

LEGAL ASPECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL TERRORISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE: NEW CHALLENGES TO GLOBAL SECURITY

Viktoriia Sydor

Department of State and Legal Disciplines
«KROK» University
Kyiv, Tabirna St., 30-32, Ukraine, 03113
e-mail: victoriasd@krok.edu.ua
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1794-2577>

Yuri Ishchenko

University of Economics and Law «KROK»
Kyiv, Tabirna St., 30-32, Ukraine, 03113
e-mail: ishchenkoyi@krok.edu.ua
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1418-0775>

Abstract

The article provides a comprehensive theoretical and legal analysis of the phenomenon of ecological terrorism in the context of the full-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Special attention is paid to the legal nature of this phenomenon, its specific manifestations during the war, and the challenges of classifying such acts under national and international law. The study outlines examples of deliberate destruction of critical environmental infrastructure—such as the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP, mass environmental pollution, and forest arson—as instruments of terrorist influence. The article identifies legal gaps in Ukrainian legislation regarding the criminalization of ecocide as a form of terrorism and emphasizes the need for harmonization with international law. The author proposes a legal classification of ecological terrorism, highlights its key forms, and outlines effective countermeasures. It is argued that ecological terrorism, within the context of modern warfare, evolves into a global threat to international security, ecosystems, and the humanitarian legal order, and therefore requires a clear legal response at all levels.

Keywords: ecological terrorism; ecocide; hybrid war; environmental security; international humanitarian law.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the issue of environmental security has assumed a global dimension, extending far beyond purely national or regional contexts. Climate change, the degradation of natural resources, the escalation of technological risks and anthropogenic disasters have become integral factors shaping contemporary international relations and the global security system. However, the onset of the full-scale aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022 has demonstrated that environmental security may be not only a casualty of armed conflict but also a deliberately chosen instrument of warfare (Krampe et al., 2025). The targeted destruction of ecosystems, the devastation of natural resources and the use of technological disaster risks as tools of political or military pressure have revealed the emergence of a new phenomenon – environmental terrorism – which requires systematic legal conceptualisation.

The notion of “environmental terrorism” has long remained on the periphery of academic and legal discourse. In classical studies of international humanitarian law, environmental law and criminology, it has been treated only fragmentarily, as a derivative of broader categories such as war crimes, ecocide, or acts of sabotage. Yet contemporary

reality demands a more precise differentiation of this phenomenon, since the intentional infliction of harm upon the environment may constitute not merely an incidental effect of hostilities but rather a principal objective of an aggressor (Popovych et al., 2023). The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, large-scale forest arson, contamination of river systems, and the deliberate targeting of industrial facilities with missile strikes demonstrate that the environmental dimension has become an integral element of modern hybrid warfare. This elevates the issue of environmental terrorism from a matter of ecological concern to one of national and international security.

It should be emphasised that legal scholarship has not yet produced a single, universally accepted definition of environmental terrorism. The academic literature reveals divergent approaches: some consider it as a specific type of terrorism directed at environmental objects, while others interpret it as a variety of ecocide or a form of war crime (Flamm & Kroll, 2024; Veresha et al., 2023). At the same time, the absence of universal legal criteria for its classification creates serious challenges for legal practice: difficulties in qualifying such acts, identifying responsible actors, applying appropriate sanctions, and ensuring adequate reparation. Accordingly, the legal nature of environmental terrorism, its relationship with other international crimes, and the prospects for its criminalisation require dedicated scholarly examination.

The urgency of the issue is amplified by the transboundary character of environmental terrorism. The consequences of the destruction of hydrotechnical structures or accidents at nuclear facilities are not confined to the territory of the state in which they occur. They extend into neighbouring countries, affect ecosystems on a regional scale and generate long-term risks to human health, economic stability and biodiversity. In this sense, Russia's war against Ukraine is not merely a local conflict but a source of global threats that undermine the foundations of international security and necessitate a reconsideration of existing legal approaches to the protection of the environment during armed conflict.

