CONFLICT AND CRISIS: A WORLD IN DISARRAY
A WORLD OF CONFLICT

So many people in so many parts of the world can’t take the basics of life for granted. They can’t assume when they wake in the morning they’ll live to see another day. They can’t count on clean water and something to eat. If they get injured or ill, they can’t be sure of treatment. They can’t rely on being able to access reliable information about the conflict they’re trying to survive or being able to tell the world their story. They can’t trust their government to protect them – in many cases, their government is the aggressor. They can’t have faith the international community will come to their aid either. If they’re forced to flee, they can’t expect compassion.

Around the world, one in six people are currently exposed to conflict. Conflict-related deaths are at their highest in decades, with civilian casualties up 62 per cent in 2023 compared to 2022. De-escalation doesn’t seem likely: global military spending hit a record US$2.2 trillion over the last year.

Israel’s assault on Gaza has rocked the world. The need to end the carnage is immediate – but even after a ceasefire the impacts will be felt for decades, from a generational trauma to heal to the vast task of physical reconstruction. It will also take a huge international effort to hold the perpetrators responsible for grotesque human rights violations to account.

Gaza is the site of today’s most sickening conflict – and one that threatens to spill out into the wider region – but it’s sadly far from the only one. Among others, Russia continues to wage its deadly war on Ukraine, civilians suffer as military fights militia in Sudan and bloody conflict rages in Myanmar three years after a military coup. Even in places where wars supposedly ended – as in Ethiopia and Nagorno-Karabakh – violence, rights abuses and impunity continue.

Alongside immediate casualties and injuries, conflict is causing huge environmental damage and devastating climate harm. Military forces are estimated to account for 5.5 per cent of total greenhouse
gas emissions, equivalent to those of the fourth highest-emitting country in the world. Under the Paris Agreement there’s no requirement for states to report their military emissions, and hardly any choose to, making it hard for civil society to pressure states to cut them. Civil society is urging disarmament to save human lives, realise human rights, and protect climate and planet.

Civil society is working on every front possible to respond to conflicts. It’s providing essential services, offering protection, helping people forced from their homes, sharing information, calling for fighting to stop, urging the international community to act, demanding justice for human rights crimes and advocating for de-escalation, disarmament and peacebuilding.

But belligerents are attacking civil society for playing these roles. In many cases, soldiers and rebels directly target people trying to deliver vital humanitarian help. Journalists trying to share unvarnished truths are under fire too: 99 journalists and media workers were killed as a result of their work in 2023. Perpetrators of violence are flouting long-established international human rights and humanitarian laws confident of impunity. Civil society calls for an end to conflicts and for everyone to learn the lessons on how to prevent violence, protect rights and build peace.

Unceasing slaughter in Gaza

The slaughter is unrelenting. Apart from one brief pause in November, Israel’s bombardment of Gaza has been ceaseless. At the time of writing, negotiations for a second temporary ceasefire are underway. It’s urgently needed, but beyond that, the assault must permanently end.

Already some 30,000 people have been killed and almost everyone has been forced from their homes. This is infamy that will resound through the ages.

Israel could never avoid mass civilian casualties when it decided to bombard the small and densely populated territory of Gaza, most of which Israeli forces have reduced to rubble. People have been forced to flee several times, pushed south into areas they were told would be safe, only for Israel to bomb them regardless. Israel may launch a further ground offensive at any moment. People are trapped, up against a sealed border.

There’s no doubting the horror of the attacks perpetrated by Hamas and other groups in Israel on 7 October. Those behind...
them deserve to face justice, and hostages must walk free. But Israel’s response clearly constitutes collective punishment – penalising a population group for acts committed by some of its members – that presumes Gazans must be guilty simply because of who they are and where they live. This is a war crime under the Geneva Conventions. Israel has blanket blamed civilians for failing to stop an attack that caught everyone by surprise. On 7 October, Gazan civilians were merely doing their best to go about their daily lives in already incredibly difficult circumstances. They’re not at fault.

Israel’s war on Gaza looks like nothing other than a bloodthirsty campaign of revenge from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – and it may be no coincidence that a state of war is probably his only means to ensure political survival.

Civil society is trying to mount a humanitarian response, but the Israeli government continues to choke aid supplies. Much international aid sits stuck at the border in defiance of a December United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution and International Court of Justice (ICJ) provisional orders issued in February 2024 instructing Israel to allow full humanitarian access. The predictable result is rising hunger, lack of clean water and growing health problems with most hospitals destroyed.

Humanitarian work is dangerous: at least 167 aid workers have been killed, the highest number of any conflict this century. Reporting on the conflict brings huge risk as well. More than three quarters of journalists and media workers killed in 2023 died in Gaza over just a few months.

Palestinians and Israelis desperately need civil society – with its ability to provide aid, support peacebuilding and demand accountability – but the first reaction of many donors was to make activists’ work harder. In the aftermath of the 7 October attacks, several European states suspended or announced a review of their support to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Palestine and Israel.

They did so on at best flimsy evidence that money might be diverted towards terrorism, or because they falsely conflated criticism of actions of the state of Israel with antisemitism. This deeply disturbing development played into the hands of an Israeli government that has long slurred and restricted civil society. Civil society is besieged. For 30 years, the Israeli occupation has undermined the work of CSOs, disabling their role in promoting self-reliant development, political change and an end to the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. In recent years, the occupation government has become more explicit in suppressing CSOs, directly closing them down, confiscating their assets and arresting their staff. The occupation also imposes restrictions on the funding of CSOs. The political conditions on funding imposed by European and particularly US funders have led to the cessation of work by hundreds of CSOs.

Around the world millions of people have responded with empathy, taking to the streets to show solidarity with Palestinians, demand a ceasefire and call on their governments to pressure Israel to stop the bloodshed. And they’ve faced backlash from authorities. Politicians have mischaracterised many protests as antisemitic or as showing support for terrorism. In the UK, the then home secretary called them ‘hate marches’ and said waving the Palestine flag or chanting pro-Palestine slogans may be a criminal offence.

