RESPONDING TO CONFLICT AND CRISIS
In a world marked by numerous conflicts and crises, civil society continues to mobilise. Civil society is working to protect people on the frontline, sustain lives, reach those abandoned by governments and serve the excluded groups worst affected by conflicts, including millions displaced within countries and across borders. Civil society is working to defend rights, hold to account the powerful forces committing violations and document rights abuses with a view to prosecution.

Civil society’s essential value was proved time and again in its response to the global emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. And its vital role continues to be seen amid the many conflicts that rage around the world today – not only in Ukraine but also in Ethiopia, Syria and the Sahel, among many others – and humanitarian crises in numerous other countries, such as Afghanistan, Haiti and Myanmar.

RUSSIA’S WAR ON UKRAINE

It’s now just over a year since Russia invaded Ukraine. The war’s impacts have been global, pushing up fuel and food costs, pricing essentials out of the reach of millions and driving a great wave of mass protests. The global political consequences have been major too, with renewed questioning about the international system, tensions within the European Union (EU), debate about NATO, impacts on European elections and, enabled by systematic Russian disinformation, the further spread of far-right conspiracy theories.

The war has brought huge losses of life. Almost every region of Ukraine has experienced Russian attacks. While estimates vary greatly, it’s likely tens of thousands of civilians have been killed. Evidence has mounted of human rights crimes committed on a vast scale by Russian forces. Russia’s withdrawal from Bucha last March made clear the reality of its invasion, with sickening evidence of atrocities including summary executions, rape and torture. Russia has gone as far as invoking the spectre of nuclear war to try to deter states from coming to Ukraine’s aid.

Against this grim backdrop, Ukraine’s civil society is doing things it never imagined it would. An immense voluntary effort has seen people step forward to provide essential humanitarian help. Volunteers are distributing food and medical supplies, treating the wounded and traumatised, searching for missing people, organising transport and accommodation for internally displaced people and helping the millions of Ukrainian refugees find support networks in neighbouring countries.

This is backed by international campaigning to mobilise solidarity and urge states and international institutions to take a strong line on Russia, including against its financial interests and the economic elite.

We engage with partner human rights organisations in European countries, such as France and Germany, so that they put pressure on their national governments. Some countries have continued doing business as usual with Russia, even though they have repudiated the war. We need their governments to make the kind of political decisions that will save Ukrainian lives."
Alongside these come efforts to collect evidence of human rights violations, with a view to one day holding Vladimir Putin and his circle to account for their crimes. The evidence collected could be vital for the work of United Nations (UN) monitoring mechanisms and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation launched in March.

When Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, I immediately joined a field team of investigators working day and night to document Russian war crimes in our country. Since then, our team members have collected evidence of indiscriminate shelling, targeted attacks against civilians, ecological crimes and other violations of customs of war."

As is so often the case in times of crisis, women are playing a huge role: while some women are serving in the military, overwhelmingly it’s men who’ve taken up arms, leaving women responsible for pretty much everything else. Existing civil society organisations (CSOs) have been vital too, quickly repurposing their resources towards the humanitarian and human rights response. Ukraine is showing that an investment in civil society, as part of the essential social fabric, is an investment in resilience. It can quite literally mean the difference between life and death.

Putin knows what a difference an enabled civil society can make, which is why he’s moved to further shut down Russia’s civic space. As soon as the war began, people mobilised in protest, knowing repression was certain. Vast numbers have been criminalised: over 19,000 people are estimated to have been detained. People have been arrested just for holding up blank signs in solo protests.

Censorship has seen independent media almost entirely eliminated. Last March a law was passed imposing long jail sentences for spreading what the state calls ‘false information’ about the war. Numerous media companies and CSOs have been branded as ‘foreign agents’ and shut down.

Systematic disinformation has also played a key role in the government’s effort to keep the public onside, which along with the certainty of punishment has stopped anti-war protest numbers becoming overwhelming.

"We are witnessing the establishment of military censorship. Even calling the events in Ukraine a war is prohibited. A new crime has been included in the Criminal Code: that of publicly disseminating knowingly false information about the Armed Forces."

But as the war progressed, even normally pro-state voices dared criticise the war effort, particularly following a series of reversals and the introduction of partial conscription in September – something that sparked a further wave of protests. More pressure for change may come from the families of the slain as casualties mount up.

