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Peacebuilding and sustaining peace

State of global peace and security in line with the central mandates contained in the Charter of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [72/243](#), in which the Assembly called upon the Secretary-General to submit to it a report on the state of global peace and security in line with the central mandates contained in the Charter of the United Nations at its seventy-fourth session.

In the report, the evolving nature of armed conflict and violence is highlighted and seven major trends related to global peace and security today are examined. Areas of progress and areas in which solutions are still wanting are noted in the report, along with opportunities and persistent challenges faced by the international community. As such, it serves as a contribution to the reflections that will take place during the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the United Nations and throughout the Nelson Mandela Decade of Peace. In that regard, it also serves to honour the spirit and wisdom of one of the world's great humanists, a man who believed in, and fought for, a better future. Indeed, as Mr. Mandela himself declared, "peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish, regardless of race, colour, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference".



I. Introduction

1. The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations reads “We, the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, ... and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”. These aspirations and the principles enshrined in the Charter – the non-use of force, the peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention, cooperation, self-determination and the sovereign equality of Member States – form the foundation of international relations. In the Organization’s seventy-fifth anniversary year, they remain as relevant and urgent as they were in 1945.

2. In the intervening decades, there have been remarkable developments. A repetition of the kind of global conflagration that preoccupied the founders of the United Nations has been prevented. Treaties and conventions have been adopted to address subjects ranging from the laws of war to political, civil, cultural, economic and social rights, as well as disarmament and the protection of the environment. Peacemaking and peacekeeping by the United Nations have helped to end conflicts and support reconciliation in countries across the world. Within one generation, 1 billion people have been lifted out of poverty. Most societies are peaceful.

3. Nevertheless, as the present report shows, there are potential threats to global peace and security today, fuelled by interlocking challenges that imperil progress in the years ahead. A world in transition is witness to the highest level of geostrategic tensions in years, contributing to devastating and intractable armed conflicts, as well as persistently high levels of grave violence outside conflict settings. An existential climate crisis has profound implications for peace and security. Deep global distrust has manifestations that extend from the erosion of confidence in international treaties and norms to declining faith in political establishments, accelerated by concerns of exclusion from the benefits of globalization. This already complicated set of conditions is compounded by escalating concerns about the shadow side of digital technologies, since their enormous potential for progress is affected by fears of their negative effects on jobs, livelihoods, privacy and security and their ability to spread hate speech and fuel polarization.¹

4. In early 2020, and in just 12 weeks, the emergence of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has evolved from an initially confined outbreak to a pandemic, affecting over 199 countries and territories as at the end of March. The speed and scale of the spread, the severity of cases and the societal and economic disruption have already been dramatic, with even more serious consequences in countries with slender resources and weak health systems. COVID-19 is hitting societies at their core. It has plunged the world economy into a recession with enormous socioeconomic implications, staggering unemployment and dire deprivation. The crisis risks reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and exacerbating already high levels of inequality within and between countries. A global coming together and a global solution for all are urgently needed. At the geopolitical level, the crisis is seen as a cry for leadership, solidarity, transparency, trust and cooperation.

5. Maintaining peace and security in today’s world requires coherence, engagement and coordination among the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, as well as the Peacebuilding Commission, consistent with the mandates of each body as set out in the Charter and relevant

¹ António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, “Remarks to the General Assembly on the Secretary-General’s priorities for 2020”, 22 January 2020.

resolutions. The Security Council, as the body with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, has a record of successful management of many conflicts and today has a more extensive agenda than at any point in its history. It is engaging more consistently with regional organizations than in the past and remains a vital forum for international action, with the support of other United Nations bodies. However, in situations in which the Council has been divided and unable to act as a result, the effectiveness of international cooperation to advance collective security has been cast in doubt. Conflicts have escalated, leading to a deplorable level of civilian casualties and forced displacement.

6. The Charter highlights the critical relationship between peace and security, development, human rights, including gender equality, and international cooperation. In 2015, Member States reaffirmed those fundamental interlinkages when they adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the framing document for collective efforts to build peaceful, prosperous and inclusive societies on a healthy planet. The Charter places prevention at the heart of the work of the United Nations. Moving towards a single, integrated peace and security pillar and its closer alignment with the development and human rights pillars as part of the Organization's reform agenda reflects a recognition that only a holistic approach to contemporary peace and security challenges will achieve the prevention and sustaining peace agenda, as well as preserve development gains and advance human rights for all, which are the central goals of the United Nations. Integral to those endeavours is ensuring the greater participation of women and gender equality, both within the United Nations and in its work globally.

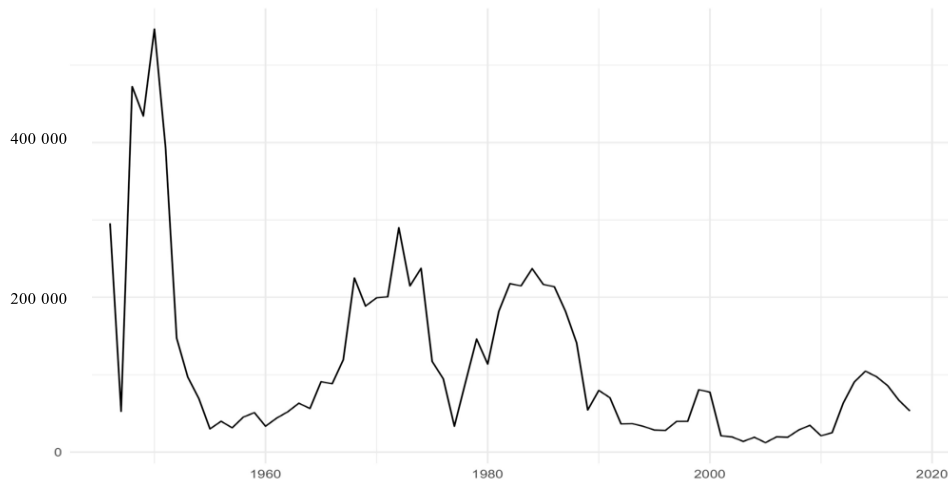
7. In order to assess the state of global peace and security, the present report provides a broad and integrated approach. A review of the evolving nature of conflict and violence is followed by an examination of seven interconnected trends that intersect in different ways with contemporary peace and security – human mobility, economic relations and trade, inequality, civic participation, digital technologies, climate change, and disarmament and the regulation of arms – and require the collective engagement of Member States if they are to successfully respond to new and emerging threats, including pandemics, prevent new conflicts and crises and sustain peace. Such a response can only be collective, and will require Member States to work effectively, nimbly and innovatively with a number of stakeholders. As the challenges that Member States face have become more interconnected and complex, responses must follow suit.

