



United Kingdom  
Mission to the  
United Nations

17 February 2021

HE Mr António Guterres  
Secretary-General  
United Nations

*Dear Secretary General,*

In its capacity as President of the Security Council for the month of February 2021, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (“the United Kingdom”) intends to organise a high-level open debate on the theme of “Maintenance of international peace and security: Climate security”, to be held on Tuesday 23 February 2021 at 8:30 a.m.

In order to guide the discussions on this topic, the United Kingdom has prepared and attached a concept note (see annex).

Member States and observers wishing to participate are invited to submit a written statement of approximately 500 words to the Security Council Affairs Division ([dppa-scsb3@un.org](mailto:dppa-scsb3@un.org)). Statements sent by 23 February 2021 will be included in a compilation document.

On this occasion, Member States and observers may also submit a pre-recorded video statement. Videos submitted by 19 February will be included in a compilation video made available on UN Web TV, separate from the live broadcast of the meeting. Full guidance is available at [www.un.org/securitycouncil/events/programme-work](http://www.un.org/securitycouncil/events/programme-work) or from SCAD ([dppa-scsb3@un.org](mailto:dppa-scsb3@un.org)).

I should be grateful if this letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

*Yours Sincerely,*

Barbara Woodward

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**Annex to the letter dated 17 February 2021 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General**

**Security Council Open Debate: Addressing climate-related risks to international peace and security**

**23 February 2021, 0830-1130 EST**

**Objective**

To discuss the role of the Security Council, Member States and the UN in addressing future threats to international peace and security posed by climate change, including through sustained and systematic consideration of related conflict risk, peacebuilding approaches and support for adaptation and resilience in climate-vulnerable settings.

**Background**

**Climate Change**

The planet is warming at its fastest rate since records began, with devastating consequences for lives, livelihoods, economies, communities, and the natural environment. Some of these impacts will be irreversible. **They will be diverse, cross-boundary and affect us all.** In current socioeconomic and political contexts, climate change has the potential to exacerbate food insecurity, water scarcity, and competition for resources, strained livelihoods, population displacement and economic shocks, slowing socio-economic development. These impacts can act as drivers of conflict and insecurity. The environmental crisis and trajectory towards catastrophic biodiversity loss will amplify these impacts. Many of these are already felt worldwide, hitting vulnerable communities the hardest.

**Climate change and fragility**

Fragility is understood as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violent conflict, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies<sup>i</sup>.

**Several fragile settings are especially exposed to the impacts of climate change.**

According to one measure, half of the 48 countries most vulnerable to climate change are affected by fragility, and 70% of the *most* climate-vulnerable countries belong to the most fragile countries quartile<sup>ii</sup>. Most significantly, a number of political, economic or social factors **may hinder the adaptive capacity and resilience of such fragile contexts and regions to the impacts of climate change.**

## The relationship between climate and conflict

Fragile countries are also at risk of conflict<sup>i</sup>. 12 of the 20 countries considered most vulnerable to climate change are already affected by armed conflict<sup>iii</sup>. Not only do these contexts face the burden of double crisis, but **conflict and instability reduces a society's resilience and ability to adapt to climate change**. Thus, efforts to end conflict and build sustainable peace can also contribute to addressing climate vulnerability.

At the same time, **the impacts of climate change can exacerbate conflict risk, acting as a threat multiplier**. The International Crisis Group's report for top 10 conflicts in 2021 includes, for the first time, climate change as a transnational risk<sup>iv</sup>. Especially in countries already facing socio-economic pressures such as high levels of inequality, exclusion, or dependency on agriculture, environmental changes can increase the risks of conflict. Some studies have shown a strong correlation between rising temperatures and conflict risks, while a growing body of scholarship is supporting a consensus that climate-driven trends are contributing to crop failure, large-scale displacement, shrinking arable land, and shifting pastoralist patterns, all of which have been shown to contribute to conflict risk in different settings<sup>v,vi,vii</sup>. The relationship between climate change and conflict is complex; other economic and political factors remain conflict's major drivers today. However, there is broad agreement amongst experts that **climate change shapes the risk of conflict and as the climate worsens this risk will grow and more climate-conflict linkages will materialise**<sup>viii,ix,x,xi,xii</sup>

## The case for preventive action

The Security Council has recognised on numerous occasions that preventing future conflict is more effective than responding to its fallout. As noted in a UN-World Bank report, **effective conflict prevention is long-term and requires upstream action on risks well before they translate into crises**<sup>xiii</sup>.

