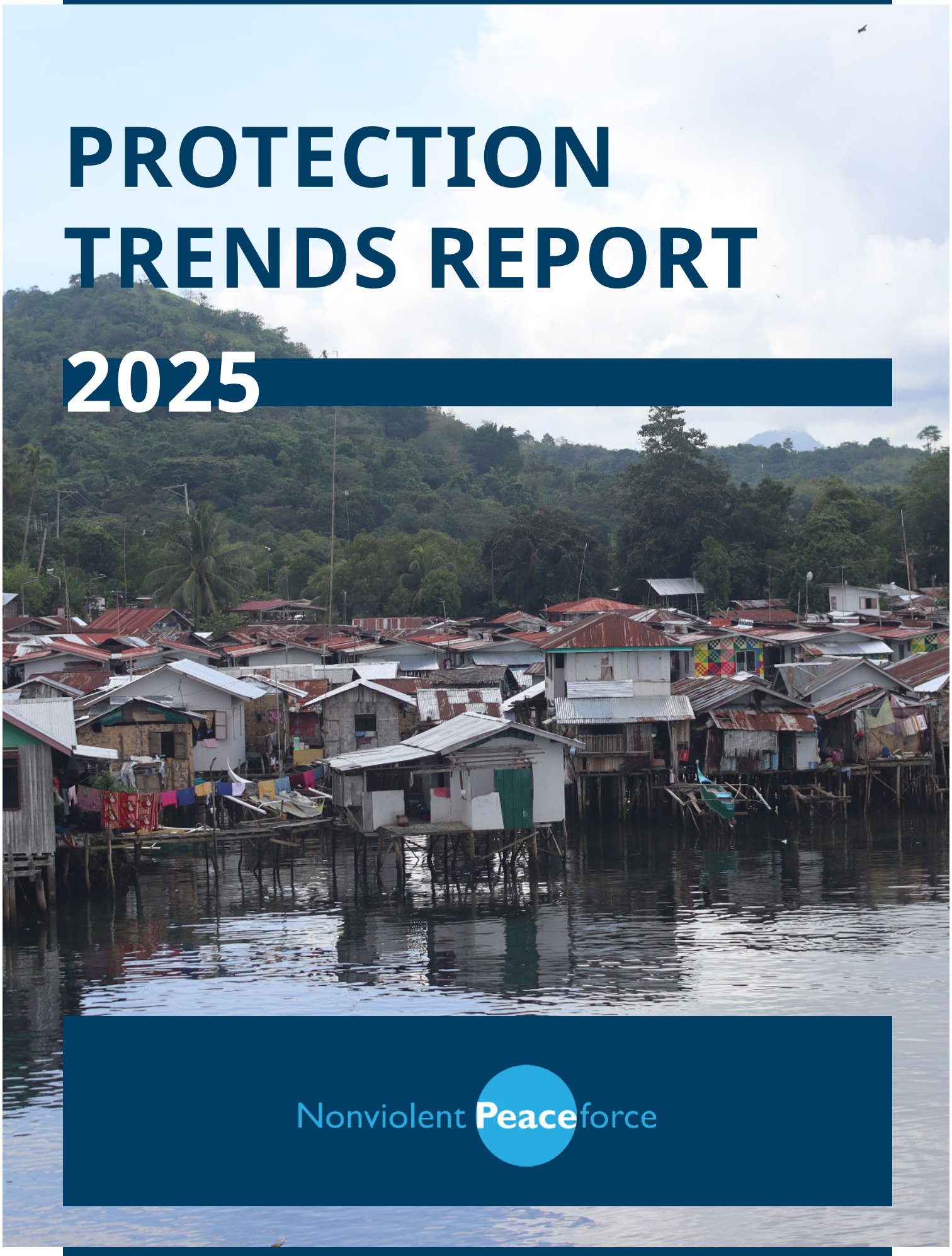
PROTECTION TRENDS REPORT 2025



Nonviolent Peaceforce

Foreword

“There is always a way through.” I was reminded of this in October 2025, during a conversation with one of our staff members who at the time was serving as a national protection officer in his home country of Iraq. He was updating me on a breakthrough he and his colleagues had achieved after more than two years of sustained effort: bringing conflicting parties in an Iraqi town into dialogue. It was progress that had required persistence in the face of repeated setbacks and moments of discouragement where the situation appeared immovable.

When I congratulated him on continuing despite the odds, he laughed and responded “This what we do. That is what I love about unarmed civilian protection (UCP). There is always a way through. If we find ourselves up against a wall, we use UCP to make a door.” As he spoke, he even acted it out – hammering at an invisible wall, tracing the outline of a doorframe in the air – smiling proudly. In that moment, I felt a powerful reconnection to purpose: even in the most constrained and violent contexts, pathways to safety can be created through intentional, civilian-centred action. With persistence, trust, and even the most basic tools at our disposal, it is possible to open space where none seems to exist.

As we reflect on 2025 and the realities documented in this Protection Trends report, it is impossible to ignore how narrow, fragile, and contested pathways to safety have become. Yet my colleague’s words do not romanticise this moment. Rather, they remind us that while conflict persists in human society, violence is not inevitable – even as we see it amplified to unprecedented levels.

This Protection Trends Report draws on Nonviolent Peaceforce’s (NP) presence across the nine contexts we operate to examine how contemporary conflict is reshaping the risks civilians face and the choices they are forced to make. It reflects what our teams have observed, documented, and responded to over the course of last year. The input is gathered through sustained engagement with communities navigating violence in their daily lives.

In 2025, civilians across conflict-affected contexts faced a stark and increasingly familiar reality: violence is no longer confined to battlefields, and protection can no longer be assumed - not in homes, not along displacement routes, and not even in places designed to offer refuge. The trends outlined in this report point to a profound shift in how war is fought and how harm is inflicted. Across contexts, danger is not episodic but constant – marked by prolonged shelling, persistent surveillance from above, and the ever-present risk of sudden violence.

Nonetheless, across all the trends described below, one finding is equally clear: civilians are not passive victims. Even under extreme constraint, people consistently demonstrated agency making calculated, often painful decisions to reduce harm when no safe options existed. Civilians negotiated, adapted, pooled resources, and relied on local knowledge to navigate threats that formal protection systems were unable or unwilling to mitigate. Sometimes, survival strategies required enormous risk and sacrifice: Families separated to increase the chances that some would survive. Communities moved at night to avoid detection. This agency, however, should not be mistaken for resilience in the abstract. These are survival strategies forged in the absence of reliable protection. They are responses to a world in which international norms, mandates, and commitments too often fail to translate into meaningful safety on the ground.