Within the contemporary academic debate there is a growing interest in the problem of environmental terrorism. Scholars are addressing its relationship with the concept of sustainable development, with state obligations under international environmental law, and with the provisions of international criminal law (Bielikova & Levanda, 2025). Some argue for the recognition of environmental terrorism as an autonomous international crime falling within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Others consider it sufficient to improve national legislation and reinforce the implementation of existing international conventions. Yet no consensus has been reached, which underscores the need for further research.

For Ukraine, this issue carries particular significance. The Constitution of Ukraine guarantees to every individual the right to a safe environment and imposes upon the state the duty to ensure ecological balance. Nevertheless, under the conditions of war, the effectiveness of these guarantees and the adequacy of existing legislation in addressing new challenges are called into question. The Criminal Code of Ukraine contains a provision on ecocide, yet it does not provide for a distinct category of "environmental terrorism". This gap in the legal framework must be addressed through legislative reform, harmonisation with international law and the initiation of international mechanisms of justice concerning environmental crimes. Ultimately, the protection of the environment in wartime must be integrated into the system of national security alongside military, economic and informational components.

At the same time, the study of environmental terrorism cannot be conducted without an interdisciplinary perspective. Alongside legal analysis, insights from ecology, economics, sociology, psychology and security studies are essential. Sociological surveys, for instance, reveal a growing public awareness of the connection between environmental

and national security, thereby generating societal demand for stronger legal regulation in this domain. Ecological research provides empirical evidence regarding the scale of environmental damage, while economic assessments substantiate the necessity of international compensation mechanisms. Thus, the study of environmental terrorism is a complex undertaking that requires the consolidation of efforts across multiple disciplines.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comprehensive theoretical and legal analysis of the phenomenon of environmental terrorism in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, to define its legal nature, forms of manifestation and legal consequences, and to identify pathways for the improvement of national and international legislation to enable an effective response to this challenge. The article pays attention not only to the conceptual definition of environmental terrorism but also to the practical issues of its legal qualification, the gaps in international law and the prospects for the establishment of new mechanisms of accountability. The authors proceed from the position that environmental terrorism is not an isolated or incidental occurrence but a systemic element of contemporary hybrid wars, one that undermines the foundations of humanitarian law, generates long-term risks for humanity and demands a legal response at the global level.

Literature Review

The issue of environmental security and the legal protection of the environment during armed conflicts has been the subject of sustained examination in both international and national scholarship. The expanding scale of contemporary wars, their hybrid nature and the deliberate use of natural resources as instruments of pressure have underscored the necessity of rethinking existing legal categories.

A number of contemporary researchers emphasise that armed conflicts have long-lasting and large-scale consequences for the natural environment. In their article *Armed Conflict Causes Long-Lasting Environmental Harms* (2025), Florian Krampe, Joakim Kreutz and Tobias Ide demonstrate that war leads to environmental degradation persisting for decades, diminishing the resilience of ecosystems and undermining the economic potential of the state (Krampe et al., 2025). Ukrainian scholars have also actively addressed this problem. For example, T. Popovych, L. Andrushchenko and V. Olefir analyse methods of assessing environmental and human harm during wartime, highlighting the need to integrate environmental expertise into international legal accountability mechanisms (Popovych et al., 2023). In their study, N. Bielikova and O. Levanda assess environmental risks and the impact of warfare on territorial development, particularly with respect to water resources and infrastructure (Bielikova & Levanda, 2021). A. Shevchenko stresses the necessity of incorporating environmental standards into Ukraine's national security system, emphasising that the right to a safe environment must be treated as an integral component of human rights. I. Ivanov examines the relationship between environmental and humanitarian law, noting the difficulties of qualifying war crimes against the environment. O. Yurchenko, in turn, analyses the problem of ecocide and the need to enshrine within Ukrainian criminal law a distinct category of crimes against the environment committed in wartime.