One day Putin’s time will come to an end and there’ll be a need to rebuild Russia’s democracy. The reconstruction will need to come from the ground up, with investment in an independent civil society. To prepare the ground, acts of protest and solidarity, internationally and to the extent possible within Russia, are needed to communicate that Russians who want change are not alone. Brave dissidents who take huge risks by speaking out, whether in Russia or in exile, need to be supported as the future builders of democracy.

The international community can support Russian civil society by sharing accurate information about what is happening in the country. A majority of CSOs and activists from neighbouring countries as well as international CSOs are focused on trying to help Ukrainian people, both refugees and those left in Ukraine. This is completely understandable, but I think they shouldn’t forget the people in Russia who continue to advocate for peace and human rights."

One day Putin’s time will come to an end and there’ll be a need to rebuild Russia’s democracy. The reconstruction will need to come from the ground up, with investment in an independent civil society. To prepare the ground, acts of protest and solidarity, internationally and to the extent possible within Russia, are needed to communicate that Russians who want change are not alone. Brave dissidents who take huge risks by speaking out, whether in Russia or in exile, need to be supported as the future builders of democracy.

The international community can support Russian civil society by sharing accurate information about what is happening in the country. A majority of CSOs and activists from neighbouring countries as well as international CSOs are focused on trying to help Ukrainian people, both refugees and those left in Ukraine. This is completely understandable, but I think they shouldn’t forget the people in Russia who continue to advocate for peace and human rights."

One day Putin’s time will come to an end and there’ll be a need to rebuild Russia’s democracy. The reconstruction will need to come from the ground up, with investment in an independent civil society. To prepare the ground, acts of protest and solidarity, internationally and to the extent possible within Russia, are needed to communicate that Russians who want change are not alone. Brave dissidents who take huge risks by speaking out, whether in Russia or in exile, need to be supported as the future builders of democracy.
end of 2022, around **eight million** Ukrainians – 20 per cent of the country’s pre-war population – had become refugees.

But away from the spotlight multiple other crises continued to unfold. Conflicts, disasters such as floods and droughts, food scarcity, violence, political persecution, economic strife and climate change all drove displacement, and not only from global south to global north countries but also between global south countries and, on a huge scale, within countries.

Twelve years into their country’s conflict, Syrians remain the **largest displaced population** in the world, having fled violence, tyranny and widespread human rights abuses. Nearly 5.6 million Syrian refugees are currently registered as living in nearby countries, far more than have made their way to Europe.

The world seems to be starting to forget Syrian refugees. No one is talking about Syrian refugees anymore. But the fact that new crises are happening doesn’t mean the situation of Syrian refugees has improved and the issue disappeared."

SERENE DARDARI AND MAHMOUD ABDULLAH
American Near East Refugee Aid, Lebanon

In Europe, the presence of migrants from Syria and other Asian and African countries has provoked a significant public backlash encouraged by far-right groups: this has played a key role in growing support for far-right parties and politicians, as exemplified by recent tilts to the right in **Italy** and **Sweden**. In Italy, civil society is once again being **criminalised** for rescuing migrants in danger at sea.
Traditionally Syrians have encountered a warmer reception in neighbouring countries, but that’s changing, notably in Turkey. The country is home to the highest number of Syrian refugees, estimated at 3.5 million. Authoritarian president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long instrumentalised migrants to extract resources and concessions from the EU. But as a severe cost of living crisis struck, throwing the result of the May 2023 election into doubt, Erdoğan’s response was to make refugees a target. There’s also been little improvement in the lives of Rohingya refugees forced to flee Myanmar, where they’ve long been denied citizenship. In Bangladesh they’re subjected to stifling restrictions on their ability to speak out, while in India they’re exposed to anti-Muslim hatred. Their plight seems largely forgotten, and now the army that unleashed genocidal violence against them rules their country. While they wait for a chance to return, they continue to fight for less hostile treatment in host countries. Xenophobia has surged and led to violence, and people have been threatened with deportation to Syria, including in retaliation for speaking out. At the same time the government has pushed back people escaping the Taliban’s theocratic rule in Afghanistan. In a political race to the bottom, opposition politicians are competing over who has the toughest stance on migration. The situation worsened further with the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Turkey in February 2023, with displaced people in northern Syria among those most badly affected and struggling to get help. There hasn’t been any change to our situation since 2017. It’s true there have been meetings about the Rohingya and many organisations and groups have issued statements regarding our situation. However, all these meetings and statements have brought no positive outcome. The solutions offered to end the conflict still equal zero.”

