

**Exclusive Interviews on U.S. - Israeli Military
Aggression Against Iran**
(Conducted by ODVV)
2026



Strengthening Civil Society Engagement within UN Frameworks: A Conversation with Cyril Ritchie, Peter Ford, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, David Swanson and Robert Fantina.

Introduction

As part of its ongoing efforts to document humanitarian and legal concerns arising from recent developments in Iran, the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) conducted an exchange with Mr. Cyril Ritchie, a senior figure within the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO). He is a longstanding leader in the international NGO community and a senior representative within CoNGO. With decades of experience working alongside the United Nations system, he has played a key role in strengthening civil society participation in multilateral processes and promoting collaboration among ECOSOC-accredited organizations.

This exchange highlights the role of civil society organizations in navigating UN mechanisms, particularly in contexts where formal international processes face political and structural limitations. The exchange highlights practical pathways for NGO engagement, advocacy, and accountability efforts within the UN system. The perspectives expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence.

The full transcript of this important exchange follows:



Cyril Ritchie

1. From your perspective, how can ECOSOC-accredited NGOs collaborate to explore the feasibility of civil society-led accountability initiatives in situations where formal international mechanisms face limitations?

CoNGO encourages ECOSOC-accredited NGOs, above all those that are members of CoNGO, to collaborate on accountability and other initiatives. The initiative should primarily come from individual NGOs with competence in the field involved, who should use the ECOSOC consultative status list to seek out potential partners or allies. Even if "formal international mechanisms face limitations" we must work with them to boost multilateralism, and in particular to foster using the United Nations System to whatever extent is "politically" possible.

2. What steps can organizations such as ODVV take to ensure that concerns related to the protection of civilian infrastructure are effectively raised within UN forums, including the General Assembly? And how can NGOs engage with relevant stake holders to support accountability efforts through legal or advocacy avenues?

NGOs, individually and collectively, can and must use their consultative status to speak up as advocates for justice and the implementation of international law, most certainly of international humanitarian law) in all relevant UN fora, above all the Human Rights Council. However, you certainly know that

NGOs have no formal access to the UN General Assembly, and many authoritarian governments regularly resist (publicly and/or behind the scenes) any efforts to open up space for NGOs vis-à-vis the GA

3. In the current climate, there is concern that political pressures may affect the consultative status of certain NGOs. How can networks such as CoNGO provide practical support mechanisms to help safeguard the consultative standing of member organizations?

I think it would be true to say that "political pressures affect the consultative status of NGOs" every month, sometimes every day. And have done for many years. The above remark on the GA is just one example. We see "political pressures" in regard to NGO accreditation to many UN Conferences or to NGO speaking rights. However, NGOs can also exercise "political pressures" by lobbying governmental missions to the UN, not least to remind some more difficult governments that they need to listen to competent NGOs which have grass-roots and operational knowledge, and which reflect the concerns of the people (to whom - in theory in (some cases - governments are responsible

CoNGO is constantly - but, to get results, often discreetly - using its almost 80-years' experience and its "standing vis-à-vis the UN System "to help safeguard the consultative standing of member organizations One of CoNGO's advantages is that it works across all UN entities, and has great knowledge of good practices throughout the System, enabling us to advocate - again, often discreetly - for their extension and multiplication



Peter Ford

1. In Iran, we have seen direct attacks on civilian areas, including the Minab school, where 168 children were killed and some families are still searching for the bodies of their children. Why do such incidents not receive the attention they deserve in Western media, and how does this silence affect public opinion and government accountability?

If a tragedy on the scale of Minab had happened in Israel the Western media without a shadow of a doubt would have expressed horror and condemnation on an unimaginable scale. Iran would have been pilloried in every possible way and the attacks on it would have been seen as a legitimate response. But because the victims were Iranian the Western media reported the atrocity factually but without any deep concern and certainly no condemnation. The double standards would have been obvious to all.

