

75 YEARS
THE ONE
SET OF RULES
WE ALL
AGREE ON



IGRG

75 YEARS OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS

STATES OBLIGATIONS TO REDUCE SUFFERING, IN COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

“The Geneva Conventions were made for us all and it is for us all to play our part. We cannot for a moment allow apathy to be our ruler.”

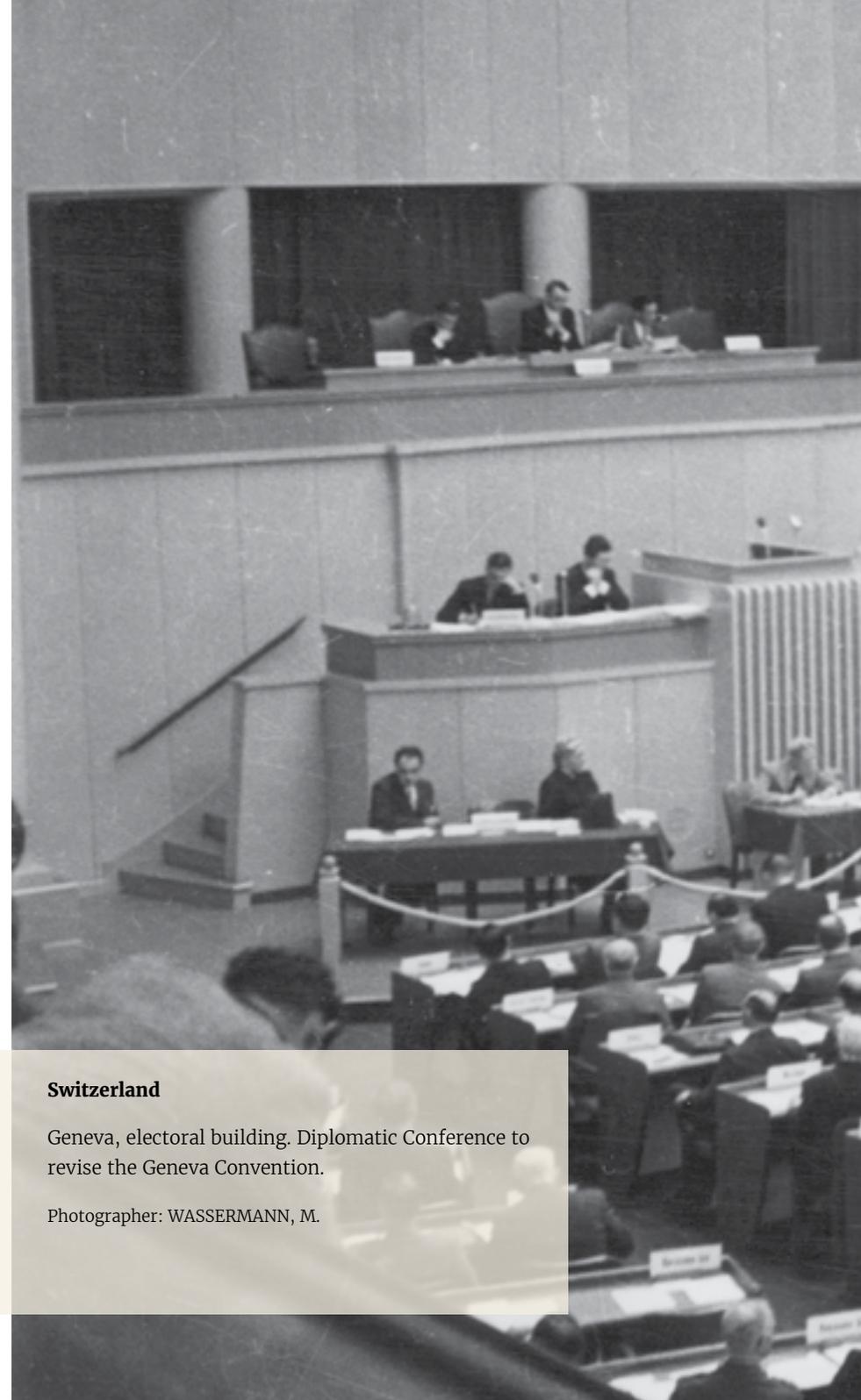
Mirjana Spoljaric
ICRC president

When international humanitarian law (IHL) is respected, lives are saved, and people’s dignity is upheld. The Geneva Conventions – one of humanity’s most important accomplishments of the last century – turned 75 on 12 August 2024. It was an opportunity to celebrate the millions of people protected in armed conflict, determine what further work needs to be done and remind the world of the importance of protecting people from the dangers of war.