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In France, the government sought to impose a blanket ban on pro-Palestine demonstrations, but a court ruled these protests can only be banned on a case-by-case basis. Police broke up a prohibited protest in Paris with teargas and water cannon. In Germany, authorities have permitted some protests but banned others. Police used force when around a thousand people came to a prohibited pro-Palestine vigil in Berlin. In Australia, police in Sydney announced they’d use ‘extraordinary powers’ to search and demand identification from people attending a pro-Palestine demonstration. These violations of protest rights are just a few examples of state responses to demonstrations during the early stages of the onslaught, and they’ve continued since.

Restrictions aren’t limited to protests. In the USA, pro-Palestine groups have reported experiencing harassment and intimidation, critics of the Israeli state have had media appearances pulled and Muslim broadcasters have been taken off air. Academic freedom is at risk, with some wealthy donors threatening to stop supporting universities whose staff and students are perceived to support the Palestinian cause. Social media companies are accused of censoring or shadow banning – hiding from prominence – Palestinian and pro-Palestine posts.

These reactions have reinforced long-running efforts to curtail people’s ability to call for boycotts of Israel. The global boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement has long urged peaceful tactics to put pressure on the Israeli state to comply with international human rights laws, of the kind that helped build momentum for the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Most US states have already adopted anti-BDS laws, often based on a model law promoted by pro-Israel lobbying groups, and efforts continue to introduce a federal-level law. French authorities have used an anti-discrimination law to limit BDS efforts, and in the UK, the government has introduced an anti-boycott bill that would prevent any public body making an investment decision on the basis of ethical concerns about a country. The draft law explicitly mentions Israel. These measures often equate criticism of Israel’s human rights record with antisemitism, making it harder for people to speak out.
The fact that the anti-boycott bill and rhetoric around it conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism will contribute to the chilling effect that makes rights advocates feel less able to criticise Israel for fear of being labelled antisemitic. In the long term, by setting up Jews and Jewish safety in opposition to other civil and human rights struggles, this bill will end up pitting minority communities against each other.

Despite the challenges, global civil society continues to pressure international organisations and call on states to demand a ceasefire and urge restraint from Israel. And it has had successes. In February 2024, after three CSO field a lawsuit, a court ordered the Dutch government to stop the export of parts for F-35 fighter planes to Israel. The court concluded there was a clear risk these could be used in serious violations of international humanitarian law. The Dutch government is however now appealing the decision. Civil society launched a similar case in the UK, currently subject to an appeal after an initial court ruling in the government’s favour.

We brought this lawsuit because no government should allow transfers of weapons to a state committing war crimes. The court made clear that violations of international humanitarian law don’t need to be proved and that a ‘clear risk’ of such violations suffices. It also rejected claims by the government that information provided by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and by UN special rapporteurs could not be credibly verified. Instead, it said that such sources must be taken ‘extremely seriously’.

Momentum to cut off the arms supply may build further after the ICJ’s provisional ruling. In the wake of the court’s orders, for example, Japanese company Itochu Corp announced it would end its cooperation with an Israeli weapons manufacturer.

Many more such actions are needed to stop the situation spinning even further out of control. There are clear signs of a potential regional escalation, with Hezbollah and Israel exchanging strikes and attacks on Red Sea shipping by Yemen’s Houthi rebels bringing US and UK strikes in return. This escalation needs to stop. All belligerents should heed civil society’s continuing calls for an immediate and lasting ceasefire.

Russia’s war on Ukraine in its third year

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine entered its third year in February 2024, showing how supposed discrete military actions can become protracted conflicts. The war has become an inch-by-inch battle for territory. It’s brought disastrous consequences for civilians, with over 10,000 killed and widespread human rights violations. As in Gaza, journalists and media workers are paying a heavy price with at least 69 killed to date.

While Ukrainian civil society offers an immense voluntary effort, Russian activists face intense constraints.
In Ukraine, civil society is working to evacuate civilians from occupied areas, rehabilitate wounded people and restore damaged buildings. It’s also documenting and collecting evidence of Russia’s many crimes, hoping to hold Vladimir Putin and his circle to international justice. The Tribunal for Putin (T4P), an initiative of three Ukrainian CSOs, among them Nobel Peace Prize winner the Center for Civil Liberties, gathers and logs details of human rights crimes, developing an evidence base that could be used by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other bodies to pursue justice. Last August it presented the ICC with evidence of acts of genocide by Russian forces in Mariupol.

Ukrainian civil society has increasingly focused on challenging corruption, reflecting increased public interest in how state agencies are spending money, including international aid, amid concerns that support could dry up if donors think funds aren’t used well. Civil society initiatives are trying to make reconstruction corruption-free, including by using online tools to track public spending. The Better Regulation Delivery Office, an independent civil society think tank, is working to investigate and prevent corruption in building reconstruction and restoration.

At the same time, the extended conflict has taken an inevitable toll on people’s ability to respond. Volunteering dropped from incredibly high levels of 80 per cent of people in the early months of the war to half that figure in the second year. Ukraine’s civil society response to the war needs sustained international support.

Meanwhile Russia continues to pay a backhanded compliment to the importance of civil society by suppressing it through every possible means. The most shocking recent event is the suspicious death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in an Arctic penal colony. He’s the latest in a long list of people to come to a sudden end after falling out with Putin. State-directed murder – as many deem Navalny’s death – is the most extreme form of repression, but Putin has plenty more tricks up his sleeve. One is criminalisation of protests, seen when people showed up at improvised vigils to commemorate Navalny. Police arrested hundreds.

Human rights organisation OVD-Info reports that at the time of writing, since the start of the full-scale invasion the authorities have detained 19,855 people at anti-war protests, brought 897 criminal cases against anti-war activists and introduced 51 new repressive laws.

Among the many Russians jailed for symbolic acts of protest, Crimean artist Bohdan Zizu received a 15-year sentence in June for spray-painting a building in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. In November, a court sentenced artist Alexandra Skochilenko to seven years in jail for placing information about the war on supermarket price tags. Authorities are even criminalising people helping Ukrainian refugees living in Russia.

In January 2023, the authorities declared Meduza, one of Russia’s few remaining independent media outlets, an ‘undesirable organisation’, in effect banning it from operating in Russia and criminalising anyone who shares its content. In June, it was independent TV channel Dozhd’s turn. Others received the same label as the year went on.

