

Yangon, Myanmar
November 28, 2024

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for accepting our invitation to commemorate together one of the most important milestones in the history of humanity, the 4 Geneva Conventions of 1949, a body of laws that is universal, as all states in the world signed them after the horrors of World War II, to regulate the way war is fought. These treaties form the basis of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

This anniversary is a moment of pride, but also a call to action. The principles cherished in the Geneva Conventions remain as vital today as they were 75 years ago. However, we cannot ignore the reality we face: In 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) identified 20 active armed conflicts. Today there are more than 120.

A funding element of the Geneva conventions and of compliance to IHL in today's world lies in the text of Common Art.1, where states agreed that "The High Contracting Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for the Conventions in all circumstances".

Considering this, it is imperative for the international community to reiterate its political commitment and support to uphold IHL, both in letter and in spirit, leading to an alleviation of the impact of conflicts, including on civilians and civilian objects. Otherwise, the world risks witnessing spiraling conflicts leading to unprecedented human, political, social, and economic costs.

The international community collectively bears the responsibility to abide by, uphold, and ensure accountability for these rules, reduce suffering, and work towards a peaceful future.

It is important to highlight the vision that lies at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and of IHL: conflict might be unavoidable; what can and must be avoided, even in the middle of a conflict, is the unnecessary suffering and the unnecessary loss of lives. The aim of belligerents should be to weaken the enemy, on this the conventions are clear: the use of force is the reality of war but there are limits under IHL on the way that force is used: such as only those who are participating in the fighting are legitimate targets. Enemies can be captured to weaken the enemy, and can be wounded, but in both cases, they must be treated humanely and their life preserved. When waging war, all parties to a conflict must ensure that civilians and civilian infrastructures are not targeted.

Too often we see the targeting of civilians and the infrastructures essential to the life of the civilian population being targeted as a mean of warfare. It happens with hospitals and ambulances, it happens with water installations, it happens with farmland that become inaccessible due to the presence of landmines, and it happens when people not participating in hostilities are denied access to life saving services and humanitarian aid.

To quote ICRC President: "The way you lead wars defines how you end wars, The Conventions are relevant. The Conventions save lives. The Conventions need to be better applied. If you destroy a country, a people, a territory completely, you create already the next conflict because of the traumas this comes with, because of the inability of societies to overcome what has happened for decades or even centuries, and all this fuels the next conflict. The way you lead wars defines how you end wars. And that's why whatever is written in the Geneva Conventions still applies today. The suffering you suffer by being separated from your relatives and not knowing where your children are is exactly the same suffering and the same feeling as it was 100 or more years ago".

The rules of IHL are set forth to ensure that after weapons fall silent, dialogue is still possible to restore peace.

Allow me also to mention that the vision of a man in Solferino in 1859, Henry Dunant, led not only to the birth of IHL, but also to the creation of a worldwide Movement, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement which is the biggest humanitarian network in the world, active in conflict and natural disasters to bring, each member with its own mandate, relief and support to those in need.

The high contracting parties have also bestowed on ICRC the mandate to act as a neutral intermediary in conflict situations to bring relief and protect people not taking part in hostilities.

Today more than ever, the ICRC needs the support of States to comply with its mandate, seeing how dramatically the humanitarian space is currently shrinking in conflicts around the world, to see recognized its role of neutral intermediary, a role that contributes concretely to the implementation and compliance of IHL.

To quote again our president: "It's a bleak world at the moment... But I think every life is worth being saved. And every family that we can inform about where their son is and that their son is still alive, every message we can bring to the families from their children is worth trying".

I would particularly like to thank the Swiss Embassy and the Italian Embassy for their collaboration and support in today's event.

Switzerland, as the depositary of the Geneva Conventions, and Italy, for the historical reasons of the battle of Solferino in 1859, have decided to join us to mark this 75th anniversary in a global campaign to promote respect for international humanitarian law.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you, from the diplomatic community and the UN agencies, the MRCS and the IFRC and all those with whom I have had the honor and the pleasure to work with in the past two years for your support to the ICRC action in Myanmar. It is time for me to leave this beautiful country at a time when the conflict continues to intensify, and the needs of people continue to increase. I do so with a heavy heart, but I am pleased to welcome and introduce to you the incoming HOD for the ICRC in Myanmar. I am sure you will extend to him the same support you have extended to me. This context is challenging no doubt, but it deserves all the efforts we all do collectively to bring some relief to those affected by a conflict that has dramatically escalated in the past year.

Thank you,