States party to IHL treaties, including the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, have committed themselves to ensure full compliance with IHL, which can be achieved by adopting strong domestic measures. This includes enacting implementing legislation to facilitate the application of IHL, disseminating these laws to the armed forces and to the population as a whole as well as investigating IHL infractions and prosecuting those who are suspected of committing them.

The exhibition organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Myanmar aims to raise awareness of the importance and the relevance of IHL, focusing on State obligations to ensure compliance with IHL to fulfil its protective purpose for civilians and for those no longer taking part in hostilities.

12 August 1949 is an important date in the development of international humanitarian law. On that day, the revised and expanded texts of the first three Conventions, as we know them today, and the Fourth Humanitarian Convention on the Protection of Civilians were signed.



Switzerland

Geneva, electoral building. Diplomatic Conference to revise the Geneva Convention.

Photographer: WASSERMANN, M.



INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND OBLIGATION OF THE STATES

International humanitarian law (IHL) is the body of international law that regulates the conduct of armed conflict and seeks to limit its effects. At the core of IHL are the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, international treaties that contain the most important rules limiting the suffering in war. They specifically protect people who are not taking part in the hostilities, including civilians, health workers and aid workers, and those who are no longer participating, such as wounded, sick, shipwrecked soldiers, prisoners of war and people detained in relation to conflict.

The primary obligation on all States and other parties to armed conflict under Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions is to respect and ensure respect for IHL. These rules call for measures to be taken to end IHL violations and prevent their reoccurrence. Preventing violations can be achieved individually or collectively through multilateral mechanisms and international organizations such as the United Nations.

The ICRC is a neutral, impartial and independent organization with an exclusively humanitarian mandate that stems from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often alongside its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners.

Jerusalem

ICRC delegate crossing the front line during a two-day truce in 1948 to collect the bodies of combatants killed in the Katamon neighbourhood.

Photographer: S.N.





On 8 June 1977, at the end of the diplomatic conference, two additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 were adopted.

The Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions were a landmark in the development of IHL. They strengthened the protection for victims of armed conflict, including civilians, in both international (Protocol I) and non-international (Protocol II) armed conflicts.

Switzerland

Geneva. Diplomatic conference on the reaffirmation and development of international humanitarian law (IHL) applicable in armed conflicts.

Photographer: KURZ, Jean-Jacques

Objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as food stocks, agricultural areas, crops, drinking water and irrigation systems are specially protected under international humanitarian law. It is prohibited to take any action against them that may be expected to starve the civilian population or force its movement.

Mozambique

Cabo Delgado province, Ibo island, health centre. Children fetching water.

Photographer: LUCAS, DAPHNE



HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Armed conflicts, whether international or non-international, give rise to significant needs for humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian action and assistance go beyond delivering goods, including food and non-food items. People affected by conflict have more complex needs that must be addressed: access to healthcare, access to livelihood (in a safe manner), access to basic and essential services as well as protection from the impact of conflict and violence.

Under international humanitarian law (IHL) each party to the conflict bears the primary obligation to meet the basic needs of the population under its control. When, due to conflict related reasons, they cannot fulfil such obligation, they can rely on impartial humanitarian organizations who have the right to offer their services in order to carry out humanitarian activities across frontlines. Such humanitarian activities in situations of armed conflict are generally subject to the consent of the parties to the conflict. Once

impartial humanitarian relief schemes have been agreed to, the parties to the armed conflict, as well as all States that are not a party thereto, are expected to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of the relief schemes, subject to their right of control. IHL sets out in detail the conditions governing such operations, with a view to facilitating the delivery of humanitarian relief to the people affected.

The legal framework pertaining to humanitarian assistance can be found in the Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols as well as in customary IHL. IHL rules on humanitarian access and assistance indicate that a refusal to grant consent to impartial humanitarian activities, by any side to the conflict, results in a violation of the party's own IHL obligations vis-à-vis the population and may constitute an unlawful denial of access under IHL.



The relevant provisions of Additional Protocols I and II stipulate that relief activities “shall be undertaken” when the population lacks supplies essential for its survival, thereby clearly establishing a legal obligation.

Myanmar

A staff member of the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) and her colleagues speak with displaced people from Chin State. The community received engine pumps and fuel to secure access to water.

Photographer: S.N.



The elderly, disabled and infirm affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection.

