

Water and habitat in conflict

2026 Briefer



Syrian Arab Republic.

Overview

Armed conflict and its consequences on essential services

Today, more than **130 armed conflicts are ongoing around the world**, with at least 20 lasting for over two decades. An estimated **204 million people worldwide now live in areas controlled or contested by armed groups** – 30 million more than in 2021. The proliferation of increasingly complex and protracted conflicts has trapped civilians in relentless cycles of violence: homes are reduced to rubble, families are displaced and separated, and entire communities are forced to survive under impossible conditions. Compounding crises are putting tremendous pressure on water and other essential services, which are unable to meet growing humanitarian needs against a global backdrop of declining Official Development Assistance (ODA).

When water systems, power stations, hospitals and other infrastructure are damaged or destroyed during hostilities, the **effects ripple across entire networks**, disrupting health care, food systems, education, heating, communication, industrial sectors and other vital services that people rely on to survive. In 2024 alone, an estimated 176 million people globally required urgent humanitarian assistance in water, sanitation and hygiene, according to the United Nations.

As public health deteriorates, civilians – particularly children – are exposed to increased risks of disease outbreaks, potentially leading to serious medical complications or death. Women and girls often face greater risks of sexual abuse when traveling long distances through unsafe areas to access water or sanitation facilities. Communities may be forced to leave in search of safer and more viable living conditions. Resource scarcity can trigger tensions within communities, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and protection risks. In protracted crises, these effects intensify over time as repeated attacks, sanctions and the gradual loss of skilled professionals, combined with climate shocks, **weaken local systems and erode the resilience of communities**.

Respect for international humanitarian law (IHL): Prevention in action

Keeping essential systems running when they are at the brink of collapse is what saves people's lives and dignity but also prevents humanitarian needs from spiralling further. That is why we respond to crises and also invest in **reducing the cost of war** itself.

IHL mandates the protection of civilian objects and essential services during armed conflict. This notably includes water resources, water-supply infrastructure, human resources, supplies and the environment itself. As a result, greater respect for IHL reduces the human, societal, environmental and economic cost of conflict, **preventing development reversals** and alleviating the heavy burdens that civilians shoulder in times of armed conflict.

Investing in resilience before systems collapse costs less and produces better outcomes than rebuilding them after failure, **reducing the cost of recovery. In protracted conflict, emergency response and resilience-building advance together.**

Respect for international humanitarian law is both a legal obligation and prevention in practice: when hospitals, water systems and power networks are spared, communities keep access to the services they depend on. Where those services endure, the social contract is also more likely to hold.

Afghanistan, Paktia. In the province of Paktia, 15 districts rely entirely on hand pumps for access to drinking water. In response, we have repaired more than 600 hand pumps in partnership with the local water authorities, enabling over 90,000 people to maintain their access to an adequate quantity and quality of water.



What sets us apart

The ICRC has a unique and historic mandate enshrined in IHL to protect and assist people **affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence**, including those whose access to water and other essential services is disrupted. We fulfil this mandate through **neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action** that reaches people on all sides of a conflict. For over four decades, our programmes have supported conflict-affected populations in accessing essential services and maintaining a safe living environment, reaching approximately 30 million people worldwide each year in over a hundred countries.



A unique mandate under IHL and a protection-centred approach

Under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the ICRC is mandated to promote and ensure respect for IHL in all circumstances, and to safeguard the life and dignity of conflict-affected people. We engage in dialogue with parties to the conflict to **remind them of their obligations under IHL**. We also work to **influence global frameworks, shape international policies**, and **develop practical tools and recommendations**, including those related to water and armed conflict, and the protection of essential services or the environment (e.g. UN Security Council Resolution 2573). We share our operational and technical expertise and knowledge of field realities in diplomatic, multilateral, bilateral or military forums to help strengthen the humanitarian and water sector. For instance, we drafted a joint report with the World Bank and UNICEF calling for [stronger humanitarian–development partnerships](#) to build service-provider resilience before and during crisis, and a policy paper alongside the Norwegian Red Cross on the importance of [protecting essential services personnel in conflict-affected urban areas](#).