For NP, the lessons from 2025 reinforce the urgency of rethinking how protection is conceived and delivered. Protection cannot be reduced to harm mitigation after violence occurs, nor can it be treated as the sole responsibility of duty bearers, armed actors or intergovernmental bodies. Effective protection must be preventive, civilian-led, and grounded in the realities of how people experience, anticipate, and already respond to harm. Early warning, accompaniment, community-based protection mechanisms, and unarmed civilian strategies are not secondary tools; they are essential in contexts where violence is diffuse, unpredictable, and deeply embedded in civilian spaces.

Hence, the purpose of this Protection Trends report is not to offer easy, one-size fits all solutions. Rather, it seeks to surface patterns that demand serious reflection and course correction. The trends documented here challenge assumptions that displacement equates to safety, that humanitarian access is stable, or that protection failures are exceptional rather than structural. They also highlight the consequences of underinvesting in civilian-centred approaches and of responding too late, after harm has already occurred.

As conflicts continue to evolve, so too must our approaches to protection. This requires political will, sustained investment, and a willingness to prioritise prevention, civilian leadership, and long-term presence over short-term visibility or militarised responses. It requires listening to what civilians themselves are telling us about risk, safety, and survival.

We offer this report as a contribution to that effort. Grounded in the experiences of civilians and frontline responders, it is both a record of what 2025 revealed and a call to reimagine what protection must become if it is to meet the realities of today’s conflicts.



Tiffany Easthom
Executive Director

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DRC, 2025. ©NP

Methodology

This report draws on reporting produced between 1 January and 31 December 2025 from all of Nonviolent Peaceforce's (NP) operations spanning Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Ukraine, Iraq, Indonesia, the United States, and the Philippines. Sources include protection and atrocity alerts, situation reports, issue briefs, quarterly reports, as well as ad hoc incident reporting. Where relevant and possible, information has been triangulated across multiple internal sources and with trusted local partners. As a protection organisation focused on civilian-led, nonviolent action, our contribution is intentionally grounded in a grassroots lens. We do not aim to provide comprehensive or representative datasets to illustrate the year 2025, but rather to prioritise qualitative, micro-level analysis of how conflict-related harm, protection risks and access constraints are experienced in the daily lives of civilians and frontline humanitarian actors. Due to the sensitivities of the contexts in which NP operates, what is presented publicly here omits key examples and data. NP is available for private briefings on request.

Increased attacks against civilians and new dynamics in urban warfare

Throughout 2025, NP reporting confirms two interlinked trends: warfare is increasingly conducted in urban and civilian spaces, and the nature of hostilities has shifted in ways that generate new and heightened threats to civilians. Across contexts, we have seen intensified urban warfare with prolonged and often daily shelling, the expanded use of drones (significantly accelerating the diminishing distinction between combat and civilian space) and a general sharp escalation in direct and indiscriminate attacks against civilians. Ukraine is the most notable example. In Kharkiv, Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson Oblasts, we have seen a sustained increase in the presence, use and abandonment of weapons, munitions and explosive devices, such as anti-personnel mines, explosive remnants of war, launched devices and controlled detonation devices since the onset of the war – but reaching worrying rates in 2025.

Beyond Ukraine, in Sudan, civilians in and around El Fasher experienced sustained day-and-night shelling and drone attacks affecting densely populated neighborhoods, markets, hospitals, mosques, universities, and humanitarian zones. The shelling left many civilians trapped without food, water, or medical care. Similarly, in South Sudan, as drones have begun to be introduced, aerial bombardments and shelling increased following political and military escalations, including in Upper Nile, Jonglei, Unity State and Central Equatoria in the March/April 2025 period. This triggered immediate civilian displacement, particularly to already overcrowded internally displaced persons (IDP) sites in response to both actual and perceived threats of airstrikes (see also below). Across contexts, it has become clear that as much as war “modernises”, the increased use of drones undeniably contributes to increased casualties, destruction of essential civilian infrastructure, mass displacement and further constraints on humanitarian presence and access.

Increase in State-sanctioned, indiscriminate violence against civilians

NP has observed a pattern of direct and targeted violence against civilians, carried out specifically by state actors, including in contexts not traditionally classified as “armed conflict”. Developments in the United States over the past year are a case in point. Since January 2025, the US government has increasingly relied on force-based governance – through policing and restrictions on civic space – to control populations and suppress dissent. These measures have not been incidental or isolated; they have deliberately targeted specific vulnerable communities and produced widespread civilian harm. Across the country, militarised policing, the use or threat of National Guard deployment, and violent enforcement of protest and immigration policy have intensified since January 2025, which has significantly shrunk civic space for dissent. Nowhere is this more visible than in immigration enforcement: a sharp escalation in the use of military tactics and state sanctioned violence against civilians has produced widespread fear, injury, and death, in civilian spaces and the illegal use of deportation mechanisms. Rather than being grounded in lawful procedure, these actions increasingly involve the selective application and at times suspension – of legal safeguards meant to protect civilians from arbitrary harm. In the San Diego area – where NP teams are also operational supporting migrant, Asian, Muslim, LGBTQIA+ and unhoused communities – military-style raids and the use of force in the arrest process increased fourfold in the first half of 2025 resulting in important number of civilian casualties.

This reflects a broader pattern seen across country contexts as states become more emboldened in the way they conduct warfare and repression of their own populations. Despite the responsibility of states for safety and care of citizens, abdication of this care is becoming more normalised, posing a growing threat to overall civilian safety. While the nature of the weapons used may differ, the common thread is deliberate deployment of state violence to control populations, punish perceived opposition and instill fear, resulting in large-scale civilian harm and the erosion of everyday protection.