II. Evolving conflict and violence

8. The scope and scale of armed conflict and violence are evolving. Inter-State war, the major preoccupation at the time the United Nations was founded, is a rare event today, even if the threat of a major global conflict remains real; meanwhile, intra-State armed conflict is resurgent.² Over the past decade, internal conflicts have contributed to the highest number of conflict-related fatalities since the end of the Cold War. Their proliferation has also reversed the decline in the number of intra-State conflicts between the early 1990s and the early 2010s (see figure I), partly as a result of concerted multilateral efforts, underpinned by consensus within the Security Council, to manage or resolve them.

² Uppsala University, Uppsala Conflict Data Program database, available at www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp.

Figure I
Number of conflict-related fatalities (1946–2018) in both inter-State and internal conflicts



Source: Peace Research Institute Oslo/Uppsala Conflict Data Program database.

9. There are considerable geographic variations in conflict trends. Latin America and East Asia, for example, have experienced a remarkable reduction in conventional armed conflict over the past four decades, despite the recent rise in tensions affecting a number of countries. A positive trend is also evident in Europe, after a dramatic escalation at the end of the Cold War as armed conflicts erupted in parts of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. There has been a significant increase in the number and intensity of violent conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, not least in the aftermath of the uprisings in the Arab world, albeit with notable exceptions within each region.³

10. Intra-State conflicts today are characterized by great complexity. They typically involve the proliferation of non-State armed groups, linkages with criminal and sometimes extremist interests, growing internationalization and connections to global supply chains. These factors have made conflicts longer and more difficult to resolve, while increasing the vulnerability of civilians to atrocity crimes, often on a large scale, and other grave human rights violations.

11. Many non-State armed groups active in intra-State conflicts operate with loose and fluid chains of command. Decentralized groups form shifting coalitions, maintaining links to external supporters while pursuing a wide range of ideological, political and economic agendas not necessarily amenable to negotiation. In many conflict theatres, armed groups are well-equipped with military-grade weapons acquired from poorly secured stockpiles and transfers from the illicit market, or from States.

12. A growing number of countries is engaging militarily in intra-State conflicts, not only as supporters or enablers of local actors, but as parties to the conflict in their own right. Critically, when external actors engage in intra-State conflicts, they often do so in support of competing internal forces, at times acting in direct violation of Security Council decisions. In many cases, such engagement appears to be aimed at countering other external actors, rather than pursuing stated aims of peace and stability.

13. The impact of intra-State conflicts on civilians extends far beyond the number of reported battle deaths. Many contemporary conflicts are fought in urban centres, resulting in devastating and well-documented impacts on civilians, including massive

³ Ibid.

loss of life and the extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure. Sexual and gender-based violence is all too prevalent, in particular directed at women and used as a tactic of war, along with forcible recruitment, including of children, into armed groups. Intra-State conflicts increase the risk of “excess deaths” among the population as a whole, disproportionately affecting women and children.

14. Since 1945, the United Nations has developed a number of practices and tools to prevent, manage and resolve conflict, from the discreet engagement of the Secretary-General’s good offices and preventive diplomacy to the more formal establishment of the mechanisms and doctrine of United Nations peacekeeping and, more recently, peacebuilding. Regional organizations are taking on an increasingly important role. In 2000, a signal achievement was the adoption by the Security Council of its resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), launching an ambitious women and peace and security agenda. With the adoption of Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), youth and peace and security has emerged as another essential focus of the work of the Organization. Most recently, in its resolution [2475 \(2019\)](#), the Council recognized for the first time the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on persons with disabilities and emphasized key actions to address it.

15. Addressing evolving global peace and security challenges, including complex, metastasizing intra-State conflicts, which are simultaneously subnational and transnational,⁴ requires the continuous review and updating of tools and approaches. In recent years, the United Nations has, among other actions, brought about a surge in diplomacy for peace and further strengthened its mediation capacity. In 2018, Member States were invited to renew collective engagement with United Nations peacekeeping in the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, and on disarmament with *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*. The reform of the United Nations counter-terrorism architecture has enhanced coherence in that area. Not only is championing improved implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) a means of countering gender inequality, but the meaningful participation of women leaders and decision makers in mediation efforts and peace processes also contributes to more lasting and sustainable peace. On 23 March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Secretary-General issued an appeal for an immediate global ceasefire. He called upon warring parties to “silence the guns” and end air strikes to help to create corridors for life-saving aid, to open windows for diplomacy and to be inspired by coalitions and dialogue slowly taking shape among rival parties in some parts of the world to enable joint approaches to the crisis. Subsequently, along with special representatives and envoys, the Secretary-General engaged with parties to that effect. Some parties to conflict have already issued declarations of acceptance in response.

