruction of their countries, to contribute to peace talks, to make sure that when healthcare services are being pieced back together that they are not forgotten, and their specific needs and requirements are taken into account, whether they are women, men, boys, or girls.

What have we done, the UN? Well, as the previous speaker said, we have improved our listening skills at the United Nations. And we have, with your support, Member States and the EU, we have increased our actions. A framework like the United Nations victim assistance policy, like the United Nations mine action strategy for many years, like the Global Protection Cluster that we contribute to, are the fora where we make sure everybody works together. And what does it mean in concrete terms? For instance, in Somalia, we have assisted the Government of Somalia in developing a national disability and victim assistance strategy. In Colombia, we are strengthening the systems that allow survivors and their families to access state assistance. In Syria, we are making sure that risk education takes inclusion into account. We are training young Syrians to safely access vulnerable communities and to gather data. In New York, UNMAS is the disability focal point in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Initiatives. We have put in place in mine action a very ambitious and realistic system of monitoring and evaluation where we coordinate the entire UN system gathering of data to make sure that inclusion is a top priority in how UN mine action strategies are implemented and measured and that we learn from the data that we receive, and that we adjust our action to take into account what the survivors tell us, what the international NGOs and local communities tell us.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, when I was alongside the Head of UNICEF, the head of UNOCHA, and I was endorsing the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, I took that framework and I made sure that all of us and all of those working with UN in mine action put their words and their commitments into action.

We have a very strong framework, a very strong instrument, the UN Security Council resolution 2475. It's even made stronger by the U.K., by Poland, by the engagement of Poland at the highest level, and by the engagement of the European Union. What we need to do now is not experience any complacency. Resolutions are wonderful instruments, they can be very powerful in some theatres, in some conflicts. A Security Council resolution is something that the world knows is important. Now, we need to take the Security Council resolution and make sure that all of us, the UN, the Member States, the donors, the affected states, the international community as a whole, with civil society, put these words into action. And this is when the UN and its Member States and people like me will gain the respect that we want the people with disabilities to have, and we will be able to give them the hope that their dignity will be recognized and respected.

I thank you all for putting this event together and having UNMAS join your efforts. We stand strong together with you to make a difference in the world. Thank you.