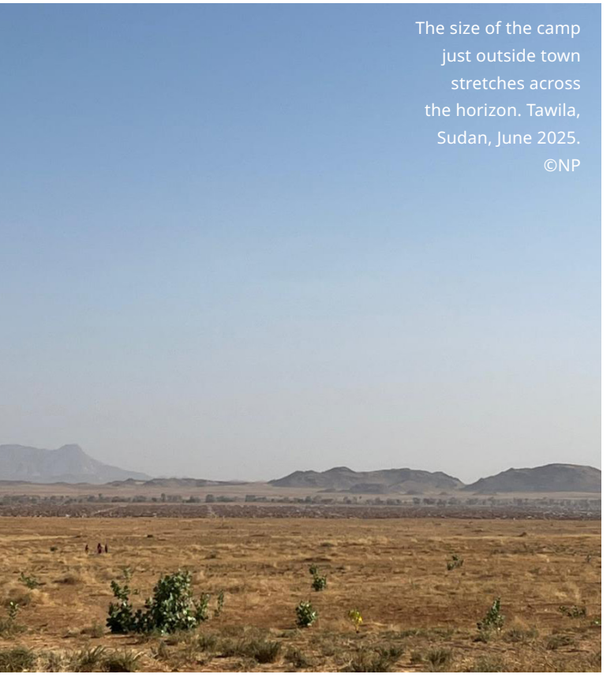


Evacuation crew from STEEL consortium. Druzhkivka, Ukraine. April 2025. ©Yevheniy Khaustov.

Mass displacement and increasing threats for IDPs

2025 reports have also shown that it has become increasingly difficult for civilians to flee conflict. Those able to displace are facing ever so dire, unsafe, and undignified conditions that generate new vulnerabilities to protection risks. It showed that however resourceful and preemptive civilians are able to be, displacement corridors progressively became sites of acute danger. In Sudan, for instance, civilians displaced from El Fasher and Zamzam, were strategic in their movement, including fleeing in small, groups in unpredictable patterns, female-only groups moving at night, and families splitting up due to transport costs, mobility constraints, or injury. However, despite these mitigation measures, movement remained highly dangerous as routes were blocked, shelled, and targeted by ambushes. Civilians also reported widespread sexual violence, extortion, and arbitrary detention en route and killings at checkpoints.

Further, displacement routes became increasingly monetised and functioned as sites of “organised crime,” where armed actors priced and controlled civilian movement. Who could flee, when, and how was often determined by access to cash, transport, and specific social networks, rather than mere proximity to hostilities. For example, in the Kalehe territory of South Kivu in eastern DRC, families reported being unable to displace despite clear and imminent risks of violence because they lacked appropriate identity documents, cash, or transport, while others who had prepared in advance (by anticipating the necessary paperwork or pooling resources, for example) were able to move earlier and with relatively lower risk. In South Sudan, armed group recruitment along the Maban corridor jeopardized what used to be a key escape route from Sudan, limiting movement options and diverting people toward already overwhelmed areas like Northern Bahr el Ghazal. In Sudan, the cost of escape also rose sharply both as fuel and vehicles became increasingly scarce but also as patterns of extortion became more prominent. Those unable to pay were pressured to contact relatives for funds and faced intimidation or abuse if payments could not be secured. Young men were disproportionately targeted, as their perceived ability to earn or mobilise resources made them especially vulnerable to financial extortion, detention, and forced movement. Essentially, across contexts, civilians with the fewest resources were least able to escape violence and most likely to flee later under more dangerous conditions and fewer access to assistance.



The size of the camp just outside town stretches across the horizon. Tawila, Sudan, June 2025. ©NP

*Illustrative journey: Civilian transit and associated burdens in Sudan***

Recent movements undertaken by civilians illustrate the severe hardships faced during transit. From an area under siege to somewhere perceived to be safer, journeys commonly begin on foot, with people departing from multiple neighbourhoods early in the morning. Civilians walk through surrounding villages to reach an interim destination by late morning. For individuals without mobility constraints, this journey typically lasts between five and seven hours. Those unable to carry belongings are often compelled to hire donkey carts at an approximate cost of 50,000 SDG per load (approx. 84 USD), creating an immediate financial burden at the outset of movement.

From where they are, civilians generally rely on commercial vehicles for the next leg of travel. Transport costs average around 150,000 SDG per person (approx. 250 USD), with routes passing through barren, insecure areas before reaching the next transit stop by mid-afternoon. The final stretch onward is frequently marked by numerous informal checkpoints. Passage is often only possible on specific days associated with informal “escort” arrangements. At these checkpoints, civilians and drivers must engage in repeated negotiations and make payments to armed actors. Fees incurred during this segment alone can reach approximately 100,000 SDG (approx. 167 USD) for small groups.

Overall, civilians may pay in excess of 200,000 SDG (approx. 333 USD) per person for what is perceived as “safe” passage. Despite this substantial cost, there is no assurance of protection. Drivers are forced to navigate a fragmented and unpredictable landscape of armed actors – some loosely affiliated with larger groups, others operating independently – who routinely exploit the vulnerability of civilians in transit.

** Exact names of locations have been removed to protect the safety of civilians in transit.

2025 also showed that displacement is rarely linear. A stark illustration of these inconsistent movements comes from eastern DRC. When the second-largest population centre in the region, Bukavu, fell in February 2025, civilians fled in multiple directions: some cross-border movement toward Rwanda and Burundi, others toward Uvira, the second-largest city in South Kivu, depending on which side of the frontline they were. In the first weeks of displacement, camps in Burundi – particularly Cishemere, where NP partners operate – became significantly overwhelmed. By April, as the situation temporarily stabilised, many civilians returned, citing dire conditions in the Burundian camps. Later, in December 2025, renewed fighting and the capture of Uvira prompted a second wave of displacement. This, in and of itself, exemplified the cyclical nature of movement in conflict-affected contexts where community members move back and forth in response to shifting frontlines and where their coping strategies cannot assumed to be linear and entirely predictable.

Further, when civilians are compelled to leave their homes in search of safety, risks do not end with movement itself. Beyond displacement routes, persist – and in some cases intensify – when civilians become

stationary again, including upon reaching IDP camps. Collectively, our engagements with civilians in IDP camps across contexts has shown that regardless of whether displacement is planned or sudden, relocation into resource-constrained, institutionally run camps can increase exposure to harm, even for those with strong coping strategies.

For many Iraqis returning from Syria, the path toward reintegration has run through the displacement camp system. While access to basic services is essential for rehabilitation and return to original or new communities, many returnees reported significant barriers to meeting even basic needs. The most complex challenges related to access to civic and legal documentation, particularly in cases of undocumented marriages and births during IS rule. Access to education, health care, and livelihood opportunities was also limited, often provided inconsistently or with difficulty. In South Sudan, high density of displaced populations across camps in Unity state led to large protests in October 2025, with mass panic, injuries and heavy-handed crackdowns, as well as further disruption to critical services. In Tawila, Sudan, those attempting to access aid within camps reported registration processes controlled by community leaders, often influenced by tribal affiliation or loyalty, with waiting periods of up to three months. Minority groups and those displaced from Zamzam reported particular marginalisation, struggling to gain recognition or assistance and facing heightened exposure to disease and violence. The extent of vulnerability within IDP camps was such that many newly displaced families reported deliberately avoiding formal camps due to fears of disease, insecurity, and overcrowding, opting to instead shelter in open areas with no access to assistance.