A court ordered the shutdown of the Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia’s oldest human rights organisation, on a registration technicality in January 2023. In August, courts ordered the closure of another human rights organisation, the Sakharov Center. Through similar means the authorities have forced several other CSOs out of existence or into exile.
The state has designated numerous people and organisations as ‘foreign agents’, a classification intended to stigmatise them as associated with espionage. In November, it added the Moscow Times to the list. In February 2024, Putin approved a law that allows the government to confiscate money and other assets from people who criticise the war. The government has also doubled down on attacks on LGBTQI+ people as part of its strategy to inflame nationalist sentiments.

The state is criminalising journalists as well. In March, it detained Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich on spying charges, sending a signal that international journalists aren’t safe. The authorities are also holding Russian-US journalist Alsu Kurmasheva of Radio Free Europe, detained while paying a family visit to Russia. Putin is likely planning to use them as leverage for prisoner swaps. State authorities have put other journalists based outside Russia on wanted lists or charged them in absentia.

It’s hard to hope for any let-up in the crackdown, at least as long as the war lasts. A non-competitive election will approve another term for Putin in March. No credible candidates are allowed to oppose him, and in February 2024 an anti-war politician who’d unexpectedly emerged to provide a focus for dissent was banned from standing. Last year the government amended laws to further restrict media coverage of the election, making it harder to report on fraud.

For a time last year, Putin seemed weakened when his former ally Yevgeny Prigozhin rebelled, marching his Wagner Group mercenaries on Moscow. The two sides agreed a deal to end the dispute, and two months later, Prigozhin died in a suspicious plane crash. The Russian state now directly controls the mercenaries.

Putin has since reasserted his authority. He may be gaining the upper hand in the war. Russia has greater firepower and is largely surviving attempts to isolate it financially, with repressive regimes such as China, India and Turkey picking up the slack in demand for its fossil fuels. It’s turned itself into a war economy, with state spending strongly focused on the military effort, although it won’t be sustainable in the long term. Some of the world’s most authoritarian governments – Iran and North Korea – are supplying weapons.
Meanwhile Ukrainian forces are running out of ammunition. Support for Ukraine has come under strain due to political shifts in Europe and the breaking of political consensus in the USA, with Trump-affiliated Republicans seeking to block further military aid.

Putin may be riding high, but such is the level of state control it’s hard to get an accurate picture of how popular he is, and the election will offer no evidence. Given repression, protest levels may not tell the full story either – but some have still broken out, including those in response to Navalny’s death.

A vital current of dissent has formed around unhappiness with war losses. Last September, an independent poll suggested that support for the war stood at a record low. Morale among Russian troops is reportedly poor and deserters have called on others to quit. Families of men serving in the military have protested to demand the fighting ends.

Protesters have offered other moments of opposition. In November, people held a demonstration in Siberia against a local initiative to further restrict protests. In January 2024, in Baymak in southern Russia, hundreds protested against the jailing of an activist.

Moments don’t make a movement, but can offer inspiration that turns into one, something that often happens unexpectedly. Putin’s story is far from over. As with other tyrants before, he’ll likely look invincible until just before he falls.

Sudan’s forgotten conflict

With global attention focused on Gaza and Ukraine, little else makes the headlines. The civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia that began in April 2023 has almost completely fallen off the world’s radar. But it has created a vast humanitarian crisis – not just in Sudan but in the surrounding countries that many have fled to, particularly Chad. Sudan’s civil society is offering solutions, but the international community isn’t listening.

The war is a battle for supremacy between two rival leaders who’d previously worked together in the military government: Abdel Fattah al-Burhan leads the SAF and Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, commands the RSF, which emerged from the notorious Janjaweed militias.

Conflict initially played out on the streets of the capital, Khartoum, and its neighbouring city of Omdurman, but has since spread to other parts of Sudan. Darfur is on fire, with the RSF accused of door-to-door killings of Masalit people and other ethnic groups, mirroring the genocide of Indigenous people perpetrated by the Janjaweed in the early 2000s. In December, the RSF took control of the major city of Wad Madani. Fighting has also flared in the mountainous Kordofan region. Meanwhile, the battles for Khartoum and Omdurman haven’t stopped, and SAF troops scored a rare victory there in February 2024.

Sudan’s civil society is diverse. There’s a tier with a track record of involvement in political processes that backed the supposedly transitional administration that emerged after the 2021 coup. There are established CSOs that advocate for rights and provide essential services. And then there are the resistance committees: neighbourhood-level groups that formed to play a crucial role in
the 2019 revolution that ousted former dictator Omar al-Bashir and that have continued to defy military rule.

The committees practise internal democracy, making decisions by consensus, and have consistently called for democratic government. They reject the calculations of the outside world, which tried to engineer a form of military rule to guarantee stability that would inherently result in oppression. During the conflict, they’ve also become a key provider of essentials such as food and water, healthcare services and life-saving information.

Diverse resistance committees worked together to develop a plan for transition, but domestic forces and the outside world consistently reject demands for democratic civilian rule as somehow too ambitious. Now the army is targeting people involved in resistance committees.

Attacks on civil society are part of a broader wave of violence towards civilians by the SAF, RSF and other militias. The UN has reported that since April, over 12,000 people have been killed and 7.76 million people have been displaced, giving Sudan the unenviable record of having the world’s highest number of displaced people. Cholera has broken out in the chaos along with other diseases such as dengue fever, malaria and measles, putting the health system under unprecedented strain. In the worst-affected regions, food, water and essential medications are scarce.

Armed forces are targeting humanitarian workers, hindering their ability to provide vital help, and journalists. On top of this, at the start of December the SAF-led government terminated the mandate of the UN Integrated Assistance Mission in Sudan, which was tasked with supporting transition to democratic rule.

Outside states are making self-interested calculations about which side to back, since Sudan’s size and position between East and North Africa give it strategic significance. The United Arab Emirates is reportedly supplying the RSF with arms. Russian mercenaries also seem to be on its side. Both countries have an interest in Sudan’s goldmines. On the other side, Egypt has always backed the military establishment, Iran may be supplying Burhan with weapons, and Ukraine special forces are reportedly engaged on SAF’s side.