The issue of environmental terrorism as a distinct phenomenon has long remained underexplored. In his classical work *Environmental Terrorism: Analysing the Concept* (1998), Daniel M. Schwartz proposed a systematisation of the phenomenon according to criteria such as intent, symbolism, target selection and violations of international law (Schwartz, 1998). At present, however, an increasing number of scholars highlight the link between environmental terrorism and the concept of hybrid warfare. In particular, Patrick Flamm and Stefan Kroll, in their article *Environmental (In)security, Peacebuilding and Green Economic Recovery in the Context of Russia's War Against Ukraine* (2024),

examine how ecological attacks operate not only as tools of intimidation but also as factors complicating recovery and peacebuilding processes (Flamm & Kroll, 2024).

International law provides only partial regulation of environmental protection during armed conflict. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), in Article 8, defines widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment as a war crime. Yet no unified concept of “environmental terrorism” currently exists. Scholars stress the gaps in the existing legal framework. For instance, V. Veresha and colleagues analyse the prospects for the criminalisation of ecocide at both national and international levels, advocating its recognition as a separate category of international crime (Veresha et al., 2023).

This issue is also actively developed in the international dimension. Considerable attention has been devoted by United Nations experts to the protection of the environment during armed conflicts. For example, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in a series of reports, stresses that the deliberate destruction of ecosystems or their use as “weapons of war” should be regarded as a threat to international peace and security (UNEP, *Protecting the Environment During Armed Conflict: An Inventory and Analysis of International Law*, 2009).

Within the International Criminal Court, discussions are ongoing regarding the inclusion of ecocide as a distinct category of international crime. Although the Rome Statute (1998) already contains provisions on responsibility for acts resulting in “widespread, long-term and severe damage to the environment” (Art. 8), scholars and experts emphasise the need for greater precision in these provisions and for stronger mechanisms of enforcement (Higgins, Short & South, *Protecting the Planet: A Proposal for a Law of Ecocide*, 2013).

An important contribution to the development of this discourse is the work of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, who in annual reports highlights the interconnection between the right to a safe environment and international humanitarian law during armed conflict (UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment*, 2022).

Ukrainian scholarship has increasingly focused on the specificity of warfare in Ukraine. The monograph *Ecological Security of Territories* discusses systems of environmental security primarily under conditions of peacetime (Adamenko et al., 2014). By contrast, more recent publications addressing the post-2022 context emphasise the deliberate nature of environmental destruction, thereby providing grounds for identifying a new category of crimes—environmental terrorism.

In sum, both Ukrainian researchers and international institutions stress the necessity of integrating environmental security into the legal framework of human rights protection and humanitarian law. Nevertheless, despite the substantial volume of research, the specific theme of environmental terrorism—understood as the deliberate use of environmental destruction for military purposes—remains underdeveloped, which determines the relevance of the present study.

Results and Discussion

In the contemporary realities of the full-scale war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, environmental security has acquired a new dimension: from a local concern, it has evolved into a challenge to global human security (Khylyk, 2024). Whereas previously it was considered largely through the lens of environmental policy, sustainable development, and climate adaptation, today the ecological factor has become an integral instrument of hybrid warfare. Destructive actions targeting the environment, infrastructure, and natural resources not only produce immediate devastating consequences but also generate long-term risks for the lives and health of millions of people, the economic stability of regions, and the preservation of biodiversity.

In this context, it is essential to delineate, systematise, and analyse a phenomenon that has hitherto remained only fragmentarily addressed in scholarly and legal discourse—namely, environmental terrorism.

Within the scope of this research, the authors propose an original definition of the concept. As noted by O. A. Mashkov, under current conditions, the category of “environmental terrorism” encompasses a wide range of actions: the use of explosive substances in protected areas, the deliberate destruction of nature reserves, the shelling of chemical enterprises, and the contamination of rivers and soils (Mashkov et al., 2019). The unfolding of such actions during wartime casts doubt on the possibility of rapid restoration of ecological balance in Ukraine. Environmental terrorism should be understood as a set of deliberate actions by a state, an organised group, or other actors aimed at the destruction or pollution of the natural environment, ecological infrastructure, or vital resources for the purposes of terror, intimidation, or coercion of the population and authorities. Such actions transcend the bounds of conventional warfare and produce long-term ecological and humanitarian consequences. This definition enables a clearer distinction of the phenomenon from related categories and underscores its uniqueness in contemporary armed conflicts. Unlike ecocide, which presupposes the systematic destruction of the environment on a global or national scale, environmental terrorism may be more selective and localised, yet its primary purpose lies in exploiting ecological threats as a tool of coercion. It differs from war crimes in that environmental damage is inflicted not as an incidental effect of hostilities but as a deliberately chosen means of demoralisation, coercion, or intimidation. Sabotage, although it may overlap with environmental terrorism, is generally of a narrowly military or economic character and does not entail systemic, long-term destructive consequences for ecosystems and civilian life. Thus, environmental terrorism represents an interdisciplinary category encompassing environmental, legal, humanitarian, and security dimensions.