Holding the increase in average global temperature to well below 2°C and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C as the Paris Agreement sets out is by far the most important preventive action we can take to avoid the worst conflict risks associated with climate change. UNSC and UN member states are already coming forward with Net Zero commitments and medium term emission reduction plans. Further ambitious pledges and plans over the coming months will be critical to staying in line with the goals of the Paris agreement. However, unfortunately, climate disruption is all-ready happening. **Thus, effective adaptation and resilience remains integral to addressing the impacts of climate change and hence to conflict prevention, especially when adaptation and resilience efforts are sensitive to and deliberately focused on addressing climate-related conflict drivers**. Many member states are already acting on this, for example identifying in their National Adaptation Plans that the sustainable management of water and land resources could serve as an investment in both climate adaptation and conflict prevention<sup>xiv</sup>. The international community needs to step forward with the financing to support climate action. At the same time, **conflict prevention and peacebuilding approaches will increasingly need to integrate climate considerations into their strategies**, with examples of integrating climate and environmental factors into conflict risk assessments already becoming more commonplace.

## The role of the United Nations

As the Secretary-General has pointed out, it is no coincidence that of the 15 countries most susceptible to climate risks, eight host a UN peacekeeping operation or special political mission. Since early 2017, climate change language has been integrated into numerous Council resolutions and presidential statements including on the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Sudan and UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) amongst others and been the subject of open debates and Arria formula meetings. Addressing climate-related security risks is a complex and broad challenge, requiring all parts of the UN system and its instruments to act collectively. **The UN Security Council has played a pivotal role in highlighting how climate change impacts international peace and security**, a topic not addressed systematically by the UN in any other fora, including the UNFCCC. The Council is increasingly recognising these links and has mandated UN special political missions and peace operations to address them.

This is essential in addition to the efforts of member states to tackle climate change directly. Hosted by the UK, in partnership with Italy, **COP26 will be a critical moment to step-up global action** to reduce emissions, strengthen adaptation to climate impacts, and support a green and resilient recovery. The UNSC and wider UN member states have a vital role to play: engaging constructively in the drumbeat of events running up to November's summit in Glasgow.

### Guiding questions

In consideration of the objectives of the debates, the following questions may help guide interventions by Member States:

1. How can efforts to build resilience and support adaptation also prevent conflict risks and support peacebuilding and stability? How can any synergies be leveraged more effectively?
2. What is the role of global climate governance/Nationally Determined Contributions/National Adaptation Plans in addressing climate-related conflict risks?
3. How can the Security Council best contribute to driving regional and transnational action to address risk and responses to climate-related conflict?
4. How can efforts to integrate climate change and security also support the broader Security Council agenda e.g. Women, peace and security?
5. Which operable activities within the Council's remit can best be utilised to address climate related security risks?

## Format

The High Level Open Debate will take place 0830-1130 EST. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom H.E. Boris Johnson will chair. Interpretation will be provided in all official languages of the United Nations. Mr. Antonio Guterres (Secretary-General of the United Nations) will address the meeting alongside other briefers.

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- <sup>i</sup> [OECD \(2020\), 'States of Fragility 2020', OECD Publishing, Paris](#)
  - <sup>ii</sup> [Climate Security Expert Group \(2020\), 'Climate Change in the UN Peacebuilding Commission Fund', Adelphi](#)
  - <sup>iii</sup> [ICRC \(2020\), 'Rain turns to dust', ICRC, Switzerland](#)
  - <sup>iv</sup> [International crisis group \(2020\), '10 conflicts to watch in 2021'](#)
  - <sup>v</sup> [Von Uexkull et al \(2016\), 'Civil conflict sensitivity to growing-season drought', PNAS](#)
  - <sup>vi</sup> [Busby \(2020\), 'It's time we think beyond threat multiplier to address climate and security', New Security Beat](#)
  - <sup>vii</sup> [Day & Caus \(2020\), 'Conflict prevention in an era of climate change', UN University centre for policy research](#)
  - <sup>viii</sup> [Evans \(2011\), 'Resource scarcity, Climate change and the risk of violent conflict', World Bank Group](#)
  - <sup>ix</sup> [Raleigh & Kniveton \(2012\), 'Come rain or shine: An analysis of conflict and climate variability in East Africa', Journal of Peace Research](#)
  - <sup>x</sup> [Burke et al \(2009\), 'Warming Increases the risk of civil war in Africa', PNAS](#)
  - <sup>xi</sup> [Mach et al \(2019\), 'Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict', Nature](#)
  - <sup>xii</sup> [Buhaug et al \(2015\), 'Climate variability, food production shocks, and violent conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa', Environmental Research Letters](#)
  - <sup>xiii</sup> [United Nations and World Bank \(2018\), 'Pathways for peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict', World Bank, Washington DC.](#)
  - <sup>xiv</sup> [Cawford & Church \(2020\), 'The NAP Process and Peacebuilding', NAP Global Network](#)