Meanwhile states aren’t providing anywhere near the aid needed: at the year’s end, the UN reported it had received only 39 per cent of the funding it appealed for.

Outside states have consistently been guilty of wishful thinking, assuming the only way to ensure stability is to work with military leaders. Every process attempted since the 2021 coup has empowered the military leaders now at war, showing the folly of this approach.

The current conflict makes the strongest possible case for democratisation instead of continuing military rule. Power should belong to neither of the warring generals but to all the people of Sudan. The international community should take grassroots civil society, and particularly the resistance committees, seriously.
Sahel: military rule fails to make a difference

Elsewhere across the Sahel, armies have taken over several states in recent years. In 2023, Niger joined its neighbours Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali in being run by the military. As in previous cases, a key justification the army used was the failure of civilian government to get to grips with a jihadist insurgency that has sprawled across borders.

States in the region under military rule have typically moved away from old relationships with the west, particularly former colonial power France, and also UN bodies, embracing closer cooperation with Russia. This often means welcoming Russian mercenaries who extract resources such as gold in return for fighting insurgents. Most mercenaries come from what was the Wagner Group, rebranded as the Africa Corps following its takeover by Putin.

Russian mercenaries are reportedly involved in as many as 18 African countries. In Mali, they actively take part in combat – and have killed civilians. Increased Russian involvement is often preceded by intensive campaigns of pro-Russia, anti-France disinformation, as seems to have been the case in Niger.

There’s generally high public support for military coups and shifts towards Russia, based on a narrative of past failures to tackle the security crisis. People whose lives are plagued by insecurity tend to be ready to embrace anything new that promises to change the situation. This trend can also be seen in El Salvador, where the president is currently highly popular thanks to draconian security policies that have subdued gang violence, enabling him to accumulate and concentrate power.

The Niger junta has so far followed the pattern. When Mali’s government kicked French forces out, Niger became the base for France’s regional military operations. Social movements in Niger protested to demand French withdrawal and people waved Russian flags when celebrating the coup. The junta tore up military cooperation agreements with France and suspended French broadcasters. In October, it ordered the UN’s top official in Niger to leave. In December, it ended two military agreements with the European Union (EU) and met with Russian military officials. The head of Chad’s junta also met with Putin in January 2024, signalling a potential shift from its former strong alignment with the west.

However, there’s no evidence military rule or the import of Russian mercenaries make any difference to the security situation. They haven’t in the countries that had military coups in previous years. The insurgency continues and the violence has, if anything, increased, while the humanitarian situation has only worsened.

There’s another problem for civil society. Even if some civil society groups initially welcome coups in response to insecurity,
Juntas invariably crack down on civic freedoms. In Niger, the new government has restricted protests and the media, following in the footsteps of Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali. These restrictions will ultimately make it harder for civil society to call for change when disaffection kicks in again.

Myanmar’s coup-turned-conflict

It’s three years since Myanmar’s coup, and ingrained conflict has set in. The military held power for decades in the past, so the generals may have suspected little resistance when they toppled the elected government in February 2021. But the ousted National Unity Government is fighting a military campaign, in many cases alongside long-established ethnic militia groups. Major parts of the country aren’t under the army’s control.

Civil society is doing all it can to respond to humanitarian needs, defend human rights and seek a path to peace. Civil society groups in Myanmar and the region have developed a plan calling for an international response to end military violence, including through sanctions, an arms embargo and an ICC referral.

Civil society is also demanding that the key regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), gives the conflict priority and talks to the many groups seeking a return to democracy. So far that hasn’t happened, with ASEAN sticking to a long-discredited plan and governments in the region showing signs of wanting to normalise relations with the junta. Little progress can be expected as the authoritarian government of Laos chairs the organisation in 2024.

Laos has designated a seasoned diplomat as the ASEAN Special Envoy, tasked with meeting junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar. However, the lack of a clear agenda for engaging with supporters of democracy such as the National Unity Government, the National Unity Consultative Council and the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations raises doubts that ASEAN is playing a progressive role. Given historical and political ties between the military junta and the government of Laos, concerns linger about ASEAN’s alignment with the interests of people in Myanmar.

But sticking to the same path can only mean further carnage. Violence intensified during 2023. In November, three armed groups in the north joined the fight against the junta, forming the Brotherhood Alliance. In what the UN said was the biggest escalation in fighting since the coup, the rebel offensive cut off key trading routes with China. It seems clear the junta can’t win this conflict in the short term.

Pushed into a corner, the military reacted with sickening violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar reports that the junta has bombed hospitals, schools, villages and displaced people’s camps. Its attacks on civilians include mass killings, torture, sexual violence, forced labour and the blocking of essential humanitarian aid supplies.

The junta is trying to control the narrative, including by detaining a reported 64 journalists. But it can’t hide the truth.
In September, the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar stated that war crimes and crimes against humanity had intensified. Research suggests most of the military’s senior commanders are responsible for war crimes. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, condemned the violence as ‘inhumanity in its vilest form’.

The deadliest airstrike so far came in April 2023, when military forces reportedly killed 168 people, including 40 children, in the village of Pa Zi Gyi. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which keeps a running count, reports that at the time of writing, the junta and pro-military groups have killed 4,598 people and the junta currently detains 26,199 people. Jails are dangerous: 34 political prisoners died in detention in 2023.

Many people have been forced to leave their homes. By the end of 2023, over 2.6 million people had been displaced, 1.1 million up on the year before. The UN assesses that 18.6 million need humanitarian help. But it received only 29 per cent of the funding it requested in 2023. Aid workers aren’t safe either. The junta arrested or detained at least 142 in 2023.

In July, the army further extended the state of emergency, in effect since the coup. In February 2024, it announced compulsory military service for young people. The generals are no longer able to pretend everything is on track for the elections they once promised, which they hoped to use to legitimise their rule.

While ASEAN is weak, the army is under some international pressure. In October, the US government imposed sanctions on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the state-owned corporation that’s the regime’s main source of foreign income. The EU also stepped up its sanctions in December, including against two companies providing arms and generating income for the junta. In May, India’s Adani group gave into pressure and sold off its port business in Myanmar.