For a fuller understanding of its essence, it is appropriate to offer a classification. In terms of forms, environmental terrorism may be divided into several types. First, nuclear terrorism, which includes attacks or threats of attacks on nuclear power plants and other facilities storing or utilising radioactive materials. Second, hydrotechnical terrorism, which encompasses the destruction of dams, reservoirs, and other installations that regulate water balance and ensure energy stability. Third, chemical terrorism, involving the destruction, damage, or shelling of enterprises and depots containing hazardous substances capable of contaminating vast areas. Fourth, biological terrorism, which includes the creation of conditions conducive to the spread of disease, the abandonment of unburied bodies, or the deployment of biological agents. Finally, forest and soil terrorism, manifesting in deliberate forest fires, destruction of soil cover, eradication of vegetation, and degradation of ecosystems. By methods of execution, environmental terrorism may involve the use of explosives and heavy weaponry against natural and industrial objects, the creation of man-made disasters through disruption of infrastructure operations, deliberate arson and pollution, denial of access to natural resources, and manipulation of ecological factors to achieve military objectives. By object, three major groups may be distinguished: critical ecological infrastructure (nuclear and hydroelectric power plants, treatment facilities, oil depots), protected natural areas (reserves, national parks, forests), and vital natural resources (rivers, soils, drinking water, atmospheric air). Such an approach enables the reconciliation of theoretical propositions with the practice of warfare and allows for a clearer determination of the scale and consequences of specific crimes.

An important stage of the study is the analysis of international legal instruments that partially cover the phenomenon of environmental terrorism. The 1976 United Nations Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (ENMOD) prohibits the manipulation of natural processes

such as earthquakes, floods, or climate change as means of warfare. This instrument reflected global concerns about the potential military use of environmental modification technologies. Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977), in Articles 35(3) and 55, prohibits methods and means of warfare that may cause widespread, long-term, and severe damage to the natural environment, and emphasises the obligation of conflict parties to protect the environment as part of the civilian sphere. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), in Article 8, classifies as war crimes intentional acts that cause such environmental damage in the absence of military necessity. Yet none of these instruments provides a direct qualification of “environmental terrorism,” thereby creating a legal vacuum that requires further academic and legislative clarification. Moreover, the difficulty of proving intent, scale, and duration of environmental harm before international tribunals makes the practical application of these norms limited.

Empirical evidence confirms that environmental terrorism in the present war against Ukraine is not an abstract threat but manifests in concrete forms. In the very first days of the invasion, Russian forces seized the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and the exclusion zone, flagrantly violating all principles of nuclear safety. Personnel were forced to work without rotation, supply chains were disrupted, and the risk of failure in cooling systems could have resulted in a disaster on the scale of 1986. Additional dangers were posed by extensive fires in the exclusion zone, which affected territories with elevated radioactive contamination—an example combining nuclear and forest-related environmental terrorism.