The Minab episode was an early skirmish in the information war. Make no mistake, the information war has been a key part of a multi-level concerted attack on Iran, with the West holding most of the big guns (mainstream media). Unfortunately for the Americans and Israelis, Iran has won the information war, against all odds. Just as in the military conflict, Iran's strategies of asymmetric warfare have been well worked out and successful. Iran managed to make America and President Trump look bad, not in the sense of being evil but of being inept. The Western media like some governments was ready to go along with criticising Trump, but more for failing to subdue Iran and not having an exit plan than for launching an unjustified and cruel war in the first place. Rarely did the Western media show much compassion or empathy where Iran was concerned, on the contrary constantly regurgitating the preferred Western narrative that Iran was an oppressive regime indifferent to the suffering of its own people and that regime change would have been desirable had it been possible.

2. When media reports use terms like “precision strikes,” while in reality hospitals, schools, and civilian infrastructure in Iran have been targeted, how can this kind of language shape or distort public understanding and even serve to justify such attacks?

Control of the vocabulary is key in the information battle space. Thus "precision strikes" slyly convey the idea that the US/Israeli aggressors were meticulous in trying to avoid civilian casualties, when the truth is that they were oblivious to such casualties since the Western media were never going to challenge meaningfully the claims that were made.

3. In the recent attacks on Iran, in addition to human casualties, there has been environmental damage, harm to industrial facilities, and destruction of cultural and historical sites. Why do these types of impacts—directly linked to people’s lives and rights—receive less attention from media and international institutions? Does this contribute to ignoring the responsibility of countries involved in these attacks?

The Western media were far more concerned about damage done to oil installations in Arab Gulf countries hosting US forces than they were about damage done inside Iran, not only to oil installations but also many other facilities and even cultural and heritage sites. Again, double standards on display. This callous indifference to suffering on the Iranian side of the scales helped enable the aggressors to continue their aggression without being called to account and the supposedly neutral Western governments like Britain to wring their hands but do nothing to stop the carnage.

4. In your view, what steps should be taken to make media coverage of wars—especially in the case of Iran and also the situation in Palestine—more transparent and fair, so that the reality of what people experience is less hidden?

Sadly, Western control over the information battle space is so widespread domestically and internationally that it is hard to foresee a time when victims of Western aggression will receive sympathetic coverage. It may be too much to hope for that the Global South will mobilize effectively to act collectively in the information domain. They can however try to do so. In the meanwhile, social media, although dominated by US corporate

tech giants, plays by different rules, and in this domain Iran in the recent conflict played a weak hand very skillfully, aping some of the tricks used by Westerners themselves to turn the tables.



Oliver Boyd-Barrett

1. In your view, how do Western media portray the suffering of ordinary people when reporting on attacks in Iran? Does this kind of coverage make the reality seem less severe than it actually is?

Western media are not interested in the suffering of ordinary people in Iran unless they can argue that the suffering has been caused by the government agencies of Iran, or unless they can show that the suffering of ordinary people will contribute to instability that will help the West topple the government of Iran.

2. In the Minab school attack in Iran, 168 children were killed, and some victims—such as Makan Nasiri—are still missing. Why do such incidents receive so little serious attention in international media, and how does this affect public opinion?

Western media seek to underplay the negative humanitarian consequences of the unprovoked aggression of the US and Israel on Iran (building on all the Western deception, connivance and collaboration, as in the proceedings leading to the former JCPOA, which have brought us to this point). They will pretend that most people in the world, including ordinary Western citizens, are not shocked to the roots of their being by such atrocities, but rather to give such events relatively little attention, while also highlighting explanations that make it appear that these events are the tragic, unintended consequences of war and not the direct culpability of those who started the war, planned the attacks, fired the missiles or dropped the bombs.

3. When terms like “precision strikes” are used in reports, while in reality hospitals and civilian infrastructure in Iran have been hit, how do such words shape public understanding of what is happening?

The intent behind the propaganda of "precision," is to reassure Western publics that the targets of Western attacks are carefully selected to minimize negative humanitarian consequences when

in fact these consequences may already have been factored in to the selection of targets, or may have been poorly calculated. Missiles and bombs are frequently anything but precise (as when intercepted) and in some recent conflicts the majority of missiles and bombs have been conventionally imprecise weapons. What we can call the "theatre" of humanitarianism is a show in which actors play the parts of people who are very concerned to minimize harm to civilians. The show, more often than not, has little connection with reality. Its purpose is propagandistic, as already mentioned, and also to provide grounds for defense in the (unlikely) event of serious legal challenge and the calling to account of evil doers.