Afghanistan

Kabul, ICRC physical rehabilitation centre. A man trains to walk with a prosthesis.

Photographer: SERIEX, FLORIAN BASTIAN



Under IHL displaced persons must be received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and members of the same family should not be separated.

Iraq

Baghdad. Children play in a makeshift playground. Zafraniya has become a refuge for internally displaced Iraqis fleeing violence in other parts of the country.

Photographer: OU, ED



At the end of active hostilities, a party to the conflict which has used landmines must remove or otherwise render them harmless to civilians or facilitate their removal.

Myanmar

The ICRC team in Mandalay conducts a Risk Awareness and Safer Behaviour session for children, explaining the dangers of explosive devices and helping them to stay safe in conflict-affected areas.

Photographer: TUN, Aye Sandar



The parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief – if it is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction – for civilians in need, subject to their right of control.

Congo

The ICRC organizes a food distribution for displaced people who fled from the clashes.

Photographer: WANDIMOYI, ALAIN

DETENTION

Every day, in conflict situations around the world, men, women and children are detained and deprived of their liberty. Deprivation of liberty – detention – is a common and lawful occurrence in armed conflict that is governed by a large number of provisions of international humanitarian law (IHL). IHL requires parties to the conflict to ensure humane treatment of detainees in their hands and prohibits arbitrary detention.

The Third Geneva Convention provides a wide range of protections for prisoners of war (POWs), a status that only applies in international armed conflicts involving members of the armed forces of one of the parties to a conflict who fall into the hands of the adverse party. It defines their rights and sets down detailed rules for their treatment and eventual release. Basic IHL concepts and rules related

to detention are applicable in both international armed conflict (IAC) and non-international armed conflict (NIAC), and also protect other people deprived of liberty due to armed conflict.

IHL requires States to grant the ICRC access to detention facilities holding POWs and protected civilians in IACs. In NIACs, the ICRC can visit detainees based on its right of initiative under IHL, which requires the consent of the State or other concerned Parties. The ICRC's visits to places of detention allow ICRC to monitor the conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees, and provide recommendations to the detaining authority in a confidential and bilateral manner.

The ICRC's unique mandate granted by the Geneva

Conventions and their Additional Protocols allows for accessing detainees and POWs in places where others are not. This enables us to work to ensure that their basic needs are met and that they are treated humanely, with respect and dignity.



Detainees must be allowed to correspond with their families and receive family visits.

Philippines

Laguna, regional tuberculosis infirmary. A woman visits her husband suffering from tuberculosis.

Photographer: AZNAR, Jes



Persons deprived of liberty must be provided with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, and medical attention. They are protected against any act of violence, as well as against intimidation, insults, and public curiosity.

The focus of these interviews is purely humanitarian and aims to assess the conditions and treatments of detainees in order to provide bilateral and confidential recommendations to detaining authorities, supporting compliance with international standards.

Somalia

Bossasso prison. An ICRC delegate conducts an interview without witness with a detainee.

Photographer: YAZDI, Pedram

The rules protecting prisoners of war (POWs) are specific and were first detailed in the 1929 Geneva Convention. They were refined in the Third Geneva Convention of 1949, following the lessons of the Second World War, as well as in Additional Protocol I of 1977.

Myanmar

World War II. Penwegen region. Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) are given a meal of rice shortly after capture.

Photographer: ICRC archives (ARR)





Under IHL detainees must be held in premises which are removed from the combat zone, and which safeguard their health and hygiene.

Philippines

Manila. Lessons learned from fighting tuberculosis help in dealing with the pandemic of COVID-19 affecting detention facilities.

Photographer: AZNAR, JES

Allowing detainees to correspond with their families is consistent with the requirement to respect family life under IHL.

Granting ICRC access to places of detention allows for verification of conditions of detention and restoring contacts between detainees and their families.

Bangladesh; Myanmar

The ICRC and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society fill in tracing requests for families from Myanmar who lost contact with their relatives.

Photographer: SIRCAR, Rufas Rafi



The ICRC works in close cooperation with the detaining authorities and the national or local health authorities to improve detainees' access to adequate health care. Measures include ensuring that inmates undergo a medical examination when they first arrive, establishing proper medical procedures and supporting prison infirmaries with necessary equipment.

Mali

Sikasso, detention center. Scabies eradication campaign supported by the ICRC. Inmates' belongings and clothes are treated with disinfectant.

Photographer: OUMAR KANE, Alpha Macky





THE MISSING

The issue of family separation is multifaceted and intricate. Not knowing the fate of a loved one can put families in a state of permanent uncertainty and anxiety.