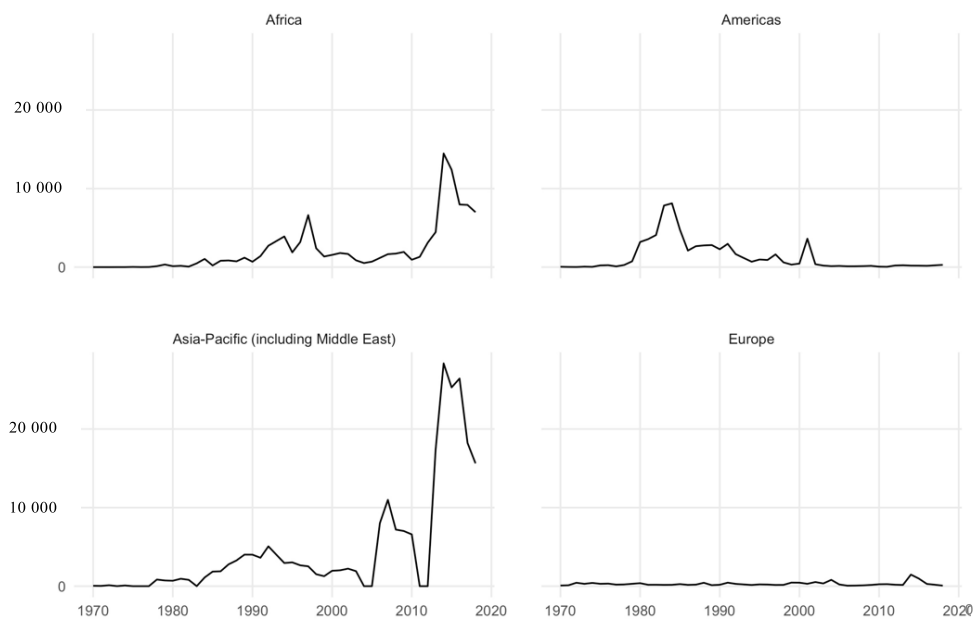
16. Beyond armed conflict, other forms of violence affect a wide range of countries.⁵ The extent of violent activities linked to extremism and terrorism has increased, especially since 2001, and has become a global phenomenon, leading to large-scale military and counter-terrorism engagements by national and international actors. The overwhelming concentration of casualties of terrorism has been in the Middle East, South and South-East Asia and North and West Africa (see figure II).⁶ A growing concern is the threat posed by right-wing extremism, including white supremacist, anti-Muslim and antisemitic violence.

⁴ World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2018).

⁵ United Nations Information Service, Vienna, “Homicide kills far more people than armed conflict, says new UNODC study”, 4 July 2019.

⁶ Uppsala University, Uppsala Conflict Data Program database.

Figure II
Number of deaths in terrorist attacks (1970–2018)



Source: Global Terrorism Database.

17. Criminal violence disproportionately affects young adult men and boys. In 2017, the most recent year for which comprehensive and standardized data are available, the number of homicide victims (464,000)⁷ far surpassed the number of people reportedly killed in armed conflict (89,000) and terrorist-related violence (26,000).⁸ Although the global burden of homicidal violence is significant, there is considerable variation in the prevalence between and within regions. In 2017, roughly 37 per cent of all reported homicides occurred in the Americas, 35 per cent in Africa and 23 per cent in Asia.⁹ Overall levels of homicide are declining in most parts of the world, with the exception of South America and the Caribbean, as well as Central and Southern Africa. In some countries, while overall homicide rates fell, femicide is rising, meaning that the number of women being killed by an intimate partner or otherwise targeted for being women is on the rise.

18. While poorly documented, transnational organized crime has significantly benefited from the increase in global trade, air travel, shipping and containerization, combined with the lowered cost of communications technologies. Illicit trade and transnational organized crime cost trillions of dollars in lost revenue and productivity and generate hundreds of billions in profit.¹⁰ Transnational organized crime threatens international peace and security and inhibits progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In intra-State wars, the presence of criminal networks and their links to various parties to conflict affect the political economy of conflict and thus its

⁷ Of this figure, approximately 81 per cent (377,000) were men and boys.

⁸ United Nations Information Service, Vienna, “Homicide kills far more people than armed conflict”.

⁹ Ibid. The homicide rate in 2017 in the Americas (17.2 homicides per 100,000 people) was the highest recorded since reliable records began in 1990. In the same year, the rate in Africa (13 homicides per 100,000 people) was almost twice the global average, whereas Asia, Europe and Oceania registered far lower incidences, averaging 2.3, 3 and 2.8, respectively.

¹⁰ Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade, *Mapping the Impact of Illicit Trade on the Sustainable Development Goals* (2019).

broader dynamics, as access to illicit revenue sources can reduce the incentive to seek a peaceful settlement.

III. Major trends related to global peace and security

19. Preventing and addressing conflict and violence constitute both a tremendous challenge and an urgent priority. Nevertheless, efforts to promote peace and security are interrelated with and complicated by other factors – some causing conflict and organized violence, some, at least in part, being consequences of it, and others undermining collective efforts to prevent, manage or resolve it. The General Assembly and the Security Council have on different occasions recognized the connections between peace and security and human mobility (Assembly resolution 70/1),¹¹ economic relations and trade (resolution 70/262 and Council resolution 2282 (2016)), inequality (resolution 70/1), civic participation (resolution 70/168), digital technologies (resolution 74/29), climate change (resolution 63/281) and the proliferation of weapons. In turn, it is necessary to comprehensively address these and other drivers of, and contributing factors to, conflict in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda (see A/73/890-S/2019/448).

A. Human mobility, including refugee flows, forced displacement and migration

20. Throughout history, mobility has been an integral part of the human experience. Today, human mobility is driven by many interrelated factors, most notably armed conflict and violence, but also the impact of climate change and environmental degradation, economic pressures and the absence of, or weak, governance. Armed conflicts, ethnic violence, terrorism-related activities and organized crime have led to the forced displacement of entire communities, both internally and across borders, and have severely disrupted traditional patterns of human mobility, including transhumance.