Finding more solidarity are the masses of Venezuelans who’ve spread across Latin America fleeing economic meltdown and political oppression. Between 2015 and 2022, a staggering seven million Venezuelans left, with the greatest number making their way to Colombia. Venezuelan migrants face discrimination and multiple forms of exclusion, and there have been anti-migrant protests in Chile and Peru, but what makes a positive difference is the virtual absence of top-down xenophobia exercised for political gain.

People continue to put themselves in immense physical danger to migrate. In Latin America they’re crossing the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama – 60 miles of dense rainforest and swamps, home to violent criminal gangs – and setting out to sea from the coasts of Cuba in the hope of reaching the USA. Across the world, the Mediterranean continues to be one of the most treacherous migration routes, with people putting themselves at the mercy of trafficking gangs and taking to sea in inadequate small boats because restrictions have made safer routes impossible. While numbers remain down on the 2015 peak, they’re still high, with almost 600,000 arriving and nearly 2,000 dead or missing in 2022 alone. In the UK, the ruling party and its media mouthpieces have stoked a moral panic about small boats crossing the English Channel. In April, the government announced a deal to deport asylum-seekers to Rwanda, apparently to try to deter people from crossing. The consequence is that people could be dumped in a country they have no connection to that’s an authoritarian state with an appalling human rights record.
Politicised migration anxiety has mobilised across Europe. Another flashpoint is provided by Spain’s enclaves in Morocco, where people gather to try to enter EU territory. Several people died in a mass crossing attempt in June, highlighting the dangers of a security-driven approach to migration and the lack of accountability over rights violations.

Migration remains a major political issue in the USA too. In 2022 border crossings by undocumented migrants reportedly topped 2.76 million, breaking the previous record by more than a million. This increase was driven largely by Venezuelans, followed by Cubans and Nicaraguans, showing how political repression can be a driver of migration. Venezuelans have arrived in such numbers that it’s forced a change of policy: a limited humanitarian permit is now available to them, but not for other nationals.

2022 showed that this is a world of migration. People will stay on the move because the multiple crises that uproot them will continue to occur. But policies that deny this reality continue to dominate. States seek to reinforce defences rather than address the root causes of migration.

The warm welcome that in the main has been extended to Ukrainians, even by right-wing leaders used to stoking xenophobia for political gain, contrasts sharply with the lack of hospitality afforded to others. But as they proved themselves able to respond efficiently and with compassion to a migration crisis, EU states made clear that hostility towards non-white, non-Christian migrants isn’t an inevitability but rather a conscious political choice.

The political elite treats migration as a problem to be controlled, a phenomenon that endangers the welfare and values of our countries, and that must therefore be stopped at all costs. The reality is different: migration will not stop happening. Attempts to stop it will only cause more suffering for the migrants who pass through the checkpoints.

Russia’s war on Ukraine might seem mostly a global north concern: that’s one interpretation of UN voting patterns on resolutions on Russia, which have seen much more consistent condemnation of Putin by global north states than global south states.

But the conflict far transcends Europe’s boundaries. Mercenaries from the Wagner group – a shadowy organisation headed by Putin inner circle member Yevgeny Prigozhin – have played an increasing role not only in Ukraine but also in several African countries. Since the start of the Ukraine war, Russia has stepped up its diplomatic offensive in Africa, which may be a factor in the unwillingness of several African states to condemn the invasion.

An ongoing wave of jihadist insurgency across the Sahel is endangering people’s lives, bringing numerous human rights violations and displacing many. Originally governments turned to France, the former colonial power, to provide armed forces. In Mali, where insurgency first rose in 2012, jihadist-occupied territory was reclaimed, but the conflict continues and has spread to neighbouring countries. Over time, dissatisfaction with the role of French troops, and to a lesser extent UN forces, has grown.

In Mali, a military coup in August 2020, followed by the ousting of the civilian-headed transitional regime in May 2021, precipitated a French departure. Relations between the two governments deteriorated, and the last French troops left in August. Wagner forces have stepped in. Because the group is so opaque it’s hard to estimate how many are deployed, and Mali’s junta has insisted Russian officers are merely playing an advisory role – but eyewitness accounts
indicate they’re involved in active conflict. It’s also clear civilians are being targeted. Meanwhile the insurgency continues to advance: studies show that experience of rights violations by security forces is a key driver in extremist recruitment.