Access to affected populations and an understanding of their needs

The ICRC's neutrality and impartiality enables us to gain trust and acceptance from all conflict parties, giving us access to areas in **active conflict zones**, including those under the control of armed groups, where we can **help communities that few or no other organizations can reach**. We have long-standing operations in contexts such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter, DRC), Iraq, Venezuela and Ukraine, where our work enables access to water and other essential services, with some programmes dating back to the 1980s and 1990s.

Our interventions are informed by decades of presence and experience in the most challenging conflict-affected contexts. We recognize that programming in these environments requires specialized approaches. We have a deep understanding of the dynamics of armed conflict and violence, the cyclical nature of humanitarian crises and their impact on civilians' needs and priorities. We utilize learnings from our **multidisciplinary, integrated approach** – encompassing economic security, health, protection, weapon contamination and other activities – to develop a holistic understanding of the challenges people face and to respond effectively.



A capacity to meet emergency needs and build longer-term resilience

The ICRC works closely with local service providers and authorities – water, energy, health – in around 35 countries, building lasting partnerships that recognize the integral role they play in delivering essential services to affected populations. We build resilience by helping existing systems continue to function, supporting the networks that keep essential services running. We endeavour to combine **emergency response** with **systemic approaches that integrate resilience, sustainability and humanitarian diplomacy**, ensuring that engineering solutions address both **immediate needs and long-term recovery simultaneously**. Recognizing that evolving crises dynamics require innovation and adaptability, we aim to develop solutions that are durable, climate-smart and resilient to help restore people's dignity.

Over the years, we have expanded our expertise in implementing **large-scale, multi-year urban water initiatives** with **systems-strengthening components**. To make this feasible, we actively engage with development agencies, international financial institutions, government and water authorities, the private sector, and multilateral and bilateral organizations to co-create initiatives with sustained impact on conflict-affected people. Within these collaborations, each contributes what its mandate and positioning allow, with risks explicitly shared and sequenced between partners. By leveraging our unique access, contextual analysis and technical expertise, we help catalyze funding for conflict-affected settings and create the necessary conditions for responsible exits and handovers to local actors. As part of these multi-year, multi-partner programmes, and depending on the context, we may act as a convener bringing stakeholders together, an advisor providing technical expertise, an enabler facilitating implementation conditions for other partners, or an implementer directly delivering programmes.



Partnership within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Together with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the 191 National Societies, the ICRC belongs to the **largest humanitarian movement in the world**. We work closely with Movement partners, particularly National Societies, who have knowledge of the local languages, customs and context, and a unique understanding of communities' needs. To help restore people's access to essential services, we work with National Societies on projects such as hygiene sessions and training local water-management committees, while also providing technical guidance and other support to develop local capacities and increase the sector's resilience.

What we do: our activities in two key contexts

We implement a wide range of public-health engineering activities: from directly supplying water to communities in emergencies, to working with local authorities and partners to repair upgrade or rehabilitate public facilities and essential infrastructure, such as water treatment plants, boreholes, roads and hospitals. We partner with water and energy authorities and, through our team of experts, we jointly design responses that strengthen systems' resilience, including emergency preparedness plans, training on operation and maintenance, reconnecting power grids and installing solar back-up systems. In places of detention where we have access, we provide detaining authorities with technical support to improve the living conditions of detainees. These activities are carried out in parallel with our protection work and our work to promote IHL.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Context

In the east of the DRC, particularly in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri, armed conflict continues between the DRC military and security forces and the active armed groups. This crisis, ongoing for over thirty years, remains one of the longest-running conflicts in the world. The fighting escalated again in early 2025, when the Alliance Fleuve Congo/M23 (hereafter AFC/M23) rapidly advanced into eastern DRC. The fragmentation of armed groups, and the fighting among them, adds to the precariousness of the security situation. Many people are killed, injured or abused, displaced or separated from their families. Houses, livelihoods and critical infrastructure have been destroyed, leaving communities struggling to access food, water and other essential services – systems that have already been severely weakened by years of conflict.

The ICRC has been in the DRC since the 1960s, working with the Red Cross Society of the DRC and other local partners to help conflict-affected people, including in the east, in rural areas and in areas under the control of armed groups. With regards to essential services, our priority is to ensure equity and access to water, sanitation, energy and health care, prioritizing the communities most affected by armed conflict and whom few or no other actors can reach. We aim to ensure the sustainability of our humanitarian impact and carry out projects that are built to last by undertaking – with authorities, Movement partners and others – longer-term initiatives, such as building capacities among the DRC Red Cross and making improvements to water infrastructure in urban areas.