21. The number of humans on the move worldwide, including those forcibly displaced, reached an estimated 272 million in 2019, an increase of 51 million (or 23 per cent) since 2010.¹² That figure includes nearly 29.5 million refugees and asylum seekers worldwide – the highest figure recorded since the end of the Second World War.¹³ The increase in mixed flows of refugees and migrants occurred primarily between 2012 and 2015 and was driven by conflicts in the Middle East and parts of Africa, although significant numbers were displaced in other regions too, including Latin America and South-East Asia. In addition, there were 41.3 million conflict-related internally displaced persons at the end of 2018, the highest number ever recorded. Women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population, frequently experiencing sexual violence and gender-based discrimination. Intersecting factors such as age, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation further compound the risks.¹⁴

¹¹ See also the global compact on refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

¹² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “International migrant stock 2019: ten key messages”, September 2019.

¹³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refugees and migrants from Venezuela top 4 million: UNHCR and IOM”, press release, 7 June 2019; and see www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html.

¹⁴ University of New South Wales, “The world’s biggest minority? Refugee women and girls in the global compact on refugees”, October 2017.

22. Responses to mixed flows of refugees and migrants continue to generate divisive debates. Anti-immigrant rhetoric exploits anxieties and perceptions of injustice among some populations in host countries and provokes fear of refugees, migrants and minorities associated with migration, often leading to their further exclusion or violent attacks against them. Many measures adopted by Governments to reduce mixed flows, such as pushbacks or policies of deterrence, erode human rights and refugee protection without addressing the drivers that compel people to move in the first place.

23. Human mobility is a global phenomenon, growing in scope, complexity and impact. At a minimum, the human rights of people on the move have to be respected and their humane treatment ensured, regardless of migration status, religion, nationality or ethnicity. This includes addressing particular gender-related barriers that women and girls may experience in the context of large movements. There is considerable evidence that, when they are supported by appropriate policies, refugee movements and migration can contribute to economic productivity and sustainable development in both origin and destination countries, while also benefiting refugee and migrant families and households. The global compact on refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration adopted in 2018 are aimed at building frameworks for cooperation and burden-sharing in addressing two distinct but related phenomena in a manner that addresses gaps in protection of the rights of refugees and migrants while also reaffirming the sovereign rights of States to determine their national migration policy in conformity with international law. The particular vulnerability of refugees and migrants has also been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and deeper consideration and planning for special measures to ensure their continued protection in times of global health emergencies are needed.

B. Economic relations and trade

24. Economic relations and trade have a significant bearing on peace and security. Economic and trade disputes can lead to conflicts within and between States. Similarly, well-managed and mutually beneficial trade and shared economic development – based on the principles of fairness, reciprocity and non-discrimination – have helped countries and societies to overcome generations of armed conflict and forge peaceful and cooperative relations.

25. There is increasing recognition that the gains from trade have been unevenly distributed between and within countries. This has fuelled discontent across the world. States are increasingly resorting to unilateralist strategies to resolve trade disputes, undermining the World Trade Organization and its multilateral trading system. At the same time, regional integration initiatives have advanced, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific region and the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. The latter will create the largest free trade area in the world in terms of the number of participating countries. A total of 54 African States have signed the agreement to date, covering 1.3 billion people, with an estimated aggregate income of about \$2.5 trillion.

26. Trade tensions have created uncertainties, caused significant disruptions to international supply chains and undermined global growth. In 2019, global trade expanded by only 0.3 per cent, and global growth stood at 2.3 per cent – the lowest figures in the past 10 years. Near-term global growth prospects remain weak,¹⁵ which poses a considerable threat to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

¹⁵ *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.C.1).

by 2030. Furthermore, a significant downturn is projected owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

27. Even with recent progress on some trade fronts, the potential for relapse is high, as important issues underlying the tensions have yet to be tackled in depth. Such a polarized environment could culminate in the creation of separate, incompatible and competing financial, trading and technology systems. This would threaten international cooperation, in addition to impeding flows of foreign direct investment, technology transfers and productivity.

28. As the global economic balance is shifting from North America and Western Europe and other developed regions towards East and South Asia and their fast-growing economies, economic decision-making power is shifting as well. Global cooperation mechanisms will need to recognize the shifting balance while ensuring that the voices of the underrepresented, such as the least developed countries, can be heard. This will be key in building and maintaining trust and respect necessary for collective action.

C. Inequality

29. The links between inequality and various forms of organized violence are well established. High inequality between States can reduce cooperation and trust and, in extreme cases, lead to violent confrontation. Within States, high levels of inequality and exclusion, in particular if group-based, feed discontent, which in turn can find outlets in protests or drive instability and violence.¹⁶ A combination of high inequality and economic insecurity undermines trust at many levels. Households that consider themselves economically insecure tend to have notably less trust in governance institutions. Lack of trust, in turn, can destabilize political systems.¹⁷

30. Despite significant progress in reducing extreme poverty, inequalities – not only in income and wealth, but also in health, education and gender – remain pervasive around the world. Notwithstanding achievements made by several fast-growing emerging economies, per capita income between developed and developing countries remains divergent.

31. By some metrics, such as the Gini coefficient, income inequality has risen in many countries – affecting more than two thirds of the world population. Other inequality measures, such as the income share of the top 10 per cent of earners, reveal that some countries that have seen their Gini coefficient decline have nevertheless experienced a growing concentration of income towards the top end of the income distribution.¹⁸ Some of the greatest risks of violence stem from the mobilization of concerns of exclusion and injustice, rooted in in-country inequalities across groups, based on ethnic, regional or religious identity. Corruption, as both a cause and a consequence of governance deficits, can lead to violence and conflict. Evidence from Transparency International suggests that the lowest-scoring countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index are often those experiencing conflict or war. In many countries, young people identify corruption as one of the factors that drives violent extremism. Cross-country studies also reveal that high levels of gender inequality and

¹⁶ World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace*.

¹⁷ *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.IV.1).