There’s no accountability over these forces, which are accused of atrocities, notably in the Central African Republic (CAR), where the group has long operated. Further, Wagner forces extract mineral wealth – they’re often paid in gold or oil – diverting resources from development and delivering them to the Kremlin.

In Mali and other countries of the region, many people oppose French troops. There have been numerous anti-France protests with people waving Russian flags. People are angry at France’s colonial role, but they also see its forces as ineffective. Opinions have been influenced by a pro-Russian disinformation campaign unleashed in Mali and other Sahel countries.

For Mali’s military government, the switch is a way of resisting pressure to step aside: France condemned the coup, while Russia obviously makes no calls for democracy. There’s no semblance of democracy in the CAR, and Burkina Faso is on a similar trajectory following two coups in 2022. In January 2023 its junta also ordered French troops to leave.

Some civil society leaders have spoken out in support of distancing from France. But the connection between Mali’s embrace of Wagner and the denial of democracy was made clear in November, when the junta banned the activities of CSOs receiving French support, in apparent retaliation for France suspending aid to the government. At a stroke
this affected civil society’s ability to provide humanitarian help to those affected by the conflict and to scrutinise the government.

In February 2023, another ominous sign came with the expulsion of the head of the UN’s peacekeeping mission’s human rights division over his choice of civil society witnesses of rights violations.

Civil society needs to be able to play its proper roles, not least so there can be democratic debate about the role of Russian forces, scrutiny over rights abuses and discussion of sustainable security alternatives.

One particular focus of advocacy is the US government’s freezing of Afghan central bank assets, recently transferred to a Swiss fund. Civil society is calling for their full release, and for much more international aid. Global north states that occupied Afghanistan before their chaotic pull-out have a particular responsibility. They need to be guided by the voices of Afghan civil society, in the country and in the diaspora, to both alleviate human suffering and push for the Taliban to roll back their human rights abuses.

The entire Afghan population is on the receiving end of collective punishment due to the sanctions imposed on the Afghan state. The international community should work hard to differentiate between targeted sanctions that focus on individuals within the Taliban and projects that ensure Afghans have a chance at survival.”

Myanmar’s democracy movement sees the regional intergovernmental organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as having failed them. The UN human rights machinery continues to collect evidence of atrocities, and in December the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the military’s rights violations. But while some states have imposed sanctions, these haven’t been applied to the crucial state-owned oil and gas company, and many countries continue to do business with the regime.

International civil society pressure has increasingly targeted companies that collaborate with military-controlled corporations. Some have divested, but this has led to some key assets – notably a mobile phone network once majority-owned by the Norwegian government – being handed over to military allies. Responsible divestment is needed, particularly by the fossil fuel companies that continue to reap vast profits by associating with the blood-soaked regime.

Myanmar is also home to a forgotten conflict. February 2023 marked two years since the military coup. Military rule has been bloody, with democracy activists executed and civilians killed in airstrikes and ground warfare between the army and the armed rebellion that has joined forces with ethnic militias. Over a million people have been displaced. Many civil society personnel, along with journalists and opposition politicians, have been jailed, often following unfair trials in military tribunals: there are almost 14,000 political prisoners. Detainees are subject to torture and ill-treatment. Many CSOs have been forced to suspend operations.

International civil society pressure has increasingly targeted companies that collaborate with military-controlled corporations. Some have divested, but this has led to some key assets – notably a mobile phone network once majority-owned by the Norwegian government – being handed over to military allies. Responsible divestment is needed, particularly by the fossil fuel companies that continue to reap vast profits by associating with the blood-soaked regime.
I believe nothing lasts forever and this too will pass. The junta will have to leave at some point. We need to continue our struggle with a clear vision of the future that is centred on human rights and democracy. And we need support from the international community so those struggling on the ground will one day see their dreams come true.

Henry has no legitimacy to call for any military intervention. The international community can help, but it is not up to them to decide whether to intervene or not. We first need to have a two-year political transition with a credible government. We have ideas, but at this point, we need to see a transition.

Conflict continues in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the M23 insurgent force controls large parts of the mineral-rich eastern region and many armed groups, some linked to neighbouring African states, are engaged in a struggle over resources. It’s clear that Rwanda’s authoritarian government supports M23, although it continues to deny it. Conflict resurfaced with an M23 push in March. An East African Community peace process led to a ceasefire agreement in November, but M23 rejected it and fighting broke out again the following month. In January 2023, Rwandan forces shot down a DRC fighter jet, further escalating tensions.

