



The largest alliance of U.S.-based international nongovernmental organizations focused on the world's poor and most vulnerable people.

May 13, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

With 10 days remaining before the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, we are hopeful that you and your administration will seize this opportunity to reverse the devastating harm being experienced by civilians in armed conflict worldwide. With U.S. leadership, the Summit must be a rallying point for a global effort to enhance adherence to international humanitarian law and restore respect for civilians in armed conflict

In February 2016, InterAction released a policy brief, [Civilians Under Fire: Restore Respect for International Humanitarian Law](#), which highlights deeply troubling trends in the conduct of armed conflict and its consequences for civilians, notably in Syria and Yemen. Today, even as ceasefires and political negotiations struggle forward, civilians continue to bear the brunt of airstrikes and other military operations in both Syria and Yemen.

If respect for civilians in armed conflict is to be restored across multiple ongoing armed conflicts, U.S. leadership is critical. Mitigation of civilian harm must be raised from the tactical margins to the strategic center of U.S. policy. It is essential that the **U.S. reaffirm its commitment to both respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and for the protections to which civilians, civilian property, and infrastructure are entitled.** In this regard, InterAction and its members welcome the positive statements by USAID Administrator Gayle Smith and Ambassador Samantha Power underscoring the importance of the protection of civilians in armed conflict. We additionally welcome the recent adoption of Security Council Resolution 2286 (2016) designed to stem the growing trend of attacks on medical facilities and personnel.

Reversing the current trends, however, will require more than statements of intent. It will require deliberate effort to cultivate a climate of legal compliance as well as complementary policies to enhance the protection of civilians in practice. This means that the U.S. must strengthen its own policies and practices while calling on others – allies and adversaries alike – to respond in kind. **By adopting and implementing standing operational policy to ensure that civilian harm is minimized in all U.S. military operations, the U.S. would systematize its own good practice learned over the past 15 years in Afghanistan and Iraq.** Leading up to and following the World Humanitarian Summit, this would set the tone to rally comparable effort and commitments by other states.

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Transnational NGO Initiative

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Nancy E. Wilson
Relief International



Further, with U.S. security interests increasingly pursued through security partnerships with state and non-state allies, it is critical that U.S. support for and cooperation with foreign forces promote compliance with international humanitarian law. **As a matter of policy, security assistance should not be provided to those whose past performance and current policies do not demonstrate the will or capacity to minimize harm to civilians during military operations.** Without robust U.S. due diligence, civilians are at risk wherever U.S. arms sales and security cooperation is extended. U.S. security assistance should be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Lastly, the U.S. should insist that **clear benchmarks for enhanced measures to mitigate civilian harm in Syria and Yemen be included in ongoing bi-lateral and multi-lateral negotiations.** These negotiations present immediate opportunities for the U.S. to champion efforts to restore respect for civilians in armed conflict and expect demonstrable changes in conduct by all parties in these ongoing armed conflicts.

Finally, if you are unable to attend the World Humanitarian Summit, **it will be important for Vice-President Biden or Secretary Kerry to join Administrator Gayle Smith in leading strong senior political level U.S. delegation in Istanbul.** This will signal to all state and non-state parties to conflict U.S. intentions to implement, and expect of others, concrete measures to minimize civilian harm during armed conflict and restore respect for international humanitarian law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam A. Worthington".

Sam Worthington
Chief Executive Officer

cc:

Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Vice President of the United States
Honorable Ashton B. Carter, United States Secretary of Defense
Honorable Secretary John Kerry, United States Secretary of State
Honorable Samantha Power, United States Ambassador to the United Nations
Honorable Susan Rice, National Security Advisor
Honorable Gayle E. Smith, Administrator, United States Agency for International Development