4. What practical steps can independent media and civil society actors take to ensure that the real suffering of people in Iran—especially due to military attacks or sanctions—is more accurately reflected in Western public opinion?

Independent media and civil society actors can take all practical measures to critically dissect and to publicize misleading or false claims that are made by all parties to international conflicts, and to support all efforts at independent, professional, judicial investigation.

5. In the recent attacks on Iran, in addition to civilian casualties, there has been environmental damage, destruction of industrial infrastructure, and significant harm to cultural and historical sites. Why do such acts—despite being clearly prohibited under international law—not trigger stronger responses from international institutions? Are these institutions limited when it comes to the United States or Israel? What can be done in practice?

Newer generations of leaders in the West have emerged in whose ranks the wealthy and privileged classes are vastly overrepresented. They generally lack direct experience of conflict and its horrors for civilian life. Their material interests are not the interests of ordinary people. They have been cocooned by their social class, educational, political, religious and professional institutions within the ideological, neoliberal "end of history" fancies that have hijacked and monopolized intellectual life throughout much of the world following the end of the Cold War.



David Swanson

1. In Iran, we have witnessed civilian areas being directly targeted, including the Minab school incident in which 168 children lost their lives, and some families are still waiting to find their loved ones. In your view, how can civil society ensure that these human stories are seen and understood globally, rather than being reduced to mere numbers in the news?

Forcing something into "viral" online popularity -- such as the genocide in Gaza or Black Lives Matter or Me Too -- is difficult. Gaza never really won over the corporate media; Black Lives Matter did for a while; and Me Too started there. It has to be seen as a big viral success before anyone will jump on board and participate in it, so some sort of ploy is needed to break out of that Catch-22. A story about the story can be created by disrupting an event, involving a celebrity, winning over an unexpected politician. Or perhaps producing Lego videos. Maybe the Lego videos could make a turn from just mocking Trump to focusing on the mass murder. What the rest of us can do is produce our own writing, speaking, video, audio, graphics, rallies, banner-drops, reports, studies, and social media pushing and pushing and pushing the story that mass murder is being openly committed, in hopes of having some momentum when a lucky break comes. But we do already have a big majority in the U.S. against the wars and can go ahead and give them credit for righteously objecting to mass murder, regardless of whether that is what everyone objects to, and encouraging useful action in addition to good thoughts.

2. In situations where civilian infrastructure in Iran—such as clinics, schools, and basic services—is damaged during ongoing tensions, what practical legal avenues exist to pursue accountability and obtain compensation, especially when major powers are involved?

Nothing is ever considered "practical" until after it succeeds, but it's possible that someday it will appear practical to have demanded global support for the ICJ, the ICC, the UN Charter, and other standards of international law. I'd love to see the government of Iran publicly send a letter to the U.S. State Department indicating its decision to join the Kellogg-Briand Pact and thanking the U.S. government for leading the way in criminalizing all warmaking. I'd love to see the Iranian government ask the U.S. government to read the War Powers Resolution correctly -- something a child could (and should) do.

3. Given the continuation of military and economic pressure against Iran, some analysts point to the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic lever. In your view, to what extent can restrictive actions in such waterways be examined within the framework of the right to self-defense or deterrence?

To the extent that they do not involve the illegal use of mines.



Robert Fantina

1. In Iran, the combination of decades of unfair sanctions and recent attacks has worsened existing difficulties in access to medicine, healthcare, and even education. In your view, can this combination of targeted sanctions and the destruction of civilian infrastructure be seen as a deliberate form of pressure on the population?

These cruel measures taken by western governments are a form of collective punishment, and are therefore a violation of international law. The United States and the leaders of other governments will say that they are being done to punish Iran for human-rights violations, yet they are willing to overlook the extreme human-rights violations being committed by Israel and the United States. Medicine and healthcare are vital for existence; Article 25, Section 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, in part, the following: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services....”

Article 26 is also relevant; Sections 1 and 2 of this Article read as follows:

Section 1: “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.

Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”.