Those protection risks were often heightened for persons with disabilities and older people. In Ukraine, for instance, NP assessments of collective sites hosting IDPs in frontline oblasts such as Khersonska, Donetska, and Kharkivska revealed severe structural and accessibility deficiencies, particularly affecting elderly persons and people with disabilities. Many shelters lacked blast protection, accessible sanitation, ramps, or safe evacuation routes, leaving residents unable to reach safety during air alerts or attacks.

We have also seen how displacement deeply altered family structures and dynamics. In Sudan and Ukraine especially, many families either remained trapped or repeatedly displaced because they refused to abandon relatives who were injured, elderly, or unable to travel, even amid shelling and aerial bombardment. In El Fasher, in April 2025, the vast majority of the population - with many already displaced multiple times - stayed behind due to poverty, disability, age or injury. For those who fled, displacement often fractured families: men or healthier members moved ahead, while women, children, older persons, and the injured followed later or were left behind. Despite the small number of arrivals in Tawila, our teams saw the average family size drop from an average of six to two which illustrates the sheer scale of fragmentation. Approximately 50% of children were reported as separated or unaccompanied. Our team reported one harrowing account of a woman and son arriving in Tawila with a child they picked up on route found amid remnants of deceased family members. Families arriving in Tawila also described the deaths of young children from exhaustion, malnutrition, and lack of medical care, both en route and after arrival.

Lastly, across all contexts, we observed over the past year the importance of mitigating tensions between host communities and incoming IDPs. This is rarely a straightforward process. Iraq provides a clear example. Many IDP families return to communities where they are labelled as “IS wives” or face other forms of stigma. These perceptions are worsened when host community needs remain unmet and resources are scarce, making inclusion particularly difficult for families associated with alleged “wrongdoers.” While many community members recognise that reconciliation is essential to prevent the spread of divisive ideologies and renewed violence, acceptance of returnees remains limited. As a result, in places such as Sinjar and South Mosul, returnees have been escorted back to their communities by heavily militarised forces. These returns are often perceived by survivors and victims’ families as imposed, triggering distress and fostering further rejection rather than acceptance. In many cases, families respond by resorting to secondary displacement. This is especially evident in West Mosul, where returnees settle in isolation and with limited access to services.

Taken together, these patterns highlight a growing disconnect between how displacement is experienced and how it is governed. Immigration and displacement policies continue to rely on linear assumptions that people flee once, move along predictable routes and transition from movement to safety in a stable location. In practice, however, civilian displacement in 2025 was fragmented, cyclical and frequently reversed, with civilians moving in stages, pausing, returning, separating, and re-displacing in response to shifting threats. When policy frameworks fail to account for this inconsistency and these multilayered risks along the way, they leave civilians exposed at precisely the moments when protection is most needed.

Dormitory of the State University of Biotechnology, Dokuchaevske village, Kharkiv district, Ukraine. 2025. ©NP



Widespread hunger and deteriorating access to necessities

Widespread hunger and the collapse of access to necessities became key drivers of civilian displacement, in some contexts surpassing direct violence as the immediate cause of flight. In Sudan, for instance, after two years of siege in El Fasher, widespread hunger became a primary driver of civilian displacement in June 2025. Armed groups restricted the inward flow of essential goods, while some suppliers within the city hoarded stock to drive up prices. As a result, the cost of food and basic commodities skyrocketed, with cash shortages compounding the crisis: even if civilians had access to digital funds, most vendors only accepted cash. This disconnect meant that people were unable to purchase what limited food was available. With acute food shortages, lack of clean water, fuel, and medical supplies forcing many civilians to leave, those remaining relied heavily on community kitchens, which similarly increasingly struggled to operate as supplies dwindled.

As food became inaccessible, civilians adopted increasingly dangerous coping strategies. Reports included families consuming animal feed, with a family of six dying from food poisoning on 28 August 2025. This reflects experiences of civilians in other NP field sites. For example, in DRC's Kalehe territory, the closure of key road axes and Kivu lake access in early 2025 led to sharp price increases and reduced availability of essential goods, amplifying food insecurity.

The breakdown of water, health, and hygiene systems compounded these risks. In Zamzam, severe water shortages caused by non-functional generators and lack of fuel, combined with the absence of medical care and hygiene supplies, contributed to the rapid spread of cholera. Similarly, IDP camps in Burundi which hosted tens of thousands of Congolese refugees became overwhelmed following the takeover of Goma and Bukavu in January-February 2025. In Ukraine, teams reported comparable risks in some IDP housing. For example, in one case a dormitory housing 40 evacuees, including five persons with disabilities, lacked proper toilets and ventilation, creating a high risk of infectious disease. In El Fasher, hospitals collapsed and injuries went untreated.

In many instances, what our colleagues in the field witnessed – families consuming unsafe food, the introduction of diseases due to overcrowding, delayed medical care and more – was a direct consequence of severe funding shortfalls amplified by political decisions at the global level. The year 2025 was particularly stark in this regard. While humanitarian systems remain chronically underfunded, the UN-led Global Humanitarian Overview identified 189 million people in need across 42 emergencies, with an appeal of $47.4 billion. Mid-year, a request for hyper-prioritisation of humanitarian plans was introduced after numerous donors announced significant funding cuts, most notably the United States – the then-largest humanitarian donor. What was already a critical funding gap became a full-scale emergency, with the consequences borne primarily by the most vulnerable individuals across contexts. For NP, the lesson was clear: the effects of war and violence, particularly on primary necessities such as food and access to healthcare, can only be mitigated if global political conditions that enable widespread civilian harm are actively challenged.