¹⁸ *Ibid*; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Sustainable Development outlook 2019: gathering storms and silver linings”, October 2019.

gender-based violence in a society are associated with increased vulnerability to intra-State conflict and the use of more severe forms of violence in conflict.¹⁹

32. A number of policies advanced over the past three decades aimed at promoting liberalization, privatization and decentralization have eschewed income distribution, concentrated wealth, reduced social protections and services and intensified the sense of economic uncertainties and insecurity of millions who have not experienced benefits of the economic and political integration of societies over the same period. The international financial crisis in 2008 further contributed to a widening of income and wealth inequality, breeding discontent within and across countries with the social and environmental quality of economic growth. Ongoing austerity measures designed to raise revenues and reduce deficits have acted as major triggers for waves of popular protests around the world. The increasing discontent is compounded by rising inequalities in access to the more empowering opportunities of the twenty-first century – such as higher education and technology – and by the lack of social mobility.²⁰

33. The General Assembly, by resolving to leave no one behind in its adoption of the 2030 Agenda, recognizes the adverse impact of inequalities within and among countries and aims to reduce them through cooperative action. For all countries, addressing inequalities and making institutions more inclusive are central to preventing the fraying of the social fabric that could escalate into crisis.

D. Civic participation

34. In the past year, people in many parts of the world have taken to the streets, with women and young people playing a prominent role in demands for change. Popular protests are fuelled by grievances related to inequality; restrictions on public freedoms and civic space; corruption or perceptions of corruption; dissatisfaction with public and social services; and concerns about the impact of climate change. Common demands include the call for more transparency and inclusiveness in decision-making.

35. Some Governments have responded to popular protests by restricting participation online and offline through laws, policies and other measures that may be in violation of international human rights norms. Such measures include resorting to the use of force in violation of international standards, limiting or banning assemblies, online surveillance and shutting down the Internet or parts of it.

36. For several years, United Nations human rights mechanisms, civil society organizations and others have observed and documented attempts to shrink civic space by State and non-State actors. These measures include unduly restrictive laws – for instance, criminalizing support for certain groups – imposing limitations on the registration and funding of associations and the media and disproportionate taxes on civil society organizations, often under the pretext of maintaining security and combating terrorism. They have also taken the form of physical attacks.²¹ Of particular note is the rise in threats and acts of violence against women, including women in politics, and human rights defenders. Discourse in which human rights defenders are portrayed as potentially undermining development and security has in some contexts made it harder to maintain public support for civil society. As stipulated in the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights, it is critical to protect civic space.

¹⁹ World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace*.

²⁰ *Human Development Report 2019: Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today – Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.III.B.1).

²¹ For example, between 1 January and 31 October 2018, the United Nations recorded and verified 397 killings of human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists in 41 countries. See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-16>.

37. Elections continue to be compelling and effective ways for citizens to participate in the political processes in their countries and have their voices heard. Political leaders, from both government and opposition parties, bear the overriding responsibility for fair and transparent elections. This responsibility applies not only in the period leading up to an election, including engagement in civil and peaceful competition, respecting the integrity of the process and the rights of all and calling upon supporters to do the same, but also in the days and weeks that follow, when the results emerge and tensions may rise, providing tests of true leadership. Successful and defeated candidates all face the choice of reaffirming public trust in their country's democratic system or undermining belief in its legitimacy.

38. Around the world, digital tools are increasingly used to gain access to information, participate in debates and persuade others. They have created previously inconceivable avenues for involving more people, in particular young people, in the development of policies and the provision of feedback on their implementation. However, the same tools have also been used to restrict civic space, for instance by disabling the channels available for people to organize themselves or by tracking those who protest.

39. Over time, efforts to limit the space for critical voices may be translated into greater tensions and deepen social and political divisions. Ensuring broad-based participation, with the full and meaningful inclusion of women across all segments of society, makes communities safer and more resilient and policymaking more sustainable, effective and legitimate. Special measures are also necessary to involve young people, as well as other traditionally excluded groups, such as persons with disabilities.

40. In addition, to be truly effective, participation requires openness, transparency and an enabling environment that guarantees the safety of those who participate and provides remedies in case the right to participation is violated. Civic space is also protected when meaningful partnerships are forged with different social groups, civil society and communities, deepening their role as stakeholders in a common future and in building a more peaceful and prosperous society for all.

E. Digital technologies

41. Rapid advances in digital technologies – powered by growth in computing, transmission speeds and storage capacities – are transforming every aspect of human life. Digital technologies, supported by advances in artificial intelligence, are catalysing breakthroughs in health, labour and the economy. Together with advances in automation, robotics, nanotechnologies and biotechnologies, they are reshaping human interactions in an unprecedented fashion. The global Internet penetration rate rose from 16.8 per cent in 2005 to 53.6 per cent in 2019, although it remains highly unequal among and within countries.²²

42. Digital technologies have the potential to advance mediation and the field of peacemaking and peacebuilding in several ways. The most significant impact can be seen in the potential for the inclusion of a broader spectrum of views, including those of women and other groups traditionally excluded from peace processes, such as young people, minorities, indigenous communities and persons with disabilities. Greater use of data and statistical modelling tools can improve traditional analytical methods, potentially reducing bias, while helping with early warning and the detection of potential crises. Nevertheless, gender biases in machine learning models and data also run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and locking in biases for the future. The Internet at large and social media in particular carry great promise for

²² International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2019* (Geneva, 2019).

increasing participation and connecting people worldwide by enabling the exchange of information and ideas.

43. Nevertheless, social media have also helped to accelerate the spread of harmful content, including misinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence, often particularly targeting women, facilitated by algorithms and business models that prioritize viral content. In an electoral context, suspicion that information is manipulated can lead to an erosion of trust.

44. The Internet has provided tools for terrorists and violent extremist groups to incite violence, support recruitment and plan and finance attacks. At the global level, the Internet is growing in all its facets, including the dark web, but is increasingly fractured along ideological and political lines.

45. Cybercrime presents unique challenges for criminal justice agencies, in particular in view of the possibility of remote actions and the volatile nature of electronic evidence. In the face of rapid technological advances, existing regulatory frameworks, social norms and ethical standards may be lacking in some sectors or prove increasingly inadequate in others.