Our work to restore essential services

We support local service providers in improving or upgrading infrastructure in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu, including areas under AFC/M23 control. Our neutrality, impartiality and independence enable us to facilitate humanitarian agreements between parties, for instance, to allow service-providers to carry out urgent and much-needed repairs to infrastructure in conflict-affected areas and restore people's access to essential services. For example in our role as a neutral intermediary, we helped personnel from energy service providers to access locations in the northern front of Goma so they can conduct repairs to transmission lines that had been damaged during hostilities – this helped restore 70% of the city's electric supply.

In 2025, more than 3.2 million people had broader access to clean water and public health was safeguarded because of various water and sanitation projects we conducted or were implemented with our support (e.g. working together with the national electricity company and the water distribution authority). After the surge of the hostilities in the east, we expanded our water projects to ensure that water became more readily available to more people. We repaired or upgraded water and other essential infrastructure, donated spare parts and materials for operations and maintenance, and trained local water committees. Altogether we reached around 1.8 million IDPs and conflict-affected residents, and almost 986,000 people in Bukavu and Uvira who needed emergency assistance to restore their water-supply systems. We also conducted infrastructural work in places of detention where we had access and helped carry out repairs or upgrades to three hospitals and a physical rehabilitation centre.



Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Goma in North Kivu, over half of the population lacks access to safe water which then puts people – already reeling from conflict and displacement – at even more risk of waterborne diseases and other health hazards. Our response, the multiyear Goma Resilient Water Services project adopts a multi-component approach, focusing on strengthening Goma's water infrastructure and local capacity to ensure long-term, sustainable water services for more than a million residents for years to come and thereby reducing protection risks and public health hazards, and helping improve household economies

Specifically in **Goma**, decades of conflict, displacement and rapid urban growth have left hundreds of thousands of people without reliable access to water. Many households, particularly women and children, stood in long queues to collect heavy loads of unsafe water or pay inflated rates to private vendors. To address these systemic inequalities, and building on long-standing experience in Goma and cooperation with local authorities and service providers, we developed the **Goma Water Resilient Services (GWRS)** as a city-wide extension of our earlier work in Goma West.

Aligned with the city's **master plan** for water services, which we also developed, the goal of the GWRS is to progressively improve access to safe, sustainable, and affordable water services to more than 1.5 million people currently living in Goma – a number expected to reach 3.3 million by 2040 – while strengthening North Kivu's capacity to independently manage and deliver **resilient water services**. Amid constraints faced by local service providers such as disruptions, displacement and staffing gaps, we will strengthen infrastructure, improve governance and progressively transfer operational responsibility to local entities. GWRS builds on the concept developed and validated in the Goma West Water Supply Project, where **large-scale financing** was unlocked via a model that brings together various stakeholders (see section on "What sets us apart"). Alongside the construction of new treatment plants, reservoirs and distribution networks, GWRS aims to boost the technical and managerial capacity of the local water utility and encourages community participation in service oversight. By diversifying water sources and designing systems that withstand shocks and stresses, such as hostilities, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, our work promotes resilience, public health equity and continuity of essential service provision while offering a new partnership model in fragile urban environments for sustainable impact and the protection of people.

Ukraine

Context

The international armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine continues unabated. According to UN estimates at the time of writing, about 3.7 million people remain displaced within Ukraine and around 5.6 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered globally. Thousands of combatants and civilians have been wounded and killed or are unaccounted for. Extensive damage to critical infrastructure has disrupted basic services in many communities. For instance, damaged water systems and energy supply infrastructure in various front-line or hard-to-reach areas have left large populations with unreliable access to safe drinking water, electricity and heating – which add another layer of suffering for families during the harsh Ukrainian winters.

The ICRC, which has been working in Ukraine since 1993, reinforced its operations in the country in 2014 and massively scaled up its activities in 2022. The Ukrainian Red Cross Society convenes, while the ICRC co-convenes, the Movement's activities in Ukraine. With regards to essential services, our priority is to consolidate the initiatives to ensure people's access to water, electricity, health and forensic services by working with public utilities and local service-providers in preventing or mitigating the disruption of these services.