View from NP vehicle crossing flooded wadi. Tawila, Sudan, 2025. ©NP

Climate and conflict

The environmental pressures created by climate change continued to have serious human security implications and similarly heightened protection risks, across numerous of our operational contexts. In Sudan's South and West Kordofan, for instance, conflict restricted access to traditional grazing areas during the rainy season, forcing pastoralist Arab communities and Nuba farming communities into unusually close proximity much earlier than normal. At the same time, Nuba communities expanded farming areas amid the civil war, increasing competition over land and cattle. This reignited historical grievances, with many clashes reported in Western Kadugli linked to demands for cattle recovery and "blood debt" payments. Parties to the broader conflict were also consistently perceived to be exploiting these tensions to fracture communities further. Similar patterns were observed in South Sudan, where dry-season migration driven by water and pasture scarcity brought more than 20 000 people from Jonglei into Upper Nile state, which increased cyclical intercommunal violence and retaliation.

Sudden climate disasters were also a source of serious civilian harm in already active conflict settings. In Myanmar, the March 2025 earthquake caused widespread destruction in Mandalay and Sagaing regions, killing thousands, damaging most civilian infrastructure and overwhelming already fragile health services. Roads, bridges, schools, and places of worship collapsed, separating families and severely restricting movement and aid delivery. The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance in earthquake-affected areas placed survivors and responders at acute risk, while ongoing hostilities and airstrikes already limited humanitarian access.

In Iraq as well, climate-related tensions have intensified, particularly in the Ninewa governorate, where NP teams have witnessed how water scarcity has become both a driver and an amplifier of local conflicts. Once known as Iraq's "breadbasket" and sustained by the Tigris River and seasonal rainfall, Ninewa has experienced many environmental changes – some natural, others man-made (including the absence of equitable water-sharing agreements, and inefficient infrastructure). In practice, people living in rural Ninewa travel long distance to fetch often unclean or salty water, leaving families exposed to illness and danger. Limited water access has also sparked communal conflicts. Often, they arise between neighboring farmers over irrigation, sometimes escalating into clashes, while frustration with local authorities over unequal distribution has field mistrust and social cohesion. Children and women, who bear the brunt of water collection, also faced increased protection risks, including harassment and exploitation, and households reported a difficulty to maintain livelihoods as crops didn't yield the desired harvest and livestock suffered from drought.

Seasonal Cattle Migration and climate-driven tensions in South Sudan

Each year, thousands of herders from the district of Akobo West in Jonglei State migrate to Ulang in Upper Nile state during the dry season for grazing and water, as local resources dwindle and make local cattle herding unsustainable. While essential for livelihoods, these movements also concentrate large groups in limited spaces which also creates flashpoints for intercommunal tensions.

In 2024 already, conflicts had arisen along migration routes and at grazing sites, including violent clashes between armed youth, theft of cattle, and disputes over water access. In early 2025, tens of thousands of cattle keepers and accompanying children prepared to migrate along a single main route, and risks of intercommunal clashes remained high. Heightened economic pressures – including food shortages and dowry obligations – had further intensified the potential for theft and localised conflict.

These recurrent, climate-driven pressures illustrate how environmental scarcity, economic hardship, and historical grievances intersect, generating predictable but poorly mitigated cycles of displacement, insecurity, and social fragmentation. Even small disputes can escalate rapidly, threatening hundreds of households simultaneously and straining social cohesion.
What's more, the value of anticipatory action is particularly stark when it comes to dealing with climate-related harm to civilians. In this instance, NP teams supported proactive coordination: local authorities, youth leaders, and chiefs from both Akobo West and Ulang agreed on migration routes, leadership accompaniment, and risk mitigation measures ahead of the seasonal cattle migration season. Adjustments were made to avoid areas with armed youth, demonstrating how anticipatory planning and community-led mitigation can reduce conflict during essential seasonal movements.



NP staff and Youth Protection Team members joint patrol. Tangnyang Boma, Akobo, South Sudan. June 25, 2025. ©NP

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)

CRSV increased across virtually all conflict contexts in which NP operates. Often, it was driven by the absence of consistent protection and accountability mechanisms. In Sudan, Women's Protection Teams reported an important rise in domestic violence, with women describing how stress linked to hunger, displacement, and loss of livelihoods was increasingly taken out on them within households. Other forms of sexual violence were widely assumed to be ongoing but severely underreported, particularly in overcrowded camps, where women and girls faced heightened risks of experiencing sexual violence when collecting water or firewood.

Importantly, CRSV risks were especially acute along displacement routes or within displacement sites. In the DRC, women and girls reported sexual abuses and rapes committed by various armed actors, but also sexual harassment and survival sex in displacement sites. In Sudan, women and girls travelling toward Tawila reported rape and sexual violence, particularly when moving in small groups – although small groups was often a strategy women used to reduce their visibility and avoid being detected by armed actors and criminal groups.

This included high rates of pregnancies as a result of the sexual violence and reported attempts by women to self-abort due to the absence of care. Across multiple contexts, there are also serious fears of long-term stigmatisation of children born of rape and forced marriages. For example in Iraq, CRSV survivors who bore children as a result of attacks were often rejected by their communities, leaving survivors with impossible choices between motherhood and reintegration.

In addition to physical violence, CRSV also increasingly took place online, often referred to as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). In Iraq, young women and girls have faced what is referred to as "image-based abuse" and digital extortion, with online threats to share compromising images used to extract money or sexual favors. There were reports of even non-explicit images provoking severe social stigma, shaming survivors and their families, and contributing to broader tensions between households and communities. Similarly in the US, rights organisations reported increasingly explicit, misogynistic rhetoric - both online and offline - alongside targeted threats and attacks, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. Tamika Middleton, Managing Director for the Women's March share with NP that in her view, "people feel more justified, and more safe in expressing violent threats". However, whether online or in physical reality, underreporting has remained widespread. Often, it was due to sustained fear of stigma, social reprisal and the absence of any reliable justice or support mechanisms.

Our teams also documented forms of gender-based violence that remain widely underreported and less publicly recognised.

"Even if I am free, no one sees me. They don't want my child, so they don't want me either."
– Woman survivor, Al-Hol camp

In Sudan, it took the form of gender-based violence targeting young men. Teams reported seeing young men increasingly subjected to extreme sexualised and gendered violence, particularly at checkpoints and along flight routes. Those arriving in Tawila reported being tied, beaten for prolonged periods, forced to confess alleged affiliations, or killed, with those perceived to have specific identity features facing heightened targeting and deep humiliation. Testimonies described groups of young men attempting to flee El Fasher where only one or two survived the journey, and multiple accounts reported bodies – including a man with a disability – left alongside the road. Similarly, in the US restrictions on reproductive care have been accompanied by increased violence and threats targeting women, the queer community, and healthcare providers – forms of gender-based violence that are often treated as political or security incidents rather than recognized as SGBV. Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022, there has been a sustained rise in attacks and intimidation against abortion providers, healthcare facilities, people seeking care, and those protesting to protect abortion access, with incidents frequently escalating into targeted threats and violent attacks by counter-protesters.



