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**Statement by H.E. Mr. Yashar Aliyev
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations
at the Security Council open debate on the theme:
“War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings”**

25 January 2022

Mr. President,

At the outset, I would like to thank the delegation of Norway for having convened this important meeting.

Over the years, the solid framework of legally binding rules has been developed to govern the conduct of hostilities. An evolving international jurisprudence has helped strengthen international law and has contributed to punishing most serious crimes, preventing their repeat, redressing the wrongs, promoting the rule of law, restoring peace and advancing reconciliation.

However, serious challenges remain. As the Secretary-General noted in his latest report on the protection of civilians (S/2021/423), armed conflicts continued to be characterized by high levels of civilian death, injury and psychological trauma, sexual violence, torture and disappearance, as well as damaged and destroyed homes, schools, markets, hospitals and essential civilian infrastructure.

Azerbaijan strongly condemns all attacks against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law.

It goes without saying that armed conflicts fought in urban areas cause greater harm to civilians and essential infrastructure. Sometimes military force is used in such areas where there are no military targets or proportionate military advantage and where civilians and civilian objects are evidently targeted deliberately, by employing weapons that expose civilians to a high risk of indiscriminate effect and by failing to take any precautions to limit such effect.

Azerbaijan has seriously suffered from the devastating effects of the aggression committed against it by Armenia in the early 1990s. The breaches of protections accorded to civilians under international humanitarian law throughout the whole period of the war were not isolated or sporadic, as civilians and various populated areas in Azerbaijan were repeatedly subjected to similar attacks.

The frequency and timing of the attacks, their deliberate targeting of the civilian population, infrastructure objects, homes, schools and hospitals, the use of heavy explosive weapons and internationally banned cluster bombs against densely populated areas and the resulting scale of destructions demonstrate the clear intent and purpose to terrorize and kill Azerbaijani civilians and force them to leave their homes and properties.

In particular, the most notorious violations have caused the killing of hundreds of civilians within very few hours. The following month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the largest massacre during the conflict committed against the Azerbaijani residents of the town of Khojaly. As a result of the attack and capture of the town, hundreds of civilians, including women, children and the elderly, were brutally killed or seriously wounded, taken hostage and tortured, while the town was razed to the ground.

As a result of the 44-day war in autumn 2020, the conflict has been resolved. Azerbaijan has prioritized rehabilitation and reconstruction of the liberated territories, the safe return of the displaced population and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Nevertheless, since the end of hostilities and conclusion of the war, hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians have been killed or injured by landmines. Armenia has not shared accurate and comprehensive information about the hundreds of thousands of landmines it laid on Azerbaijan's territory, thus attempting to impede the return of the internally displaced persons.

Moreover, those ordered and perpetrated attacks against Azerbaijani cities, towns and villages during the conflict remain unpunished. On the contrary, many of them were venerated and glorified as national heroes and promoted to the highest political and military positions in Armenia.

Mr. President,

The concept note (S/2022/23) raises a number of questions to guide discussions at this meeting, in particular as to how the Security Council can better use the tools in its disposal to prevent and respond to the challenges caused to civilians in urban warfare and how States can improve respect for international humanitarian law.

First and foremost, ensuring full compliance with international humanitarian law is the central challenge and key objective in all armed conflicts. The cornerstone of international humanitarian law is the principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality. The protection of civilians must be a strategic priority in the planning, decision-making and conduct of military operations, taking into account, in particular, the vulnerability of civilians in urban contexts.

Furthermore, fundamental to enhancing respect for international humanitarian law is accountability for violations. Wrongs left unpunished often act as a catalyst for the resurgence of conflicts and the commission of new crimes.

As the Secretary-General underlined in his report, what is needed urgently is the political will to respect the rules and implement good practices, as well as to prosecute perpetrators and ensure reparations for victims, bearing in mind that accountability for serious violations must be systematic and universal.

The role of humanitarian actors is indispensable. It is important that their engagement in conflict and post-conflict situations be exclusively humanitarian in nature, not misused for political purposes and carried out in conformity with the principles of neutrality, impartiality and consent of the affected country, while fully respecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

In concluding, it is essential that the Security Council consistently maintain its focus on the protection of civilians and persistently reiterate its demand that all parties to armed conflict comply fully with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Thank you.