Means of Personal Identification

In order to apply international humanitarian law it is essential to identify combatants and protected persons. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I of 1977 contain appropriate provisions for achieving that purpose. Measures for personal identification provide a means of specifying the status of persons involved in or affected by an armed conflict and thus of indicating the protection to which they are entitled. However, the mere fact of possessing an identification document is not a criterion entitling the holder to protection (except in the case of military personnel posted to civil defence organizations) since it is the capacity or function of the person that is the determining factor. In the context of armed conflict, identification measures also help to prevent disappearances and to facilitate the tracing of missing persons. It is the States and parties to the conflict that must implement these measures, which enable the bodies for which international humanitarian law makes provision to function properly (such as national Information Bureaus and the Central Tracing Agency, whose mission is to inform States on the fate of their nationals and to inform families on what has become of their relatives).

The nature and significance of means of personal identification

Measures for identifying persons are closely connected with the concept of protection, which constitutes the very basis of the legal instruments of international humanitarian law. They are a means for the persons concerned to prove their status and thus claim the protection that is their due.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I of 1977 specify the nature and minimum content of identification measures and propose a number of models in their annexes which States and the parties to a conflict are recommended to take as a basis (in particular for certain identity cards, capture cards and internment cards).

Using these models helps to standardize the various measures taken and facilitates the task of the States in the performance of their treaty-based obligations regarding identification.

In order to make these measures even more effective the parties to a conflict must ensure that they are easy to use. Following the models proposed, any documents that are issued will thus contain minimum information allowing adequate identification. The authorities may, however, go further as long as the information provided does not place the person concerned or his family at risk.

Identification is in the mutual interests of the parties. It is because identification measures have been taken and used by a party that the adverse party can more effectively carry out its duty to identify the persons who have fallen into its hands, whether they be captured, wounded or deceased (GC I, Art. 16; GC II, Art. 19).

It is recommended that the implementation of the provisions concerning identification measures should not be limited solely to the situations in respect of which they apply. They should also be extended to non-international armed conflicts and to any situation in which it might prove useful to use them.

Categories

Identity card

This card is the basic document with which the status and identity of persons who have fallen into the hands of the adverse party can be determined, and it must be issued by States to any person liable to become a prisoner of war (GC III, Art. 17).

It must contain at least the owner's surname, first names, date of birth, serial number or equivalent information, rank, blood group and rhesus factor. As further optional information, the identity card may also bear the description, nationality, religion, fingerprints or photo of the holder, or the date of expiry.

In parallel with this measure, the authorities are required to issue specific identity cards for military personnel carrying out special tasks or for certain categories of civilians, containing the basic information plus certain other particulars concerning the assignment (such as the distinctive emblem of the activity, the person's training or position, or the stamp and signature of the competent authority).

The categories concerned by these measures indicating entitlement to a specific form of protection are as follows:

- medical and religious personnel attached to the armed forces (GC I, Art. 40; GC II, Art. 42),
- civilian medical personnel and civilian religious personnel (AP I, Art. 18 para. 3), the permanent or temporary staff of
civilian hospitals (GC IV, Art. 20);

members of the armed forces specially trained for employment as hospital orderlies, nurses or auxiliary stretcher-bearers in the search for or the collection, transport or treatment of the wounded and sick (GC I, Art. 41);

persons who accompany the armed forces (GC III, Art. 4 para. A, no. 4);

members of the armed forces and military units assigned to civil defence organizations (API, Art. 67 para. 1), civilian civil defence personnel (API, Art. 66 para. 3);

the personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property (The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 14 May 1954, Art. 17 para. 2, and the Regulation for the Execution of that Convention, Art. 21);

journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions, provided that they fulfil the conditions constituting that function (API, Art. 79 para. 3).

Identity disc
The authorities may supplement the above measures by providing identity discs (GC I, Art. 16; GC II, Art. 19). The identity disc is worn permanently round the neck on a chain or strap. It can be a single or double disc made, as far as possible, of durable, stainless material which is resistant to battlefield conditions. The inscriptions it bears are similar to those on the identity card and should be indelible and fadeproof.

Capture card
The parties to a conflict which are holding prisoners of war are required to enable the latter to write a card direct to their families and to the Central Tracing Agency informing them that they have been captured (GC III, Art. 70). An individual capture card will contain in particular information relating to the prisoner's surname and first names, his State of origin, rank, serial number and date of birth, his family's address, and his captivity, address and state of health. Should a prisoner wish to refrain from revealing certain information, however, this must be respected.

Internment card
The internment card is modelled on the capture card and is adapted to the situation of civilian internees. It is also intended for the families and Central Tracing Agency, and clearly identifies the general circumstances of the civilian internee by providing information notably on his internment, address and state of health, provided that the internee considers it appropriate to reveal these details (GC IV, Art. 106).

Identification of children
In view of the fact that, depending on their age, children are unable to take care of themselves and are extremely vulnerable in time of armed conflict, international humanitarian law has provided specific measures for their identification.

The authorities could thus provide children under 12 years of age with identity discs adapted to their status and similar to those described above (GC IV, Art. 24).

In the special circumstances of occupation, the authorities are required to take steps to identify children (GC IV, Art. 50), such as providing them with an identity card or an identity disc that they wear all the time.

And finally, if children have been evacuated to a foreign country for compelling reasons of health or safety, the State arranging for the evacuation and, where appropriate, the authorities of the host country must draw up an information card and send it to the Central Tracing Agency with a view to facilitating the children's return to their families (AP I, Art. 78 para. 3).

Availability of means of identification and training
Since means of personal identification should be available at all times, the authorities must make preparatory arrangements in peacetime. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the persons concerned are carrying their identity documents should an armed conflict break out.

If the means of identifying individuals are to play their role to the full, the usefulness and importance of these measures should be explained in particular in the course of training for military personnel and other categories of persons specifically concerned. Special attention should also be devoted to this aspect when international humanitarian law is being disseminated to a wider public.
First Geneva Convention
1949 – wounded and sick on land – Annex II

Second Geneva
Convention 1949 – wounded, sick and shipwrecked at sea – Annex I

Additional Protocol I of
1977 – international armed conflicts – Annex I, Art. 2
Remarks. – This card should be made out for preference in two or three languages, one of which is in international use. Actual size of the card: 13 by 10 centimetres. It should be folded along the dotted line.


Additional Protocol I of 1977 – international armed conflicts – Annex I, Art. 15

### FRONT

**NOTICE**

This identity card is issued to journalists on dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict. The holder is entitled to be treated as a civilian under the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and their Additional Protocol I. The card must be carried at all times by the bearer. If it is demanded, he shall at once hand it to the Declaring Authorities, on pain of his identification.

### REVERSE SIDE

**IDENTITY CARD FOR JOURNALISTS ON DANGEROUS PROFESSIONAL MISIONS**

**TARJETA DE IDENTIDAD DE PERIODISTA EN MISION PELIGROSA**

**CARTE D'IDENTITÉ DE JOURNALISTE EN MISSION PÉRILLOUSE**

**УДОСТОВЕРЕНИЕ ЖУРНАЛИСТА, НАХОДЯЩЕГОСЯ В ОПАСНОЙ КОМАНДИРОВКЕ**

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**Additional Protocol I of 1977 – international armed conflicts – Annex II**
Remarks. – This form should be made out in two or three languages, particularly in the prisoner's own language and in that of the Detaining Power. Actual size: 15 by 10.5 centimetres.

Third Geneva Convention 1949 – prisoners of war
– Annex IV B.