Guatemala

A child who disappeared in 1982 due to the conflict was found and returned to his family after 26 years of absence.

Photographer: MOLINA, Carla

Due to conflict, detention, natural disasters and in the context of migration, families become separated, many people go missing and bodies of the deceased remain unidentified and are never returned to their families.

In armed conflict, international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL) require warring parties to take measures to ensure that people do not go missing. If they do go missing, the parties are required to take all possible measures to ensure their fate and whereabouts are established and their families informed.

Measures can be taken during a conflict to prevent people from going missing. If all combatants carry proper identity documents, for example, their fate can be recorded. All deaths should be registered, and information should be maintained regarding burials or the location of human remains. Records must also be kept on people detained or arrested.

The ICRC, in particular through its Central Tracing Agency (CTA), seeks to contribute to preventing people from going missing; restoring and maintaining contact between individuals and their families; searching for missing persons; protecting the dignity of the dead; ensuring that the needs of families are provided for; and supporting authorities and other actors in these endeavours. It also supports the coordination of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies within the Family Links Network.



Each party to the conflict must take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and must provide their family members with any information it has on their fate.

Families of missing persons can have multifaceted needs, including legal, administrative, economic, psychological and psychosocial needs, among others. States should therefore provide a legal status to both the missing person and their families. This is key to ensure the continuity of their legal personality and to protect their rights and those of their relatives (e.g., civil, family, property and social rights).

Bangladesh

Receipt of mail bags from the Central Tracing Agency.

Photographer: S.N.



Enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, the Central Tracing Agency is a permanent structure within the ICRC that assists parties to conflicts and prevents family separation and disappearances by collecting and transmitting information as a neutral intermediary.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Family members looking at photographs of people who have gone missing.

Photographer: BARRY, Jessica

Under IHL, families have a right to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives.

Cambodia; Thailand

A board of the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency at Nong Chan refugee camp.

Photographer: GASSMANN, Thierry



Under IHL, States can take several measures that are important for preventing people from going missing.

Cyprus

The ICRC worked on finding soldiers who had disappeared during the hostilities, civilians who could not be found in their place of origin nor in the centres for displaced persons, and detainees interned in a place of detention.

Photographer: VATERLAUS, Max



Parties to the conflict must endeavour to facilitate the return of the remains of the deceased upon the request of their families, in accordance with their traditions and beliefs.

Guatemala

The ICRC office in Guatemala helps local organizations that support families whose loved ones have disappeared. These organizations conduct exhumations of dead bodies and facilitate their burial in dignified conditions by the families.

Photographer: MOLINA, Carla

PROTECTION OF HEALTHCARE IN ARMED CONFLICTS

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), medical units, hospitals and ambulances are specially protected against attacks and military interference with their functioning. Parties to a conflict must respect medical facilities, transport and personnel while they are performing an exclusively medical function and must not unduly interfere with their work so as to allow them to treat the wounded and sick.

Even in cases where resources are limited, parties to a conflict must accomplish their best efforts to provide wounded and sick with the best possible care as quickly as possible. This includes permitting impartial humanitarian organizations to provide medical care when the needs of the wounded and sick are not fulfilled; consent to the work of these organizations must not be refused arbitrarily.

In times of armed conflict, anyone who is wounded and sick, whether military or civilian, and needs medical attention must be cared for without discrimination.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The team of a surgeon at the only hospital in the Waliklae territory, North Kivu region.

Photographer: YBARRA ZAVALA, Alvaro





Attacks directed against medical personnel and objects displaying the distinctive emblem of the Geneva Conventions in conformity with international law are prohibited.

Gaza, Israel and the Occupied Territories

Photographer: GLASS, Thomas



Providing the urgent care that is so vital during armed conflict becomes even more challenging when a society's essential infrastructure collapses. Parties to the conflict must uphold the letter and spirit of the specific protection accorded to medical facilities against attack, armed entry and misuse for military purposes.

Syria

Northeast Syria, Al Hassakeh Governorate, Al Hol camp for internally displaced persons, field hospital. This woman is a midwife. She delivered the first baby girl born at the field hospital.

Photographer: MORTVEDT, MARI AFTRET



Hospitals and other medical facilities perform a lifesaving function during conflicts and should be sanctuaries from fighting. IHL specifically protects medical facilities by requiring that they must be respected and protected at all times. The specific protection of medical facilities and units (including hospitals) shall not cease unless they are used to commit hostile acts, outside their humanitarian function.