The international community must keep the junta isolated and refuse it diplomatic recognition. States should sanction the military’s network of companies, including MOGE. An April 2023 UN Human Rights Council resolution condemned the junta’s violence but failed to call for sanctions such as a prohibition on the sale of aviation fuel or an arms embargo. These remain key civil society demands, and they must be acted on to stop the killing.

A frozen conflict ends in Nagorno-Karabakh

The long-running, often stalemated conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended decisively in September, leaving civil society scrambling to help multitudes suddenly forced to flee.

The two sides were long at odds over the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, within Azerbaijan’s internationally recognised borders but until recently populated mostly by ethnic Armenians as the self-declared breakaway Republic of Artsakh. The dispute resurfaced when the two countries became independent at the end of the cold war.

Historically Armenia had the upper hand, but Azerbaijan regained much of the territory in a 2020 offensive in which thousands died. The remaining breakaway region relied on a narrow
The consequence was a humanitarian crisis. Normal life shut down. Ten months of blockade wore people down, so the next Azerbaijani attack in September, it was brief. The two sides agreed a ceasefire just a day after the offensive began. A little more than a week later the Republic of Artsakh announced its dissolution.

In 2020, Azerbaijan withdrew a promise to respect Nagorno-Karabakh’s special status. It was clear the government intended simply to absorb the region into Azerbaijan. Given a history of ethnic violence and the much larger size of the Azerbaijani population, ethnic Armenians feared the worse.

When Azerbaijani authorities lifted the blockade, an exodus ensued. Over 100,000 people – almost the entire ethnic Armenian population – fled to Armenia. In what could reasonably be called an episode of forced migration and ethnic cleansing, the territory emptied.

The blockade and offensive were meant to achieve the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The intentional deprivation of essential resources for survival followed by the direct attack to take over Nagorno-Karabakh, along with the creation of conditions for the Armenian population to leave, indicate that Azerbaijan is not contemplating any peaceful end to the conflict or human rights guarantees for Armenian people to feel safe in their homes and continue living in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The conflict and its aftermath passed with minimal attempts at international intervention. Azerbaijan uses its oil wealth to build strategic relations with European states and project a positive

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Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh stand in the back of a truck after crossing the border into Armenia on 28 September 2023.
international image, including by hosting the next climate summit, COP29. Russia, preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, is no longer the solid partner for Armenia it once was. Turkey, Azerbaijan’s staunchest ally, is stepping into the regional space vacated by Russia. As a result, perpetrators of human rights abuses are unlikely to face accountability.

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian state where two generations of the same family have held power since 1993. Its civic space is closed, leaving no scope to criticise the state’s actions. The government cracked down further following its victory, ahead of an early presidential election held in February 2024 that wasn’t remotely free or fair and gave the incumbent a fifth consecutive term. In the month following Azerbaijan’s victory, authorities reportedly arrested over 20 people for criticising the offensive. The state has continued to arrest journalists and dissidents since.

The conflict may be over, but long-term issues will need to be addressed. Armenia has a new population group, resigned to never returning home. People have enduring needs, both material and psychological. Civil society, having worked to provide emergency help during the exodus, must now be enabled to play a full role in shaping the broader response, which must include accountability for rights violations committed during the conflict.

Ethiopia’s unanswered questions

Ethiopia is home to another conflict the state desperately wants to say is over. A two-year war between federal forces and insurgents from the Tigray region supposedly ended in November 2022, with a peace deal signed that confirmed the federal government’s victory. But violence continues in several parts of the country, particularly the Amhara region, and there’s a growing food crisis. The state is still cracking down on civil society, opposition protesters and independent media, and uses internet shutdowns to limit the flow of information.

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia documented that Eritrean forces – which fought on the federal government’s side – and Amhara militias have continued to commit rape and sexual violence since the Tigray peace deal came into effect. Amnesty International has found evidence that war crimes and possible crimes against humanity have been committed since the peace agreement was signed. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has found evidence of extrajudicial killings of civilians by government forces in Amhara. It’s reported that in January 2024, federal troops went door to door killing civilians in the Amhara town of Merawi.

The state shows no real interest in halting rights violations or holding perpetrators to account – particularly those on its side. The UN Commission’s report found that the government’s transitional justice process doesn’t meet international standards. It says the government is failing to investigate human rights violations and isn’t providing support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Victims don’t trust the state to take them seriously.

The government wants to present the conflict as resolved and turn the page with the international community. It successfully
lobbied for the closure of the Commission of Inquiry of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Its mandate was terminated in June after two years, without ever producing a report. And then the UN Commission’s mandate was quietly allowed to expire at the year’s end. It needed a vote at the UN Human Rights Council to renew it, but following Ethiopia’s lobbying, no vote occurred.

Civil society’s calls to continue these international inquiries went unheeded because states were persuaded to move on for the sake of maintaining relations with a regionally strategic country. As conflicts rage elsewhere, this one has quietly slipped from the headlines.

Perhaps emboldened by the lack of accountability over its wars in Tigray and Amhara, in January 2024 the Ethiopian government announced an agreement with Somaliland that threatens to further fuel regional tensions. Ethiopia, landlocked since Eritrea became independent in 1993, announced a deal to lease a stretch of coastline from Somaliland, a de facto nation within Somalia’s borders with no international recognition. It’s suggested Ethiopia might recognise Somaliland in return, provoking an angry response from Somalia.

All sides must take every precaution to ensure the current dispute doesn’t spark another armed conflict. At the same time, the Ethiopian government must listen to civil society’s calls to ensure accountability for human rights crimes and allow people to mobilise, campaign and express dissent.

Haiti’s gang violence spirals beyond control

In Haiti violence comes from a different source – but the impacts on people’s lives are just as deadly. Gang violence grips the country. Civil society, a source of ideas often ignored by the government and the international community, criticises proposals for international intervention and calls instead for a broad-based transitional government to help steer Haiti towards safety.