46. The High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation established in 2018 convened a group of experts from diverse disciplines – Governments, the private sector, academic institutions and other entities – to push for dialogue, coordination and cooperation to prevent further political division and ensure that the Internet remains a force for good. In its 2019 report, the Panel concluded that it was necessary to focus on policies and investments that would enable people to use technology to build better lives and a more peaceful, trusting world. A road map for implementation of the Panel’s recommendations will embed human rights values and considerations in an improved global digital cooperation architecture.

47. Advances in digital technologies can be harnessed to maximize peaceful benefits and realize the goals of the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda, while curtailing unintended consequences and malicious use. There is a need for new legal and ethical standards on the use of such technologies to foster trust, peace and stability. They must be grounded in internationally agreed instruments, which provide the framework for the protection of, and respect for, human rights, peace and security.

F. Climate change and peace and security

48. Peace today faces a new threat, the climate emergency, which is proceeding at a relentless pace.²³ The World Meteorological Organization, in its 2019 Statement on the State of the Global Climate, highlighted that the previous five years had been the hottest on record; sea levels were the highest in human history; biodiversity was shrinking; the incidence of droughts was advancing at alarming rates; and climate-related disasters were becoming more frequent and destructive. The magnitude of climate change means that its impacts extend far beyond the natural environment and increasingly affect human systems. While climate change and environmental degradation are rarely, if ever, the trigger for conflict, their interplay with other factors can multiply risks that are known to contribute to insecurity.

49. This is not a scenario of some distant future. For millions of people around the world, it is part of their daily reality. In parts of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, where climate change parches water reserves and reduces the availability of

²³ António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, “Secretary-General’s Message for 2019”, 21 September 2019.

productive land, competition over land and resources is severely testing existing mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution. In the Lake Chad Basin and some parts of Central America, deteriorating livelihood opportunities lower the threshold for recruitment by organized crime syndicates or, in the case of Lake Chad, extremist groups. In Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, water scarcity exacerbates existing tensions between communities and between States.

50. The risk of climate change adversely affecting peace and security is greatest where institutions and communities are unable to manage climate stress or absorb shocks. In situations of conflict and insecurity, where underlying vulnerabilities are pronounced and adaptive capacity is weak, the effects of climate change will be felt more strongly. As conflict harms the structures, systems and institutional capacities that are necessary to facilitate inclusive and equitable climate adaptation or protect and manage natural resources, it can effectively accelerate climate change and environmental degradation. In conflicts around the world, for instance, warring parties have engaged in illegal logging to fund their armed struggles, but felling trees also decimates carbon storage capacity and removes natural barriers to floods and landslides.

51. Developing countries, in particular small island developing States, disproportionately face climate risks. Extreme weather phenomena in the Caribbean that used to occur once every 100 years are now taking place several times per decade.²⁴ With average global sea levels estimated to rise by up to 110 cm by 2100,²⁵ the Pacific Islands Forum has already declared climate change the primary threat to the security, livelihoods and well-being of peoples in the region. In Africa, weather shocks and an extreme climate were responsible for pushing 29 million people into situations of acute food insecurity during 2018.²⁶ In South Asia, Latin America and Africa, the worsening impacts of climate change could forcibly displace over 140 million people within their countries by 2050.²⁷

52. Different social and economic groups are affected unevenly. People living in poverty and other disadvantaged groups – including indigenous peoples and small landholders – are more exposed to the impact of climate change, and their capacity to cope is lower. Dependence on agricultural, fishing and other ecosystem-related services increases the risks to livelihoods, while poverty further compounds the effects of diseases and health conditions aggravated by climate change. Women face additional risks, in large part owing to gender inequities that affect their ability to adapt to the challenges brought on by climate change. Persons with disabilities are also vulnerable as they are usually among the poorest members of society and do not have access to the resources and knowledge to adapt to the impact of climate change.

53. Looking to the future, climate change threatens to be a destabilizing geopolitical factor as well. Melting ice caps are opening new shipping routes and access to natural resources, which could increase tensions between countries already at odds over maritime issues. If not managed carefully, the global energy transition towards climate-friendly economies could disrupt jobs, food prices and energy markets, potentially destabilizing entire regions.

54. In recent years, the Security Council has recognized the link between climate change and security on several occasions, including in the context of situations in

²⁴ Hans-Otto Pörtner and others, eds., *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate: A Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Food Security Information Network, *2019 Global Report on Food Crises: Joint Analysis for Better Decisions* (2019).

²⁷ Kumari Rigaud and others, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2018).

West Africa and the Sahel, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa. The General Assembly, for its part, in 2009 requested a comprehensive report on climate change and its possible security implications in its resolution 63/281. In a similar vein, the Economic and Social Council and the Peacebuilding Commission have placed climate security challenges on the agenda of joint meetings.

55. There are no template solutions for how to deal with a danger to peace as complex and powerful as climate change. The most viable option in the long term is ambitious climate action, beginning with the full implementation of the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015. But in the meantime, as climate change advances, its repercussions will continue to grow. Conflict-sensitive adaptation and resilience-building form critical building blocks of effective prevention and sustaining peace. A genuinely integrated approach, combining short-term with long-term action and leaving no one behind, must guide collective efforts to address climate change in conjunction with other potentially destabilizing factors and catalyse coordinated risk prevention, early warning and transformative adaptation.

G. Disarmament and regulation of arms

Conventional weapons and mitigating the humanitarian impact of armed conflict

56. Increasing militarization is evident in many parts of the world. Global military spending has more than doubled in United States dollars, adjusted for inflation, since the end of the Cold War. At an estimated \$1.822 trillion in 2018, it is 76 per cent higher than the post-Cold War low in 1998. International transfers of major weapons have steadily climbed since the early 2000s, including in regions affected by conflict.