Mozambique

Cabo Delgado province, hospital. A woman and her child wait in the hallway of a hospital rehabilitated by the ICRC.

Photographer: BATA, FIDELTO

Access to healthcare must not be a privilege: everybody has a right to health care – even in war.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Mulolwa health centre in Tanganyika Province, supported by the ICRC, provides free healthcare to the people.

Photographer: BUSASI NSALIMBI, Jonathan







The wounded and sick must be treated without discrimination. If distinctions are to be made among them, it can be only on the basis of their medical condition.

When hospitals are damaged or destroyed in armed conflict, the loss is far greater than the physical structures: safe spaces are lost, health outcomes worsen and trust in health institutions is undermined.

Ukraine

Irpin, military hospital. Two ICRC staff member during an assessment and assistance mission. The town has been the theatre of heavy fighting. The hospital is empty and heavily damaged.

Photographer: SYNENKO, ALYONA

THE NEUTRAL INTERMEDIARY ROLE OF THE ICRC

The Geneva Conventions, in their various provisions, establish the fundamental role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a neutral intermediary in armed conflicts. This role is mentioned in Article 9 of the four Geneva Conventions, as well in its Additional Protocols, which provides that in times of international armed conflict (IAC) impartial organizations may act as neutral intermediaries. By the same nature, in non-international armed conflicts (NIAC), this role is mentioned in Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions.

Common Article 3 gives the ICRC the possibility to offer its services as a neutral intermediary in internal conflicts: “An impartial humanitarian organization, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the parties to the conflict”.

The ICRC acts as a neutral intermediary due to its mandate under international humanitarian law (IHL) and its Statutes, which establish the Fundamental Principles. Neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action is central to the ICRC’s identity. The ICRC engages in dialogue with all actors in armed conflicts and those affected, gaining acceptance and trust. This approach allows the ICRC access to victims and ensures the safety of our staff, enabling us to reach people on all sides of conflict front lines.

The ICRC’s neutrality enhances the ability to protect and assist those in need while facilitating humanitarian action. This often involves negotiating access with relevant parties to deliver services to those suffering due to conflict.

The ICRC engages with various stakeholders and acts as a neutral intermediary to deliver humanitarian services across front-lines. In this approach, the ICRC must engage with all those who have the responsibility to respect IHL and protect those affected by conflict and acts with the agreement of all parties involved in conflict and violence.

“International humanitarian law (IHL) was created to move beyond division, paving the way from polarization to peace. These laws—treaties your states created and ratified—compel restraint. Under the Geneva Conventions, even your enemy must be treated with humanity. IHL is not transactional”.

UN Security Council

Maintenance of International Peace and Security, 25 September 2024, New York.

Photographer: Manuel Elías

Photo credit: UN Photo





PRESIDENT
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Civilian internment must cease as soon as the reasons which necessitated it no longer exist. It must in any event end “as soon as possible after the close of hostilities”.

Colombia

A civilian is released after being held by an armed group in Colombia. ICRC is called to support in the safe transfer in its role of neutral intermediary.

Photographer: MONTERO, Y.S.



Under the Geneva Conventions, a neutral intermediary can facilitate the evacuation of civilians or wounded people from locations where active fighting is taking place.

West Bank, Occupied territories, Israel

Hebron. A man is transported in an ambulance to see his detained son in Qetziot Prison. The ICRC coordinates a special transfer between a Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance and an Israeli one for the men who has a severe sickness. A paramedic accompanies him on his journey and provides him the needed healthcare.

Photographer: SYNENKO, ALYONA



States must ensure that members of the armed forces are aware of their IHL obligations.

Training sessions on IHL are offered to a variety of actors, including but not limited to members of the armed forces, armed groups and other weapon bearers. These sessions promote and develop the knowledge of, understanding, application and adherence to IHL rules and principles.

South Sudan

Two ICRC delegates discuss the rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) with members of the South Sudan Armed Forces (SPLA).

Photographer: ROMENZI, Alessio

Persons deprived of liberty must be released as soon as the reasons for their detention cease to exist.

In international armed conflict, prisoners of war (POWs) cannot be prosecuted for taking a direct part in hostilities. The purpose of their detention is to prevent further participation in the conflict, not to punish them. They must be released and repatriated without delay latest at the end of hostilities.

Saudi Arabia; Yemen

Sanaa, airport. Release and repatriation of persons detained in connection with the conflict in Yemen, with the support of ICRC in its role of neutral intermediary.

Photographer: AL-EKAM, SAFWAN