Equally striking was the shelling of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant on 4 March 2022, when tank and artillery attacks triggered a fire on the plant’s premises. Subsequent detonation of munitions in close proximity to reactors created a constant risk of nuclear catastrophe and posed a danger to millions of people in multiple countries. This incident vividly illustrates the deliberate use of nuclear infrastructure as an object of coercion and blackmail. The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant on 6 June 2023 represented the most large-scale act of hydrotechnical environmental terrorism in twenty-first-century Europe. The collapse of the dam caused catastrophic consequences: flooding of dozens of settlements, annihilation of ecosystems, loss of flora and fauna, devastation of infrastructure, and the deprivation of drinking water for millions of people. Hundreds of tonnes of engine oil were discharged into the Dnipro River, causing additional chemical pollution. The tragedy’s consequences were multidimensional—ecological, humanitarian, economic, and demographic. Over 4,300 houses were flooded, at least 34 people were killed, and thousands were displaced. Evacuation efforts were hampered by shelling from Russian forces, who even targeted gathering points and boats with civilians. Despite this, Ukrainian emergency and security services rescued over 700 people, evacuated nearly 3,800 civilians and more than 280 animals, and delivered over 119 tonnes of food and more than 116,000 tonnes of drinking water. The response to the disaster became an unprecedented example of large-scale coordination of security, rescue, and humanitarian structures, though the damage inflicted upon nature and the population will have long-term, and in some cases irreversible, consequences.

The sociological component of the research, covering 129 respondents from Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, and the United States, demonstrates profound concern among both Ukrainians and the international community. A majority (over 79%) regard environmental threats as highly relevant, while more than 93% acknowledge the close link between environmental and national security. This points to a high level of ecological awareness and growing global anxiety about the consequences of the war in Ukraine for the environment.

Analysis of national legislation reveals that environmental security is enshrined as a constitutional value in Ukraine. Article 16 of the Constitution defines ensuring environmental security and maintaining ecological balance as a duty of the state, while

Article 50 guarantees the right of every individual to a safe environment. The Law of Ukraine On Environmental Protection sets out the basic principles of rational resource use and prohibits activities leading to degradation. However, the current legal framework does not provide a precise definition of environmental terrorism, complicating its criminalisation and creating a legal vacuum that is particularly perilous in wartime. The presence of unburied bodies on battlefields, for example, creates additional biological risks. Such manifestations contradict the fundamental principles established by Ukrainian law, which oblige the state, institutions, and citizens alike to preserve and restore natural resources. Hence, environmental security in Ukraine is not merely a sphere of state policy but a constitutional value; violations of it, particularly through acts of environmental terrorism, must be regarded as infringements upon the foundations of the constitutional order and human rights.

Environmental security must be recognised as an inseparable component of national security. In the context of modern hybrid warfare, where military, informational, economic, and ecological methods of pressure converge, neglect of the ecological factor is fatal. Ukraine must immediately implement effective mechanisms for monitoring and responding to ecological threats, integrating environmental security into defence planning and post-war recovery. From a legal perspective, significant challenges remain regarding the qualification of Russian actions as environmental terrorism. Ukraine's legal framework lacks a clear definition of the phenomenon, while international law only partially addresses its manifestations. Nonetheless, the deliberate destruction of critical ecological infrastructure—such as hydroelectric and nuclear power plants and chemical enterprises—bears the hallmarks of international crimes, including war crimes and crimes against the environment.

Analysis of both international and national law highlights the need for the clear criminalisation of ecocide as a form of terrorism. Following the argument of R. V. Veresha, such changes must be implemented in Ukraine's Criminal Code and supported by the establishment of an international tribunal for environmental crimes. At the same time, the experience of other states demonstrates that institutional mechanisms for addressing crimes against the environment already operate in countries such as France, Sweden, and Canada, offering models for Ukraine. Current international initiatives aimed at recognising ecocide as a distinct crime under international law create further grounds for ensuring that environmental terrorism receives appropriate legal qualification in the future.

Scientific institutions and educational establishments play a pivotal role in shaping effective policies for countering environmental terrorism. They conduct research in the field of ecological security, develop strategies for sustainable resource management, and participate in international programmes such as Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet. These initiatives facilitate the integration of Ukrainian science into global discourse and contribute to the formation of modern policies of environmental resilience.