57. Today more than 1 billion small arms are in circulation worldwide, three quarters of which are in civilian hands, the vast majority unlicensed. Insufficient regulation of small arms and their ammunition creates insecurity, harms civilians, facilitates human rights violations, hampers humanitarian action and fuels gender-based violence. Armed violence involving small arms breaks communities apart, undermines development, including access to basic social services, and compromises economic growth and investment.

58. In that context, it is encouraging that important gains continue to be made in the field of humanitarian disarmament. Several of the most egregious types of conventional weapons that have an inherently disproportionate impact, or cause unacceptable harm, have been regulated, restricted or banned outright. These include incendiary weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. Undertaking robust risk assessments before authorizing arms exports, in line with the provisions of the Arms Trade Treaty, has considerable potential to curb the flow of arms to situations in which they are likely to be used to commit violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law or serious acts of gender-based violence. Authorizing any export of arms and ammunition, including their parts and components, is particularly problematic if there is an overriding risk that such items will be used to commit or facilitate violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law, serious acts of gender-based violence or violence against children.

59. More work is required to achieve the full potential of global transparency and confidence-building mechanisms, with a view to facilitating agreement on the regulation of conventional arms and the reduction of military spending at the global level. Regulating conventional arms and their ammunition is not only a question of addressing stockpiles. All dimensions need to be addressed – from manufacture to border controls and from crime prevention to community violence reduction – in an inclusive, integrated and participatory manner, including at the country and subregional levels.

Nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction

60. Nuclear weapons remain the most destructive weapons in existence and pose an existential threat to the planet. The humanitarian and environmental consequences of any further use of such weapons would be catastrophic. Throughout the Cold War, a framework of instruments, multilateral, plurilateral and bilateral,²⁸ was developed to reduce the risk of nuclear war and implement progressive and irreversible steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons. Important reductions were made in the overall numbers of nuclear weapons – from a high of around 70,000 in 1986 to around 14,000 today.²⁹

61. In recent years, however, progress has ceased. In some cases, it has been reversed. Prospects for the use of nuclear weapons – either intentionally, by accident or through miscalculation – are higher than they have been since the end of the Cold War. The demise of both the Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty Systems and the Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles³⁰ removed important brakes on nuclear war. If the Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START Treaty)³¹ is not extended, it will expire in 2021 leaving no constraints on nuclear arsenals.

62. There is renewed competition between nuclear-armed States. Unlike the quantitative arms race of the Cold War, there is arguably now a qualitative arms race, as arsenals are being modernized in ways that create new capabilities and military missions. They include plans to pursue or deploy new and potentially destabilizing nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems, including those designed for battlefield use or to evade defensive systems.

63. Many regional disputes involve a nuclear dimension, including conflicts in which nuclear-armed States support opposing parties. Regional proliferation challenges persist, especially on the Korean Peninsula. The growing proliferation of ballistic missiles into crisis-prone regions further intensifies risks to peace and security. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the nuclear programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran is an important contribution to non-proliferation and regional security. The initiation of dialogue within the United Nations among the States of the Middle East on nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction has the potential to promote durable peace, arms control, confidence-building and political reconciliation. A renewed commitment to achieving a common vision for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and accelerating the implementation of past commitments is essential.

64. Advances in life sciences are contributing to increasing concerns regarding the potential utility of biological weapons. In the absence of global, treaty-based verification mechanisms, the existing mandated authority for the United Nations Secretariat to conduct investigations of alleged use (General Assembly resolution 42/37 C) remains a central line of defence, despite its limited resources. Recent violations of the prohibition

²⁸ See www.armscontrol.org/treaties.

²⁹ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Status of world nuclear forces”, Federation of American Scientists, May 2019.

³⁰ See <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/101888.htm>; and Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State, United States of America, “U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019”, press statement, 2 August 2019.

³¹ The Treaty was signed in Prague on 8 April 2010 and, after ratification, entered into force on 5 February 2011.

on the use of chemical weapons pose a grave risk to civilians, as well as regional security and the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

Developments in new weapons technologies

65. Developments in artificial intelligence are one of the drivers of growing military interest in lethal autonomous weapons.³² While technological advances may be able to improve the accuracy of some weapons and reduce collateral harm, machines cannot reliably make the decisions required to comply with legal principles, such as distinction, proportionality and precaution.³³ No weapons system can take on that role in conformity with humanitarian principles, as the application of international humanitarian law is predicated on human judgment and accountability. Many technological advances, especially those resulting in greater autonomy and remote operation of weapon systems, could also create perceptions of casualty-free warfare, lowering the threshold for the use of force.

66. Conventionally armed ballistic missiles are prevalent in the arsenals of many States and some non-State actors, where they function as area bombardment weapons generally aimed at cities. The development of hypersonic glide vehicles, an advanced type of long-range manoeuvrable strike weapon, has considerable potential to spark new arms competition and impair strategic relations between States. Such weapons could reduce decision-making windows in high-pressure situations, leading to miscalculation or error. The problem may be exacerbated by ambiguity as to whether such systems carry a conventional or nuclear payload.

67. Advances in space technologies are contributing to all spheres of human life. However, increasing civil and military dependence on outer space is creating pressure for armed forces to defend against associated risks and vulnerabilities. While we have yet to witness a direct arms competition in outer space, various types of disruptive and destructive capabilities are under development in several States. This is evidenced by the growing number of countries that have conducted anti-satellite missile tests. The near-term deployment of capabilities with potential dual-use applications, such as rendezvous and proximity operations and active debris removal, can fuel mistrust in the absence of international norms and may constitute a further driver for weaponization.

68. Developments in missile technology are posing new challenges for crisis management, the protection of civilians and the achievement of broader disarmament objectives, in particular in the light of the lack of universal legally binding arrangements governing their use. It is necessary to re-engage and give higher priority to addressing issues related to missiles, especially in the context of the nuclear disarmament process. Furthermore, it remains in the common interest of humankind for all States to work urgently to preserve outer space as a realm for peace, free from weaponization and the conduct of hostilities.

