



European
Commission



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Last updated 10/02/2022

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

International Humanitarian Law

What is it?

International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict. It lays out the responsibilities of states and non-state armed groups during an armed conflict.

It defines, among others:

- the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid in armed conflict
- the freedom of movement of humanitarian workers
- the protection of civilians (including medical and humanitarian workers)
- the protection of refugees, prisoners, the wounded and sick.

Why is this important?

IHL is based on the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention on protecting civilians in conflict and the 1977 and 2005 Additional Protocols. The principles that guide and safeguard humanitarian action in armed conflicts are also based on IHL. These include rules on ensuring:

- humanitarian aid is quickly and impartially provided to civilians in need
- humanitarian workers can move freely.

While many provisions of IHL are now accepted as international customary law (i.e. general practice, accepted as law and which is independent of treaty law), increasingly it is violated by warring parties.

IHL violations continue to be among the most critical challenges for protecting civilians and humanitarian and medical workers.

Buildings belonging to relief organisations are attacked, vehicles and convoys hijacked, and personnel murdered or kidnapped. Such violence affects civilians and prevents millions of people from receiving life-saving assistance.

How are we helping?

As most humanitarian action takes place in areas of armed conflicts, violations of IHL greatly hinder the EU's ability to fulfil its humanitarian aid objectives of meeting the needs of those affected, and also endanger the security of EU humanitarian partners.

Therefore, as one of the world's largest humanitarian donors, the EU has always been firmly committed to promoting compliance with IHL.

All EU countries have ratified the 4 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. The EU also is the only regional organisation to adopt (in 2005; updated in 2009) guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL.

In 2018, the EU published the first report on how these guidelines were implemented, highlighting the wide-ranging measures the EU carries out in support of IHL. Every year since then, the EU has continued to publish such reports.

In March 2021, the Commission adopted a Communication on the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles. It stresses how important it is for the EU to continue to put the promotion and application of IHL consistently at the heart of its external action.

The European Commission, through its Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department (ECHO), promotes the global compliance for IHL and respect for humanitarian principles. Examples of activities which the European Commission supports are:

- extensive advocacy on IHL, globally and in certain conflicts, both in bilateral and multilateral forums
- thematic advocacy linked to IHL (e.g. children and armed conflict, protecting education facilities from attack, protecting humanitarian and medical workers during armed conflicts)
- funding of partners for promoting IHL knowledge and advocacy in conflict-affected countries (e.g. Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, Ukraine)
- funding activities aimed at increasing the capacities of humanitarian workers in advocating for IHL.

Facts & figures

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IHL violations have significantly increased in the past 10 years

Over the same period, the risk of humanitarians and medical workers being attacked has also increased