Our work to restore essential services

Working with local operational partners is indispensable to ensure the sustainability of interventions, even more in such complex urban environments. We work to support essential infrastructure and the delivery of essential services in areas affected by the international armed conflict. We utilize our active presence in the field and our decades of operational experience in protracted urban crises to develop both an effective emergency response and a set of comprehensive urban resilience programmes. This way, our response covers **people's urgent needs and longer-term, more preventive support for service providers**.

In 2025, we were able to ensure access to water, electricity, heating, sanitation and other basic services for approximately 2.1 million people.

We helped utility companies avert or mitigate disruptions to their services and help insulate their systems more effectively against the pressures caused by conflict – specifically, we gave them spare parts, consumables and specialized equipment (e.g. generators) for running and maintaining their facilities, as well as contingency stocks of supplies, and tools for making repairs, in preparation for emergencies.

Some of these activities are part of larger **urban resilience programmes** ongoing now for years in **Donetsk, Kherson** and **Mykolaiv**, where the goal is to improve local service providers' capacities and make their systems more resilient (e.g. diversification of water sources, assessment and preparation for full-scale rehabilitation) through technical guidance, training and the above-mentioned distributions. The goal is that the essential services systems will be able to absorb, adapt, respond to and/or recover from shocks and stressors caused by the conflict.

We helped sustain the provision of services in IDP shelters and medico-legal facilities by carrying out infrastructural improvements such as the renovation of water systems, repair of rooms and installation of forensic refrigerators. We helped people repair their damaged homes through materials and tools we distributed. We also donated bottled water in areas where water was scarce.

Across 12 hospitals and physical rehabilitation centres, we renovated surgical facilities, and upgraded heating, water and electrical systems, strengthening their resilience against blackouts and other emergencies. In detention facilities, targeted infrastructure works and supply donations directly improved the living conditions and health environment of nearly 1,000 people deprived of their liberty, providing them with a safer and more sanitary environment.



Ukraine, Mykolaiv. To help ensure people's access to safe and clean water, our engineers helped restore a pumping station that will be an alternative source of water supply to the city of Ochakiv. In the event of the destruction of the main water supply station, it will be able to provide up to 10,000 cubic meters of water for the townspeople.

The way forward

Amid a dangerous convergence of escalating armed conflicts, significant cuts to aid funding and growing challenges to respect for IHL, the ICRC will prioritize its **unique mandate** to protect and assist conflict-affected people and to promote protective interpretations of IHL. We will focus our efforts where our help and operational expertise is most needed – in areas where **active armed conflicts** continue to generate **significant humanitarian consequences** for civilians.

In 2026, the ICRC will continue working to restore people's access to essential services and infrastructure in countries and contexts affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, working to implement public-health-engineering solutions guided by IHL and humanitarian principles. Notably, we will continue to:

- maintain and extend emergency preparedness and response capacities to have a timely and effective impact in the sudden onset or acute phases of conflict,
- promote a flexible, systemic and sustainable approach that strengthens the longer-term resilience of people affected by conflict and addresses their needs during protracted crises, notably through strategic partnerships with key stakeholders and essential services providers and
- share our operational and technical expertise while influencing the debate and policies in the water and humanitarian sector, to promote a broader acceptance and deeper understanding of IHL.

Targets for 2026

Water and habitat activities in 35 contexts:



26.7 million civilians

to restore access to essential services or benefit from infrastructural work



Almost 182,400 detainees

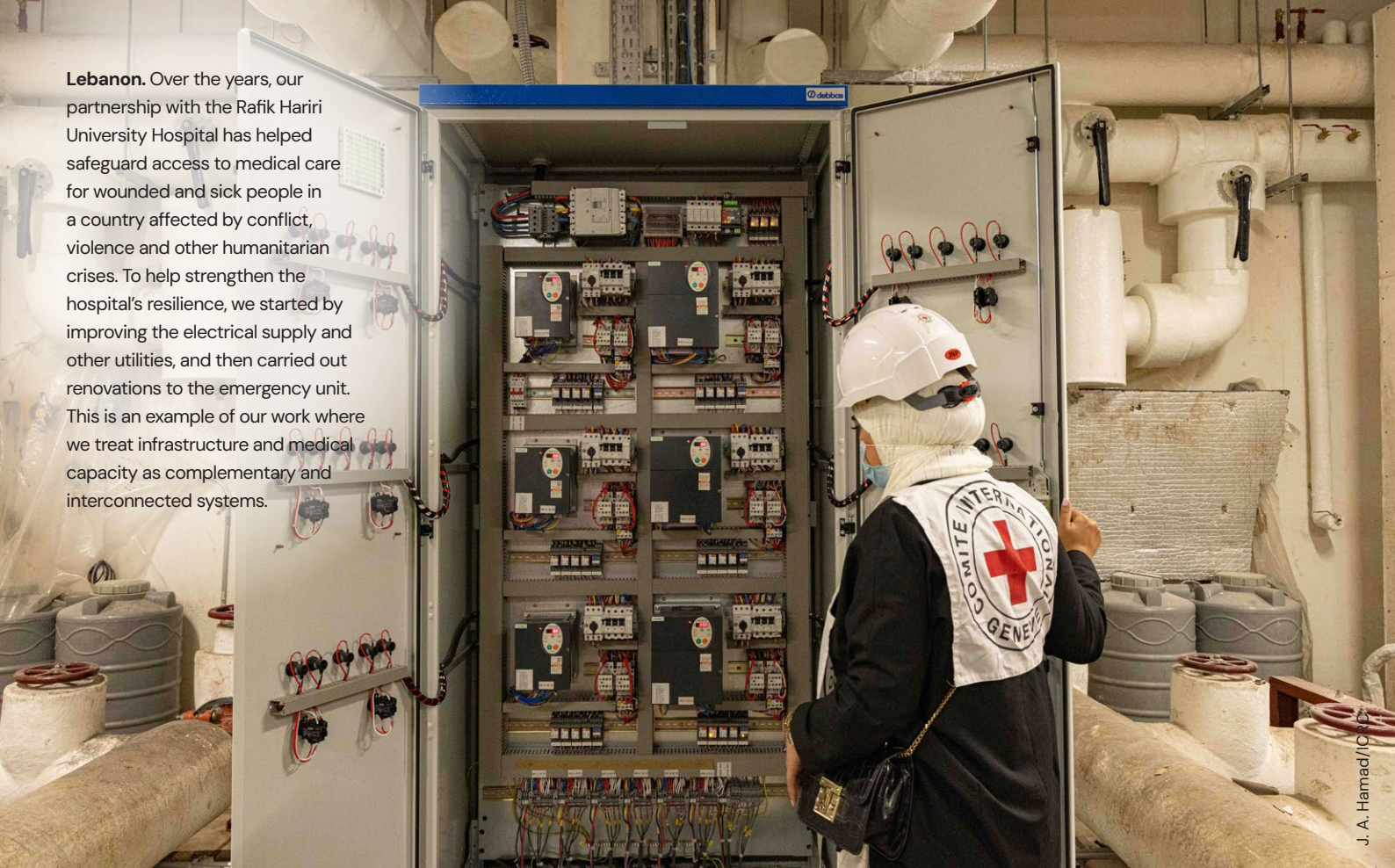
to have improved living environments in prisons



103 hospitals, physical-rehabilitation centres and other health facilities

to have infrastructural upgrades or repairs

Lebanon. Over the years, our partnership with the Rafik Hariri University Hospital has helped safeguard access to medical care for wounded and sick people in a country affected by conflict, violence and other humanitarian crises. To help strengthen the hospital's resilience, we started by improving the electrical supply and other utilities, and then carried out renovations to the emergency unit. This is an example of our work where we treat infrastructure and medical capacity as complementary and interconnected systems.



We believe that keeping water and other essential services running is one of the clearest ways to protect the life of civilians during situations of armed conflict and violence. **Your continued support is vital** to help us safeguard the dignity of entire communities – and ensure their access to the most basic of our human needs.

**Work with us to turn commitment into
meaningful, lasting change.**

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ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross
19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
T +41 22 734 60 01
shop.icrc.org
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