In October, Haiti’s acting leader Ariel Henry called for UN foreign security assistance. But many Haitians are worried because any troops would likely come from the USA, which has a dismal history of intervention in Haiti. Civil society has come together to suggest a consultative, transitional process to address the crisis and develop democracy. Any international response must be informed by local voices.

In anger and frustration at insecurity, people have joined anti-Rwanda and anti-UN protests. A UN peacekeeping force has been in the DRC for over two decades, but like French forces in the Sahel, many see it as ineffective, and peacekeepers have been accused of killing civilians. Protests against UN forces turned violent in July, leaving at least 36 people dead. Civil society movements are part of the protests but they’re also calling out their government’s rights abuses and failure to protect them. They demand locally accountable forces that, crucially, uphold human rights and don’t use violence against civilians. Ongoing neglect by democratic states can only further open the door to influence by autocratic regimes including China and Russia, with mineral resources an enticing prize. States that have built warm relations with Rwanda by ignoring its human rights abuses need to stop overlooking its evident role in stoking conflict in the region.

The international community has been hypocritical and has always prioritised their own needs. It is unfortunate that the recent events are happening in a mineral-rich area of our country. Many powerful people have interests there and are willing to do anything to ensure they are protected. That is why so few countries are speaking up against what is happening.
UNEASY PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

The war in Ethiopia’s Tigray region was brought to what must be hoped is a permanent end after two years in November, with a ceasefire brokered by the African Union. Ethiopia’s federal government has triumphed in its battle with Tigray separatist forces and their allies, but the costs have been huge all round. While casualty figures are disputed, it’s clear hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions displaced. All parties in the combat are accused of war crimes and acts of genocide. Ethiopia’s blockade of Tigray precipitated a humanitarian crisis. For months no aid was allowed in, leaving people desperately short of food, water and healthcare.

Civic space suffered. There was a campaign of mass imprisonment of Tigrayans, seemingly locked up purely on grounds of their ethnicity. Internet shutdowns were imposed and journalists consistently targeted as the government sought to control the flow of information. Many journalists have been harassed, numerous have been detained and several foreign reporters have been expelled. Some international CSOs providing humanitarian aid have experienced bans.

The government also sought to limit international scrutiny. UN monitoring found evidence of crimes under international law, but this was likely an
underestimate of the true scale of abuses. The government refused to cooperate with a UN Human Rights Council commission established in 2021 following civil society advocacy.

There’s still considerable simmering resentment, not just in Tigray but across Ethiopia’s complex patchwork of ethnic and regional identities and interests. The federal government mustn’t seek to impose a victor’s justice. It needs to invest in reconciliation. This must include openness and accountability over all crimes committed, including by the central government and its allied Eritrean forces. An absence of trust means the international community has a key role to play. But Ethiopia is yet another crisis that powerful states and international bodies have neglected – the UN commission’s work, for example, is under-resourced. Now they need to take peace seriously.

CIVIL SOCIETY A PATHWAY TO PEACE

Apart from Ethiopia’s ceasefire, none of these conflicts and crises were resolved as 2022 gave way to 2023. Even what Putin surely thought would be a lightning-quick strike on Ukraine has lasted more than a year. Conflicts and crises spanning multiple years require a committed response from the international community, motivated by humanitarian and human rights impulses and informed by local voices.

The vital role of civil society was again recognised in 2022 with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to activists and organisations in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, working to uphold human rights at the heart of conflict. But their reward, in Belarus and Russia, was renewed persecution. There’s no better summation of the gulf between the recognition of civil society needed and the reality of its repression.

There’s no way of resolving a crisis, building peace and fostering reconciliation in the absence of a diverse, adequately resourced and enabled civil society, working in conditions where civic space is respected rather than restricted. It’s about time that lesson was learned.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Around the world, conflicts are causing avoidable devastation on an untold scale, with immense economic, environmental, social and human costs. Civil society should continue to advocate and campaign against militarisation and warmongering and intensify peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives.

2. The documentation of war crimes and collection of evidence of human rights violations is a cornerstone of efforts to bring accountability. Civil society should continue to engage with the international human rights machinery in collecting evidence, and international organisations should commit to working with civil society to document violations with a view to prosecution.

3. Civil society has long stood up for migrants, refugees and displaced people, including by providing essential services and advocating for their rights. It must urge states to respect the 1951 Refugee Convention and contribute to developing new international standards recognising the reality of migration and the rights of people on the move.