Youth Peace Team member during 16 Days of Activism. South Mosul, Iraq. 2024. ©NP



Child at the Trans Youth Rally where NP provided protective presence. Brooklyn, New York, U.S. February 8, 2025. ©Madison Swart

Hate speech, mis- and disinformation

Hate speech, mis-, and disinformation have long been present across nearly all conflict settings where our teams operate. They are often rooted in ethnic, political or identity-based divisions and are not just a result of conflict but a real driver of it. They are also well-documented early warning indicators of mass violence and atrocities. In 2025, these dynamics not only intensified but manifested in multiple, reinforcing ways: through rumours and information manipulation affecting civilian movement and safety, through deliberate information blackouts, through inflammatory rhetoric by duty bearers and through online harm and digital abuse.

To start, rumours and active misinformation drove displacement and violence at community level. In eastern DRC, for example, communities reported a marked rise in rumours and information manipulation amid rapidly shifting frontlines and limited, inconsistent communication from both state and de facto authorities. In this environment, misinformation became a direct driver of displacement and harm. Single, unverified messages such as warnings of imminent forced recruitment, attacks, or pillaging repeatedly led entire villages to flee within hours. “Rwandophone” communities reported increased harassment and attacks linked to perceptions of being “foreign” or “infiltrators” associated with Rwanda.

Information blackouts amplified fear and constrained civilians’ ability to make protective decisions. In Sudan’s Zamzam camp, for example, a complete telecommunications blackout in early 2025 left civilians and humanitarian actors without access to reliable information. In the resulting information vacuum, rumours spread rapidly and misinformation became widespread, amplifying panic and placing civilians at heightened risk. The inability to verify information or communicate across locations severely constrained civilians’ ability to make informed decisions about movement, safety and access to assistance.

Inflammatory rhetoric was increasingly carried out by duty bearers. In South Sudan, senior security authorities used public statements to frame political opposition and community movements as security threats, often encouraging the use of force against them. In other contexts, hate speech by authorities directly translated into protection risks for specific groups. In the US, for instance, hate speech from the administration and senior officials targeting LGBTQ+ communities - particularly transgender people - intensified in 2025. Vilifying rhetoric was reinforced through legislative and administrative actions seeking to exclude transgender people from public spaces, restrict access to healthcare, participation in sports and military service, remove gender-affirming identification, and essentially erase transgender people from public narratives. Transgender people reported growing isolation from public life, reduced freedom of movement, and reluctance to seek healthcare or engage with authorities. In the DRC as well, those calling for accountability or expressing more nuanced positions in the face of inflammatory narratives from a wide array of political actors, were increasingly labeled as traitors, exposing them to intimidation and effectively silencing dissent.

Finally, civilian harm increasingly took place in the online space, through tactics of extortion and abuse, often with rapid offline consequences. In Iraq and the Philippines, for instance, mis- and disinformation intersected with cyber violence, particularly affecting women, youth and children. As shown previously in the report, digital extortion and image-based abuse in Iraq became increasingly prevalent, with perpetrators threatening to disseminate real or fabricated images to extract money or sexual favors. In the Philippines, online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) remained a significant protection concern. Digital platforms enabled exploitation to occur within homes and communities, blurring the line between public and private spaces and making detection and reporting particularly difficult.

Online risks and misinformation in Ninewa, Iraq

Community Protection Teams (CPTs) are volunteer groups of local residents working with NP to identify protection risks and support grassroots safety measures. Across Ninewa, CPTs consistently report that online spaces are dominated by fear-driven and divisive narratives, with only few posts conveying messages of peaceful coexistence or recovery efforts. In areas recovering from IS rule, including Sinjar, Baaj, and Tel Afar, this scarcity of positive content leaves little counterweight to hate speech, rumours, and misinformation, amplifying mistrust and anxiety within communities.

Youth are particularly affected, as their primary sources of information often prioritise anger or fear over empathy, reinforcing tensions. CPT members note that community Facebook pages frequently highlight sensational content, glorifying violence and enabling harmful narratives to spread rapidly. For example, in Sinjar, one high-follower page amplified IS-supportive messages and alarming claims about insecurity, triggering anxiety and mistrust among residents still coping with the legacy of past violence.

Language barriers further exacerbate risk: posts in local dialects, including Kurmanji Kurdish or dialect-specific Arabic, often evade platform moderation. Hence, harmful content in these languages - including threats and extortion - frequently remains online, leaving communities without effective digital protection. CPT observations show that these online dynamics create real protection risks, undermining social cohesion and complicating recovery efforts.

To read more about digital harms and their impact on social cohesion in Ninewa, see https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/NPIQ-digital-social-cohesion-EN-advocacy-brief.pdf.



Above: DRC. 2025. ©NP
Opposite: Earthquake response. Myanmar. 2025. ©NP

Access constraints and shrinking humanitarian space

NP teams and the wider humanitarian community continued to experience serious access constraints and restrictions to humanitarian space. This limited both civilian survival options and the ability of humanitarian actors to access impacted people and operate safely and impartially. In South Sudan, violence in Jonglei and Upper Nile states and ensuing road closures consistently threatened the delivery of life-saving aid. Aid convoys were also regularly ambushed or looted. In eastern DRC, access was equally fragile, with inflation, cash shortages, and bank closures increasing transfer fees and transport costs. This forced humanitarian actors to adopt costly and complex workarounds to maintain operations. Teams also regularly encountered armed minors at checkpoints, intoxicated soldiers, experienced short detentions, and demands for escorts along mixed-control routes. They have made clear that access was not stable but had to be managed day by day through ongoing negotiation, refusal to pay bribes and flexible planning. In Sudan, for example, all access routes into and out of El Fasher – including those west of Zamzam – cut off civilians from life-saving aid because of the persistent insecurity that prevented effective supply. It's important to note that, across contexts, national staff were particularly exposed and vulnerable to access-related violence, signaling both how local identity can affect who is targeted and a wider erosion of trust between authorities and aid actors.