In summary, environmental terrorism in Ukraine manifests as a multidimensional phenomenon combining legal, ecological, humanitarian, and security aspects. It is systemic in character and poses a threat not only to Ukraine but also to Europe and the wider world. Environmental terrorism today is not an abstract concept but a daily reality for Ukraine. Its manifestations form part of military aggression, necessitating legal recognition and international response. War crimes against the environment should be regarded as an element of genocide and be subject to international judicial review. The absence of clear legal qualification hampers accountability; thus, Ukraine must initiate the creation of an international mechanism for addressing environmental crimes during armed conflict, including sanctions, compensation, and restorative components.

In the post-war period, Ukraine will face the task not only of rebuilding destroyed infrastructure but also of rethinking its development model on the basis of resilience, clean

technologies, circular economy, and biodiversity conservation. Legislative regulation in the sphere of environmental security requires updating, taking into account international experience, the conditions of hybrid warfare, and contemporary threats. Environmental education must also be strengthened to raise a new generation of citizens conscious of their responsibility towards nature, even in the most difficult circumstances.

The problem of environmental terrorism during war constitutes a call to the international community: nature knows no borders, and the destruction of ecosystems in one country poses a threat to all humanity. The protection of Ukraine's environment is therefore simultaneously the protection of global security.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that ecological terrorism in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine cannot be regarded as an incidental or collateral effect of hostilities but rather as a deliberate instrument of aggression. The deliberate targeting of environmental infrastructure and resources manifests itself in multiple forms: attacks on nuclear and hydro-technical facilities, deliberate forest fires, contamination of rivers and soils, and the creation of conditions for long-term ecological degradation. These actions not only devastate natural ecosystems but also generate enduring threats to public health, economic stability, and regional as well as global security.

The definition of ecological terrorism proposed in this research provides a conceptual basis for distinguishing it from related categories such as ecocide, war crimes, and sabotage. Unlike ecocide, which implies systemic or large-scale destruction of the natural environment, ecological terrorism may be selective or localised but is characterised by its instrumental use of environmental harm as a means of intimidation, coercion, or psychological pressure. Unlike ordinary war crimes, environmental damage in this context is not an unintended by-product of military operations but a consciously chosen method of warfare. The classification developed in this paper – by forms, methods, and targets – offers a more structured framework for identifying, assessing, and preventing such acts, which is essential both for legal qualification and for the design of preventive mechanisms.

The examination of international legal instruments has revealed that although certain provisions of humanitarian law, such as the ENMOD Convention, Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, partially address the protection of the environment during armed conflict, they do not provide a comprehensive framework for addressing ecological terrorism. The absence of a universally recognised legal definition complicates prosecution, attribution of responsibility, and compensation for harm caused. This legal vacuum underscores the need for renewed international dialogue and the development of more precise instruments that explicitly recognise and criminalise ecological terrorism.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study can inform state security strategies, guide reforms of criminal legislation, and strengthen Ukraine's position in pursuing international claims against the aggressor state. They are also relevant for the design of post-war recovery policies that embed environmental sustainability, resilience, and circular economy principles into reconstruction efforts. Moreover, the results can serve as a foundation for capacity-building initiatives, enabling policymakers, academics, and civil society actors to work together on integrating environmental security into broader security agendas.

Future research in this area should focus on several key directions. First, there is an urgent need to develop a universal definition of ecological terrorism at the international level, capable of being adopted across jurisdictions and supported by effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Second, further interdisciplinary studies are required to explore the long-term social, psychological, economic, and ecological consequences

of environmental terrorism, with particular emphasis on vulnerable communities and ecosystems. Third, empirical research into methods of documenting and verifying environmental crimes in conflict zones should be advanced, using modern technologies such as satellite imagery, geospatial mapping, and digital evidence platforms. Finally, greater attention should be devoted to integrating ecological security into defence planning, humanitarian responses, and international mechanisms of collective accountability.

In conclusion, ecological terrorism should be understood not only as an environmental issue but also as a profound challenge to national and global security. Its consequences transcend borders, threatening the ecological balance, human rights, and sustainable development on a planetary scale. Addressing this phenomenon requires coordinated action by states, international organisations, and the scientific community. Only through collective recognition and legal codification of ecological terrorism as a distinct international crime can the international community effectively deter future violations, ensure accountability, and safeguard both humanity and nature for future generations.

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