Gang violence has flourished in the wake of the July 2021 assassination of President Juvenal Moïse. It’s now known that a group of mostly Colombian mercenaries carried out the assassination, but it still isn’t clear who ordered the hit. One of those accused of complicity is Moïse’s acting replacement, Ariel Henry. But he isn’t among 50 people recently indicted over the assassination, including Moïse’s widow Martine Moïse and former prime minister Claude Joseph, in what they claim is a politically motivated move by Henry. Meanwhile Henry has formal political power but no mandate. The terms of all elected government officials have expired.
Criminal gangs have thrived in the vacuum. It’s estimated that gangs control around half of Haiti. The capital, Port-au-Prince, is ground zero in a bloody battle between rival gangs. The UN Integrated Office in Haiti estimates that during 2023 around 3,960 people were killed, 1,432 injured and 2,951 kidnapped, although the real figures may be higher, since many crimes go unreported.

Gangs target peace activists and journalists. They use systematic sexual violence to control communities through fear. They’re also skilled at extracting resources, including through kidnapping for ransom.

Webs of corruption link gangs with judges and police officers, leading to widespread impunity. The criminal justice system is weak and police ill-equipped. As a result, there are no recent reported prosecutions or convictions for gang violence. Haiti has no army: it was disbanded in 1995 after multiple coup attempts.

Those who can flee are doing so, facing hostility and danger. They’re not welcome in the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti and is building a border wall. They’re forced to take risky routes to more distant countries. And even if they make it to their destination, they’re not safe. In the first half of 2023 alone, over 115,000 were sent back to Haiti against their will.

Some have responded to violence by forming vigilante groups that have carried out lynchings of suspected gang members, and have also claimed victims with no involvement in gangs.

Violence has fuelled a dire humanitarian situation. People struggle to access essentials, including food and water. Cholera has returned and many children are malnourished. The insecurity situation limits humanitarian access, and as in Myanmar and
Sudan, funding is lacking. In July, the World Food Programme was forced to cut the number of people receiving food support.

In such dire circumstances, international help is needed, but of what kind and to what end remains a matter of civil society concern. Haiti’s post-independence history has been one of self-interested foreign interference, particularly by the US government. UN forces have been no saviours either. A peacekeeping mission deployed from 2004 to 2017 was to blame for a wave of sexual abuse and a cholera outbreak. International civil society groups, such as those that responded to the devastating 2010 earthquake, have been criticised for taking a high-handed approach and accused of sexual abuse.

The latest plan, laid out in a UN Security Council resolution adopted in October, was to send in an international police force to strengthen law enforcement capacity. The US government had pushed this idea for some time but, presumably mindful of its dismal history in Haiti, sought another country to front it.

The government of Kenya offered to deploy a thousand police officers, and several Caribbean countries pledged a smaller contingent. But following an opposition lawsuit, in January 2024 a Kenyan court ruled the plan unconstitutional.

This latest proposal having failed, Haitian civil society groups want to know what the long-term plan is. They wonder how long the unelected politicians presiding over disaster intend to cling to office, and call for a non-partisan transitional government as an early step out of the crisis. They don’t want an international response that props up a corrupt elite even longer.

Haiti’s civil society is a crucial source of resilience, but its role has long been neglected by the domestic government and foreign states, international organisations and international civil society. It should now be put front and centre. Haitian civil society should at the very least be enabled to play a strong accountability role over any new security initiative that may follow the unravelling of the Kenyan plan. Its demands for a more considered response beyond this sticking-plaster approach must be heard.

A WORLD OF DISPLACEMENT

Conflict is one of the key causes of migration and displacement, along with political oppression, economic strife and, increasingly, climate change. But despite the numerous conflicts and crises around the ever more interconnected world, states are in denial, refusing to recognise the reality that people are on the move, both within countries and across borders. Conditions for migrants and refugees are becoming ever more hostile.

Rising hostility in Europe

Blatant double standards are on display in Europe. European countries have broadly continued to welcome the many displaced by Russia’s war on Ukraine. As of December 2023, there were 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees, 5.9 living in Europe, along with 3.7 million people internally displaced within Ukraine.
Even here, however, states are showing signs of compassion fatigue as the war wears on. In Ireland, housing scarcity has fuelled a backlash, expressed through an anti-migrant and anti-Muslim riot in Dublin in November 2023. The following month, the government announced it would cut its support for new arrivals from Ukraine. Across the EU, with the temporary status they were granted set to expire in 2025, Ukrainians worry about how long they may be able to stay.

But everyone else receives far worse treatment. European governments have shown they’re palpably racist by largely welcoming Ukrainians while intensifying their targeting of Black and Brown people from the global south.

In Europe there’s a disturbing emerging trend of governments offshoring migration responses: states pay poorer countries to host the migrants they don’t want. Australia invented this approach in 2001, dumping people in detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, but it had been an outlier. Now the UK government is pushing ahead with its Rwanda plan, intending to deport people who enter the UK unlawfully to Rwanda and force them to stay there even if their asylum claims succeed.

When the government introduced the plan, it wasn’t clear whether it genuinely expected it to work or the purpose was to put the opposition on the backfoot on a hot political issue, with the ruling party floundering in the polls. Even though the UK receives far fewer asylum seekers than other major European countries, right-wing politicians and supportive media have focused heavy attention on the ‘small boats’ issue – the arrival of migrants on the UK’s south coast after crossing from France. With the government having shut down all safer routes for undocumented migrants, people are making the dangerous crossing across the world’s busiest shipping route in unsuitable craft peddled by unscrupulous trafficking gangs.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made the Rwanda plan a headline policy, but civil society has taken to the courts to try to stop him. In November, the UK Supreme Court declared the Rwanda plan illegal on the grounds that Rwanda isn’t a safe country for send asylum seekers. Rwanda is an authoritarian state with repressed civic space, where critics of President Paul Kagame are routinely assassinated or jailed, LGBTQI+ rights aren’t respected and migrants face discrimination.

The UK government faces in two directions, maintaining both that Rwanda is a welcoming country and also that the prospect of going there will deter people from crossing. Its reaction to the Supreme Court ruling has been to rewrite the law. It recently replaced its memorandum of understanding with Rwanda with a treaty. It’s backed this agreement up with a draft law, in parliament at the time of writing, that simply waves away the court judgment by declaring Rwanda a safe country. The bill also further limits the ability of people to mount legal actions against relocation decisions.