Finally, as explained previously, the increasing economic exploitation of civilian movement is an additional factor that has made the establishment of humanitarian corridors or convoys nearly impossible: multiple armed actors control different segments of routes, and many currently profit from civilian transit, which reduces incentives to agree to ceasefires or safe passage arrangements.



Mental health, psychosocial support and a perceptions of abandonment

Continued exposure to violence has continued to have severe and lasting mental health consequences, particularly for women who survived conflict related sexual violence. In Iraq and Syria, women who had survived IS atrocities - including rape, forced marriage, religious coercion, and prolonged captivity - described deep psychological suffering, in an environment where mental health and psychosocial support remained extremely limited, especially in rural areas. Many spoke of living with constant anxiety, emotional numbness, and a sense of psychological fragmentation after years of abuse. Some were captured as young as 8 or 9 years old, raised under IS rule and now carry an identity forged through violence. Hence, they end up reporting having little or no memory of their families, communities, or cultural and religious practices before captivity. In other words, a complete identity loss. For some, Syria had become the only home they knew, making the idea of “return” difficult or meaningless in the absence of memories of what was lost.

“I no longer know who I am. I don’t even speak my language properly.” – Yazidi woman returned from Syria

Across contexts, communities affected by conflict also spoke of feeling abandoned and losing trust in protection systems, with clear impacts on mental health and social cohesion. As trust eroded, people became less willing to engage with outside actors, highlighting the need for protection approaches built on consistent presence, predictability and equal attention to psychological as well as physical safety. This was evident in eastern DRC, where already strained relationships with international actors were further pressured as lines of control shifted in 2025. In Sudan, civilians in El Fasher and Zamzam also described feeling deserted by the international community, with daily life reduced to survival and little expectation of meaningful protection or assistance coming from “the outside”.

Importantly, these dynamics also affected frontline humanitarian workers, with cumulative stress, insecurity, and displacement taking a toll on staff wellbeing, including with our own staff. Sustained exposure to violence translated into deep fatigue and trauma symptoms among personnel, which led to the introduction of deliberate mitigation measures such as structured debriefs, peer support, and access to psychosocial care. This reflects a broader responsibility to look after the people carrying out humanitarian work, particularly in high-risk environments. Ensuring staff are supported, safe, and able to process the violence they experience daily is not only critical for individual wellbeing, but also for the quality, continuity and integrity of the assistance provided to affected communities. This is what we refer to as duty of care. In some contexts, duty of care has required the provision of concrete, technical support to reduce direct operational risk. Ukraine illustrates this clearly.

Use of Frequency Analysers (FA) by first responders in Ukraine

Combat attack drones have become the deadliest with short-range improvised combat unmanned escalating from 31 recorded incidents in 2022 to 26,493 period, casualties rose from 2 to 5,136, including 3,290 cent increase compared to 2024.

Local humanitarian organisations conducting frontline exposure to this threat and have consistently requested analysers (FAs). These passive radio-wave detection nearby drone activity, enabling earlier threat awareness allowing teams to delay movement, seek shelter, adjust measures, FAs support proactive risk mitigation rather



NP and Safer Access Ukraine intensive training on short-range drone safety with Vilniy Kharkiv Volunteers. Kyiv, Ukraine. 2025. ©Vilniy Kharkiv Volunteers

In several documented cases, early warnings from FAs evacuation teams to shelter during artillery strikes, postpone operations until threats had passed, or evade incoming drones. Incidents that could have resulted in serious harm instead demonstrated the effectiveness of early warning systems as a protective measure.

The implication for duty of care is clear. International actors cannot continue to rely on local partners to operate in high-threat environments without providing access to proven protective technologies. Supporting such measures constitutes both an immediate life-saving intervention and a necessary adaptation to the realities of modern warfare. As ICUAV threats continue to expand beyond Ukraine, the approaches developed here will increasingly inform sector-wide responses to emerging risks faced by humanitarian workers and civilians alike.

To read more about ways to improve the safety of humanitarian operations through the use of frequency analysers in Ukraine, see https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Provision-of-Frequency-Analysers_EN.pdf.

*** We use the terminology “Improvised Combat Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (ICUAVs)”, a designation that is widely accepted across security, protection, and humanitarian risk-analysis sectors. While these systems are often colloquially referred to as “FPV drones,” FPV (First Person View) describes a commonly used mode of operation rather than a category of weapon or platform. The term ICUAV more accurately captures the diversity of commercially available and military allocated or modified unmanned aerial vehicles (attack drones) that are repurposed and employed with improvised submunitions by drone operators.*

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Reflecting on 2025, one central question emerges: as a protection organisation, what have we learned from this moment and what must change do we promote, as a result?

The past year marked a period of deep institutional reckoning across the global protection and humanitarian system. Trends long underway became more entrenched and impossible to ignore. At the system level, 2025 was widely framed as a year of "reset" or fundamental "restructuring." A UN-led humanitarian reform agenda, the UN80 reforms, reviews of peace operations and associated civilian protection mandates, the contraction or collapse of major humanitarian actors, unprecedented funding cuts, and rising global military expenditure all unfolded at once. At the same time, renewed efforts to reaffirm the relevance of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) shaped protection discourse. These efforts remain essential. Yet the realities documented in this report reinforce a growing recognition across the sector: legal frameworks alone have not guaranteed civilian safety. Compliance gaps persist, enforcement remains weak, and civilians continue to bear the consequences of unabated violence. For organisations committed to civilian-centred, nonviolent protection, this was not a year of expansion or certainty. It was a year of holding the line, that is maintaining presence, sustaining trust with communities, and continuing protection work amid shrinking humanitarian space and increasing pressure to justify approaches that do not rely on force.

Beyond institutional upheaval, 2025 was also a year that challenged long-held assumptions about civilian protection: where threats to civilian safety originate, how violence manifests, and who is responsible for responding. Across contexts, harm was not confined to frontlines or clearly defined conflict zones, nor was it perpetrated solely by identifiable armed actors. Violence increasingly unfolded in civilian spaces, through surveillance, restriction, deprivation, and fear, as much as through direct physical attack. In this context, civilians, in partnership with formal or informal local protection organisations were often the first – and sometimes only – responders, navigating protection risks in the absence of timely, effective, or accessible formal mechanisms.

