



European
Commission



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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 requires, among other things:

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

Why is this important?

The rules are designed to protect civilians and humanitarian and medical workers during armed conflicts in any part of the world. Without them, there would be no international standards at all for this.

IHL is based on the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention on protecting civilians in conflict and the 1977 and 2005 Additional Protocols.

While many parts 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.

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

These violations continue to be among the most critical challenges for IHL.

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 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.

In 2009, the EU issued guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL. In 2018, it published an initial report on how they were being 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.

The European Commission, through its Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department (ECHO), promotes the global compliance with IHL and humanitarian principles in general.

Examples of activities which the European Commission supports are:

- advocacy in support of IHL through multilateral forums, dedicated public events (e.g., European Humanitarian Forum), and dialogue with other donors and partner organisations.
- advocacy for compliance with IHL in specific armed conflicts
- thematic advocacy linked to IHL (e.g. children and armed conflict, protecting education facilities from attack, protecting humanitarian and medical workers during armed conflicts, protecting civilian infrastructure)
- funding partners to disseminate IHL knowledge and advocacy in conflict-affected countries (e.g., Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Ukraine)
- funding activities aimed at increasing the capacities of humanitarian workers in advocating for IHL.
- in 2022, the EU launched a 3-year pilot programmatic partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross on preventing IHL violations.

Facts & figures

All 27 EU member countries have ratified the 4 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

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.