The government has also announced a planned rule change to force government staff to ignore any European Court of Human Rights rulings that halt planned deportations, while many of its more extreme politicians are pushing the idea that the UK should withdraw from the European Court.

The human cost of this bill will be catastrophic. Even before it has passed, we have seen the prospect of being sent to Rwanda drive the people we support into extreme anxiety and mental distress, and we continue to see alarming rates of self-harm and suicides. By implementing it, the government will be forcing people to face certain and irreversible harm.

ARIA DANAPARAMITA
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, UKCollaborative Fund
If the UK’s scheme comes into effect, it’s likely to spark imitations. There are already indications. Denmark signed a similar memorandum of understanding with Rwanda in 2021, but is yet to follow up on it. Italy’s far-right government announced a deal with Albania in November to relocate migrants rescued from the Mediterranean Sea, a key migration route. In return, as well as funding, Italy has promised to support Albania’s attempts to join the EU. The deal was temporarily blocked by Albania’s Constitutional Court the following month but given the go-ahead in January 2024.

In November, Germany announced harsher measures for asylum seekers, including social benefit cuts. Greece, meanwhile, has put hostility towards migrants and refugees – and the civil society that works to help them – at the centre of its politics. It has put humanitarian workers on trial on serious charges, including espionage, people smuggling, membership of criminal organisations, fraud and money laundering – crimes that can bring jail sentences of up to 25 years. Many have been held in pretrial detention and others have been slapped with travel bans. The state has also put activists under surveillance. The government has criminalised operations to rescue migrants at sea, forcing several organisations to end their efforts. Greece has also been accused of illegal pushbacks. It’s even boasted of ‘blocking’ people at its border.

These restrictions on the rights of civil society working to help migrants and refugees were a key reason Greece’s civic space rating was downgraded from narrowed to obstructed by the CIVICUS Monitor in March 2023.

The challenge for civil society is that these actions bring governments a level of public support, which is why parties offer anti-migrant rhetoric ahead of elections. In Greece, the ruling party, long a mainstream centre-right party, won a second term in 2023 by extensively taking on board anti-migrant policies once the preserve of the far right. This offered a textbook example of how proponents of extremist ideas about migrants and refugees shift the political centre.

And yet the irony is that Greece, like Germany and several other European states, is currently experiencing labour shortages in key parts of its economy, including agriculture and services. In response, in December the Greek government granted legal recognition to thousands of undocumented migrants.

Greece is far from the only EU country accused of illegal pushbacks. In April, Lithuania passed a law legalising pushbacks
in emergency situations. At the regional level, the EU stands accused of poor treatment of migrants and refugees, something that contradicts its lofty human rights principles. Its border agency, Frontex, is alleged to be complicit in violence and other rights abuses. Civil society groups say its policies are at least partly to blame for the deaths of over 3,000 people last year.

Things could get worse. In December, EU states agreed a Migration Pact that threatens to create detention centres at borders, speed up deportations and allow states to engage in pushbacks in crisis situations. The EU is also muting human rights concerns about countries such as Ethiopia and Tunisia in return for commitments to strengthen their borders and return migrants. Through such actions the EU erodes humanitarian solidarity and dehumanises migrants and refugees.

The Rwanda plan is one component of the UK’s increasingly hostile environment for migrants. This is reflective of a wider global trend. Across the world, but particularly in Europe and the USA, governments are pouring money into tightening already highly militarised borders. In times of crisis or economic instability, governments will scapegoat excluded groups and migrants to distract from their own failings. It is the oldest trick in the book.

The implication that wealthier countries can simply pay poorer countries to tidy away their problems also says something disturbing about how they see the world as divided into people who have rights and people who don’t. It smacks of colonialism. Political rhetoric is also helping drive discrimination and vilification in global north countries against people of colour and of non-Christian faiths.

People are paying a lethal price for the closure of safe and legal migration routes. More than 2,500 people died crossing the Mediterranean in 2023. As these paths get choked off, people take still riskier routes. Now people are trying to navigate the treacherous Atlantic Ocean to get to Spain’s Canary Islands. The number of people making the Atlantic journey from West Africa increased by over 1,000 per cent in 2023. CSO Caminando Fronteras (‘Walking Borders’) reported that 6,618 people died or disappeared, presumed dead, trying to cross to Spain in 2023, among them 384 children – 18 people a day.

Similar story in the Americas

It’s a similar pattern of hostility and increasing risks in the Americas for people trying to make their way to the USA. In an election year, US politicians have made border control an intensely political issue and are racing to the bottom to see who can posture as toughest on migration.

In October, President Joe Biden announced plans to strengthen the USA’s southern border and resume deportation flights to Venezuela, which had been paused. But surely no one can go lower than Donald Trump, the immigrants’ grandson who in December told a rally that ‘immigrants are poisoning the blood of our country’ – a straightforward use of white supremacist rhetoric. The politics are such that Republicans have repeatedly delayed backing support to Ukraine unless the deal also includes measures on US border control.

In an intensification of the politicisation of migration, Republican governors of southern states such as Texas have started bussing newly arrived migrants to far-off cities run by Democrats, dumping them there with no support, treating them as pawns in
a political game. A vital voluntary effort has mobilised in cities such as New York to extend help.

Meanwhile, as in Europe, when routes are closed off people increasingly take riskier ones. Migrants are now making their way north from South American countries through the Darién Gap, a dangerous territory that connects Colombia and Panama. In 2023, a record 520,000 people took this once-rare path, around a quarter of them children and young people. On top of the highly challenging natural barriers they must overcome, they’re vulnerable to killings, violence, sexual assault and theft. In December, Médecins sans Frontières recorded a seven-fold increase in monthly incidents of sexual violence.

People are also increasingly taking to the seas – and as in Europe, that brings great danger. A new people trafficking route has opened up across the Caribbean Sea via the Bahamas – and as in Europe, people are dying. In November, at least 30 people died when a boat from Haiti capsized off the Bahamas.

Shifting sympathies in the global south

Despite the politicised anxiety about migration in the global north, it remains a fact that most migration and displacement take place in the global south. Many people are displaced within their countries or across borders to neighbouring global south countries.