These shifts in perception also created a moment of opportunity. The political and resourcing shocks of 2025 opened space for overdue questions - not only about how protection is delivered, but by whom. Amid the grimness, our teams also observed growing openness among some policy and donor actors to approaches that are community-led, rooted in nonviolence, and linked to longer-term peacebuilding. While these conversations raised serious concerns - particularly the risk that shifts in responsibility become shifts in burden, through outsourcing risk to communities without adequate support or withdrawing international presence too soon – one conclusion is increasingly clear: protection must be locally grounded and responsive to the priorities and agency of those most affected, while also being backed by sustained, predictable international engagement – financially, politically, and operationally.

Underlying these debates is a deeper challenge: that of trust. Trust between local and international actors; between field-based knowledge and global policymaking spaces. Rebuilding this trust requires more than structural reform. It demands a cultural shift – one grounded in humility, serious listening to civilian perspectives, and an understanding that protection moves at the speed of relationships, not funding cycles or political timelines.

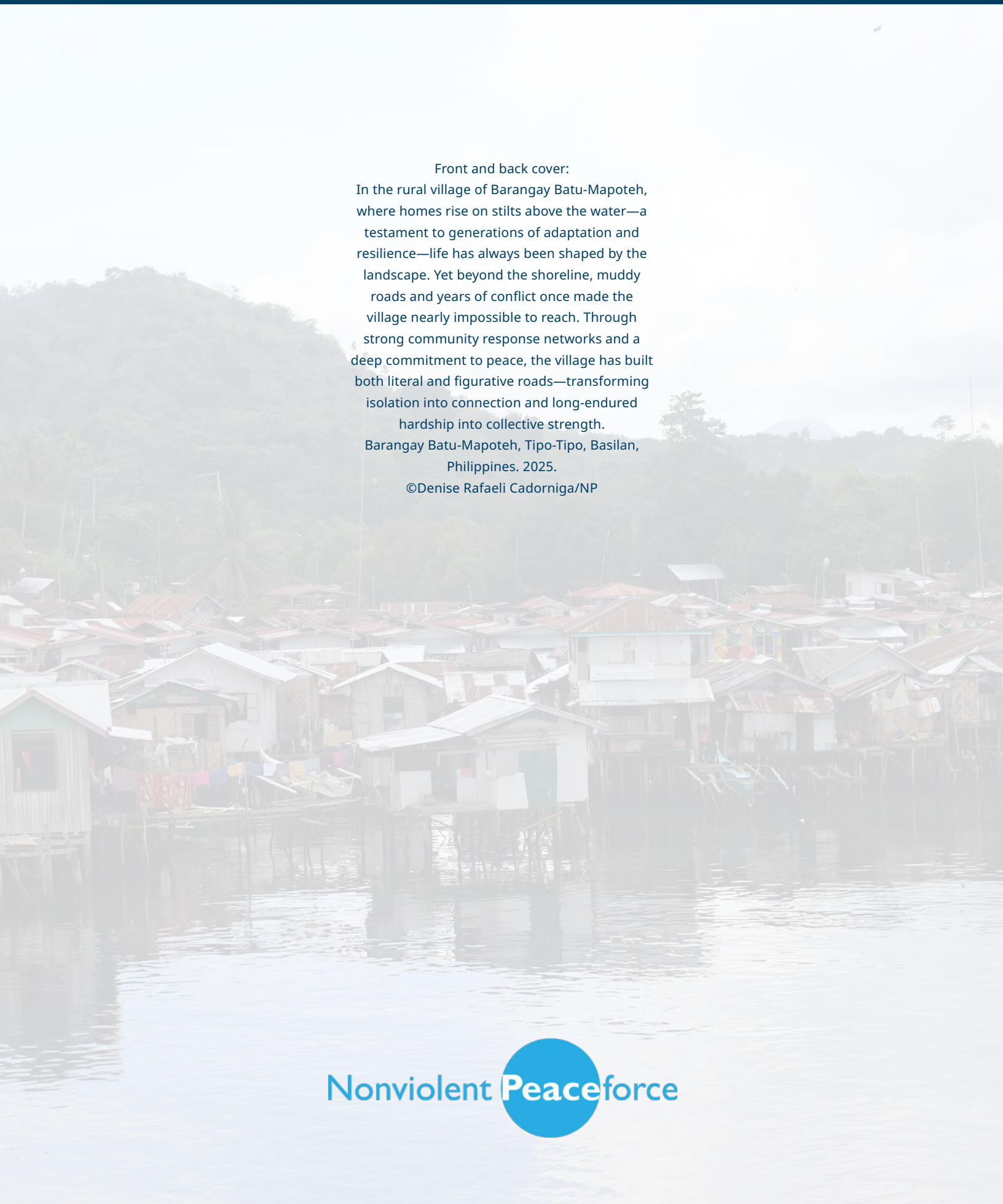
This is at the heart of the UCP philosophy. However, to realise its full potential, UCP must be recognised, resourced, and systematized – not as a niche innovation, but as a core protection approach. This requires investment in long-term presence, support for community-based protection mechanisms, and the integration of nonviolent strategies into broader protection planning, rather than deploying them only in moments of crisis.

The trends documented in this report are sobering. They reflect a world in which pathways to safety are increasingly narrow, fragile, and contested. Yet they also affirm something else: civilians continue to act, adapt, and protect one another, even when formal systems fall short. Our responsibility as international protection actors is not to replace this agency, nor to romanticise it, but to stand with it, strengthen it, and ensure it is not borne alone.

As conflicts evolve, so too must our understanding of protection. The challenge ahead is not simply to respond faster or louder, but to respond more wisely – centering prevention, civilian leadership, and trust-based engagement. In the words of our Iraqi colleague highlighted in this report's foreword, "there is always a way through". If 2025 has shown anything, it is that even when walls appear higher and more immovable than ever, pathways can still be created, especially at the grassroots. The task now is to ensure that protection systems are capable – and courageous enough – to help open them.

Contact

If you would like to request further information with respect to any of the points outlined in the present document, please contact Imane Karimou, ikarimou@nonviolentpeaceforce.org or Felicity Gray, fgray@nonviolentpeaceforce.org.



Front and back cover:
In the rural village of Barangay Batu-Mapoteh, where homes rise on stilts above the water—a testament to generations of adaptation and resilience—life has always been shaped by the landscape. Yet beyond the shoreline, muddy roads and years of conflict once made the village nearly impossible to reach. Through strong community response networks and a deep commitment to peace, the village has built both literal and figurative roads—transforming isolation into connection and long-endured hardship into collective strength.
Barangay Batu-Mapoteh, Tipo-Tipo, Basilan, Philippines. 2025.
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