69. It is crucial to reach a common understanding on agreed limitations that should be applied to autonomy in weapons, as well as a broader consideration of the impacts of introducing autonomy and artificial intelligence into other military systems and of

³² United Nations position, see Michael Møller, Director-General of United Nations Office at Geneva, “Secretary-General’s message to meeting of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems”, 25 March 2019; and stronger language used by the Secretary-General, who has labelled lethal autonomous weapons as “politically unacceptable and morally repulsive” and has called for them to be banned under international law (see Nina Werkhäuser, “UN impasse could mean killer robots escape regulation”, Deutsche Welle, 20 August 2019).

³³ Switzerland, “Practice relating to rule 1 on the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants”, in International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law*, vol. II (practice) database, available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/home>.

how effective governance and risk mitigation can be achieved. In the near term, the recommendations elaborated under the auspices of the General Assembly, which are aimed at building international confidence and greater responsibility in the use of cyberspace, provide important guidance to Member States.

IV. Observations: the imperative of collective action

70. The challenges identified in the present report are significant and include: (a) climate change, which is unprecedented and requires immediate action; (b) nuclear competition, which is re-emerging and further complicating the possibility of achieving an agreed governance framework for new weapons technologies, and (c) growing inequalities within countries that permeate all aspects of life, stifle opportunities, threaten to exacerbate gender and wealth gaps, derail the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and affect trust in institutions, including the United Nations.

71. The interplay of those three challenges with armed conflict and violence and the other trends examined in the present report creates a complex and dangerous mix, even before the addition of a global pandemic such as that of COVID-19. The response will require new forms of cooperation among all States and societies, underpinned by mutual respect, a common interest in putting the well-being and safety of people at the centre of concerted efforts and a sense of urgency. The time to address or reverse the biggest global challenges of today is limited.

72. Seventy-five years ago, in a world much less globalized and interconnected than today, the drafters of the Charter did not have the luxury to ask whether there was a need for a multilateral system. They understood that collective decision-making and continuous dialogue were essential to avert another global war. With a new global framework for peace and security in mind, they dared to imagine a system in which cooperation was for the greater good – to build peaceful societies, advance human rights and achieve sustainable development for all.

73. Nevertheless, in many instances, multilateral action has fallen short of expectations. Broad agreement on the goals of the multilateral system, captured in the Preamble and Chapter I of the Charter, has not been matched by a consensus on the methods to achieve them. States diverge in their interpretation of the principles espoused in the Charter. Compounding this long-standing divergence of views are new geopolitical tensions that are deepening divisions among States and in the Security Council. These divisions have impeded cooperation, eroding established treaties and encouraging some States to circumvent norms.

74. As in 1945, the present generation cannot afford to question the necessity of a multilateral system. The only choice is whether there is common resolve to work together to improve the existing system or leave such work to the next generation, burdening it with the consequences.

75. The past 75 years provide inspiration. Decolonization began a process of correcting historic injustices and unleashed tremendous human potential. Advances in human rights frameworks, including for the rights of women, children, refugees, indigenous communities and persons with disabilities, are unparalleled in their reach and impact on human lives. United Nations engagement – including when mandated by the General Assembly and the Security Council – has helped many countries to resolve conflicts and recover from them, address threats of violent extremism and build more peaceful societies. While violence remains a fact of life in many regions, the international community has become better at preventing armed conflicts and

responding to them when they emerge, providing emergency humanitarian assistance on the ground and addressing the plight of refugees and others forcibly displaced.

76. With the launch of the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations reaffirmed that it would deliver on its commitments to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. With the prevention of conflict, crisis and human suffering at the heart of the work of the United Nations, a surge in diplomacy for peace remains an essential element in achieving the transformative Goals.

77. United Nations partnerships with regional and subregional organizations have grown in size and substance and have led to notable progress, in particular in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa.

78. The Paris Agreement was an important diplomatic achievement. Its implementation will require a significant level of trust and determination, with the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change needing to demonstrate an unprecedented level of ambition at its twenty-sixth session.

79. The 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons is an opportunity for the States parties to ensure that the Treaty can fulfil its fundamental goals: to prevent nuclear war and facilitate the elimination of nuclear weapons. Building upon accomplishments, while not losing sight of the greatest threats confronting Member States, requires the urgent forging of a new consensus on the best methods for achieving the goals set out in the Charter. The most pressing issues of today do not respect borders and divisions. They require a joint response.

80. Global society has never been more complex and interdependent. Intergovernmental frameworks are flanked by regional and subregional counterparts. Cities are emerging as vocal subnational actors, eager to cooperate across borders to address shared challenges. Young people and women have been at the forefront of global voices calling for a change in governance, priorities and partnerships. They ask that a future for all be built with them rather than for them. They have proven to be important actors in the prevention of conflict and crises, peacebuilding and sustaining peace, advancing human rights and sustainable development and forcing attention to be given to the climate emergency. The private sector has also grown in size and influence, becoming a significant factor in global affairs.

81. In such a context, international cooperation has to reach beyond States and across borders, sectors and generations. Success requires that efforts include local actors, civil society and the private sector and are anchored in the full and meaningful participation of women, young people and other segments of society, such as persons with disabilities. Addressing the unprecedented challenges of today with solutions fit for the twenty-first century entails extending boundaries of imagination and innovation. Heeding the demands of the young to be heard on issues that will shape their future, as called for in the political declaration adopted at the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit (General Assembly resolution [73/1](#)), is imperative.

82. Trust is a prerequisite for collective action. However, each time the shared norms are breached and commitments remain unmet, trust is eroded. At the present time of heightened tensions and new threats and anxieties, there is no alternative but to return to the foundations of the global system of collective security and to uphold the purposes, principles and central mandates of the Charter, especially as they relate to its overarching goal of prevention. Adherence to the Charter remains the most effective way to face the global challenges of today collectively, to achieve the aspirations of the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals and, as the United Nations embarks upon the next decades, to make progress on a common future.