Many of Sudan’s refugees have, for example, crossed the border into Chad, a low-income country already home to around a million displaced people before the conflict began. Refugee centres are struggling to cope and people live in crowded and insanitary conditions.

Camps have insufficient access to clean water, food and sanitation. Lack of electricity makes communication with their families back in Sudan difficult and has led women, in particular, to feel unsafe while moving around the camps after dark. Lack of adequate shelter is of particular concern. These conditions make the refugee community incredibly vulnerable to diseases and elevate the risk of gender-based violence. It is urgent to address these needs in a comprehensive manner, which requires immediate attention and support from the international community.

Broadly, so far Chad has shown solidarity towards new arrivals, although that could change as Sudan’s conflict continues. Chad also stands accused of being a transit point for weapons that go to the RSF, which is responsible for driving most of the refugees to Chad in the first place.

Elsewhere in the global south there are troubling signs, with governments abandoning long-established humanitarian practices and some sections of the public determined to blame migrants for economic and social problems. In South Africa, for example, xenophobia has soared and an anti-migrant vigilante group plans to stand in this year’s election.

Pakistan is home to an estimated four million Afghan refugees, including many who’ve fled successive waves of repression under the Taliban. In October, the government ordered all undocumented refugees to leave, affecting around 1.7 million people. It justified its move with reference to terrorism, but it seemed to be more about offsetting economic pressure than anything else, with some Pakistanis accusing Afghans of keeping them out of jobs.
The government followed up its announcement by detaining many undocumented Afghans and dropping them at the border. People are being forced out even if they were born in Pakistan. Pakistani authorities have reportedly committed abuses, including seizing Afghans’ property and tearing up their identity documents, trying to make the situation so hostile that people feel compelled to leave. The Pakistan government also imposed ‘exit fees’ of around US$660 on Afghan refugees who secure a resettlement place in another country – a move that saw it accused of making money out of misery.

For women, girls, LGBTQI+ people, journalists and anyone who’s criticised the Taliban, repression on return is certain. Pakistan’s policies can only worsen the already desperate humanitarian and human rights situation in Afghanistan.

Despite repeated requests, we haven’t received sufficient international support, which is crucial to prevent further escalation of the crisis. Given the current winter conditions in Afghanistan, our immediate focus is on providing shelters and kits for winter. We call on the international community to address these pressing issues and urge the government of Pakistan to halt refugee expulsions at least temporarily and collaboratively devise a strategy in consultation with the authorities in Afghanistan and the UN Refugees Agency.

Pakistan is following in the footsteps of Turkey, home to an estimated 3.6 million Syrian refugees. The ruling party has stoked xenophobia in reaction to economic trouble and as part of its strategy to win the May presidential election. In a sign of how normalised toxic anti-migrant sentiment has become,
the opposition campaigned on a promise to be even harsher towards Syrians.

In a blatant breach of the Refugee Convention’s principle of non-refoulement, many people are being forced to return to Syria, where they risk arrest and detention. The Syrian state is committing grotesque human rights abuses, including against returnees. Before being sent back, people are arrested and held in dire conditions in detention centres. Those who remain in Turkey are subjected to heightened levels of public hostility and violence.

In Lebanon, also home to many Syrian refugees, state authorities are similarly scapegoating them during a sustained economic and political crisis and deporting them to Syria. Meanwhile Syria’s murderous ruler, Bashar al-Assad, has been welcomed back into the regional fold, with states that once ostracised him now normalising their relations, potentially paving the way for even more forced returns.

In Tunisia, authoritarian president Kais Saied had led attacks on Black Africans who live in the country, seeking to focus public anger not on the failing economy or his many attacks on freedoms but on a visible minority. He’s blamed migrants for crimes and violence and spread conspiracy theories that they’re part of a plot to undermine the country.

The threat has gone beyond words. In July, the government reportedly rounded up hundreds of people, including children and pregnant women, dumping them at Tunisia’s borders with Algeria and Libya. At the Algerian border, people were stuck in the desert at temperatures of over 40 degrees. At the Libyan border, they were exposed to danger in a militarised zone. Some reportedly died and others were subjected to sexual violence. In response to international backlash, the authorities subsequently moved some people to camps. Groups of locals have also committed violent attacks.

There was a time when Saied would have faced international condemnation for stoking racism, but the EU’s self-interested focus on controlling migration is letting him get away with it. In July, the EU and the Tunisian government signed a deal to provide Tunisia around US$1.1 billion in funding, including money to prevent migration and return Tunisian migrants from EU countries, since people have continued to flee economic strife and repression. The EU and the Tunisian government have since fallen out, with the Tunisian government handing back around US$65.4 million already received. But as the political manoeuvres continue, there’s nothing to suggest life’s about to get any easier for Tunisia’s Black people.

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TIME FOR A CHANGE

2023 was sadly a year of immense and needless human suffering. People who’ve done nothing to cause conflicts – including children – weren’t just the victims of those perpetrating violence but in many cases their deliberate targets. Even when people
escaped with their lives, they were subjected to ongoing cruelty and hostility. Government forces, militias and other violent groups were responsible for widespread attacks on civilians and the infrastructure they rely on. Allied with soaring military spending, recent events have raised the danger that any progress made to make the world more peaceful since the horrors of the Second World War is unravelling.

It needn’t be this way. Life mustn’t be this cheap. Civil society is urging the path of peace, de-escalation, justice and inclusion. It’s demanding that long-established international human rights and humanitarian laws are respected, with consequences for those who don’t. It’s calling for solidarity with the victims of violence, and collaboration across civil society groups, including women’s and youth organisations, trade unions and faith groups, to stop the violence.

Civil society is often repressed and targeted with violence during conflicts. Global and national processes that try to resolve conflicts are often dialogues of elites, privileging the very people and mindsets responsible for starting conflicts, and sidelining crucial questions of justice and redress. Civil society is standing up for the voices of those on the sidelines, the world’s most excluded people who are disproportionately impacted on by conflicts.

The same old approaches to conflicts clearly aren’t working, or the world wouldn’t be in the sorry state it is. It’s time to listen to civil society, include it and enable it, and open up civic space so it can play its proper roles.