Section 2: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

When any government deprives a population, or a subset of a population, of these rights, they are in violation of international law.

Yet U.S. President Donald Trump, along with the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has stated that one of the goals of their war against Iran is to ‘assist’ the population in overthrowing the government. They hope to do this by making conditions so desperate for the Iranian population that it will accede to their wishes. They do not understand the Iranian people or the Iranian culture.

2. When civilian infrastructure in Iran—such as hospitals, schools, and service facilities—is destroyed as a result of U.S. and Israeli attacks, what practical mechanisms exist at the international level to ensure accountability, condemnation, and compensation?

The United Nations has proven that it is unable to prevent these atrocities, or hold accountable the people responsible for them. The Security Council is the U.N. body that can act, but with the U.S. having veto power, that has not been, and is not now, effective. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) can act, despite the fact that the U.S. sanctions individual members of those courts, preventing them from being able to travel or even use their credit cards.

The most effective measures are sanctions against these criminal nations and their leaders. All nations should cease trade and military agreements with the U.S. and Israel; while suspending all trade may not be feasible, since many economies rely on U.S. trade, it can be reduced. We are seeing now many European countries increasing trade and other alliances with Russia, China and India, and this must continue. Also, U.S. and Israel leaders, and leaders of other countries in violation of international law, should not be welcomed into any nation that respects such law.

3. Given the continuation of military and economic pressure on Iran, some analysts argue that strategic locations such as the Strait of Hormuz could be used as a deterrent tool. In your view, to what extent can such actions be justified within the framework of self-defense?

The U.S. and Israel have used whatever they have at their disposal to attempt to destroy Iran. The disproportionate number of Iranians who have died in this war compared to the number of Israelis and U.S. citizens is great because the Iranian government does not target civilian populations; the Israeli and U.S. governments do. The Iranian government is well within its rights to use the Strait of Hormuz in a manner that will protect and benefit Iranian citizens. Closing the Strait of Hormuz has already had global economic consequences, and those consequences, even if the Strait is opened today, will reverberate for months, if not years. Trump is apparently willing to destroy the world economy in his effort to bring down the government of Iran. He may succeed in ‘accomplishing’ the former, but his goals for Iran are completely unrealistic.

4. Considering the events in Iran—from civilian casualties to broader social and economic impacts—what practical actions can NGOs and human rights actors at the global level take to ensure that these realities are better recognized and that accountability is pursued?

Because international institutions have been unable to act against these severe and blatant violations of human rights and international law, and most government leaders are willing to ignore them, NGOs offer the best alternative to increase the worldwide recognition of these atrocities, and pursue accountability. Members of NGOs, of course, risk their lives to assist suffering people and publicize what the world should see. NGO members must speak publicly, in person and particularly on social media, so the average person, wherever they may be in the world, can see what is happening in Palestine, Iran and Lebanon. NGOs must encourage action, in peaceful protests and at the ballot box, to end these horrors and assure that those responsible for them are held accountable.

5. In the recent attacks on Iran, the targeting of industrial and petrochemical facilities has led to air pollution, environmental damage, and serious concerns about public health. From the perspective of human rights and international law, how should such actions be assessed? What mechanisms exist to pursue them as violations of the rights of civilians?

The U.S. and Israeli governments have no regard for human rights, within their own borders or globally. These industrial and petrochemical facilities are required for the Iranian economy, and are used safely to benefit the people of Iran. When they are bombed, all safety mechanisms are, of course, damaged or destroyed, causing widespread environmental damage, including air and ground pollution. Such actions are additional efforts by the U.S. and Israeli governments to punish the people of Iran for daring to overthrow the U.S.-installed government in 1979, and cause them to be in such desperate circumstances to overthrow their current government.

Again, since the United Nations Security Council is hampered by U.S. veto power, the ICC and ICJ must act. This requires some nation to present a case, as South Africa did against Israel, accusing it of genocide in Palestine. Some world leader must be willing to challenge U.S. hegemony, and take the risks that are inherent in ever challenging the U.S., and which are much greater now with the current administration. But history will judge harshly those who did not act to protect human rights and adhere to international law. And world leaders must recognize that, regardless of their actions, they are in no way protected from the erratic actions of the current U.S. president.

