

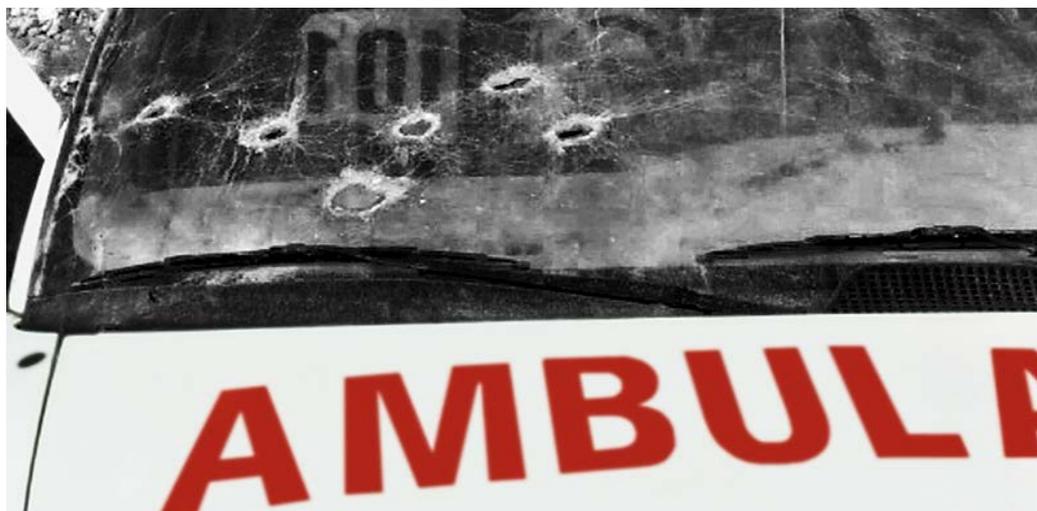


## International Humanitarian Law

### ECHO FACTSHEET

#### Facts & Figures

- All EU Member States have ratified the four Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.
- 196 states, including all UN Member States, have ratified the fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians in Time of War, which equals universal acceptance.
- However, 22 states have not ratified the important first protocol (relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts). In addition, 28 states have not ratified the second Additional Protocol relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.
- Violations of International Humanitarian Law have significantly increased in the past 10 years.
- Over the last decade, the risk of humanitarians being attacked has increased.
- In 2017, 143 major attacks against aid operations occurred, affecting 288 aid workers in 21 countries.



Ambulance attacked, Photo: EC/ECHO/Maria Jose Pallares Paredes

#### Key messages

- International Humanitarian Law (IHL) lays out the responsibilities of states and non-state armed groups during an armed conflict. This set of rules defines, among others, the right to receive humanitarian assistance, protection of civilians (including medical and humanitarian workers), and the protection of refugees, prisoners, the wounded and sick.
- While many of the provisions of IHL are now accepted as international customary law (i.e. are considered general practice, accepted as law and exist independent of treaty law), IHL is increasingly violated by warring parties.
- The EU contributes to the global respect for and compliance with IHL through advocacy and political measures such as dialogue, statements and initiatives, as well as through funding to ensure humanitarian access. The EU funds IHL dissemination targeting a wide range of stakeholders, activities aimed at increasing the capacities of humanitarian workers in advocating for IHL and implements information campaigns to raise awareness of IHL across the general public.
- Professional humanitarian workers are in danger if warring factions associate them with military, political, religious and ideological authorities. It is therefore essential that all parties involved respect the distinct and separate roles of humanitarian agencies and workers, comply with international rules, abide by the principles of international humanitarian law and defend humanitarian action.

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## Humanitarian situation and needs

There are few conflicts today where civilians are not effectively being held hostage by the warring parties. While the protection of civilians provided by the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols is extensive, states and non-state armed groups are often unwilling to uphold this responsibility.

As a result, civilians continue to suffer excessively in almost every armed conflict. There is also a growing tendency to close the door to humanitarians, preventing them from helping the victims. **In 2017, 143 major attacks against aid operations occurred, affecting 288 aid workers in 21 countries.** This represents a decrease of roughly ten per cent compared to 2016, but must be seen in the context of growing no-go areas limiting humanitarian aid delivery. (Source: [aidworkersecurity.org](http://aidworkersecurity.org)).

Today, **Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia are among the countries where humanitarian workers are most at risk.** Buildings belonging to relief organisations are attacked, vehicles and convoys hijacked, and personnel murdered or kidnapped. Violence against these workers affects civilians and prevents millions of people from receiving life-saving assistance.

**Humanity, independence, neutrality and impartiality** are the principles on which humanitarian aid is founded. These should protect relief workers, enabling them to operate freely. Yet the reality can be very different. A key reason for deliberate attacks on humanitarians is often the fact that their role is not fully recognised, understood or differentiated. It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify what defines a genuine 'humanitarian'. How can humanitarian action be considered neutral if in the same emergency soldiers are also carrying out 'humanitarian' actions? How is relief aid to be recognised as independent when armed forces use aid agency emblems to deceive their opponents?

Some links between humanitarians and the military are essential as military logistics are often needed for large and rapid humanitarian operations. However, this should not be regarded as the norm. Where links do exist, distinct roles should be clearly defined, in line with the respective actors' duties. The confusion of roles puts humanitarian workers at risk. Civilians face a double jeopardy: they are themselves a target, and are unable to receive aid because the people trying to help them are denied access or, in extreme cases, killed while doing their work.

**States should avoid integrating humanitarian activities into their political and military campaigns.** Authorities must stop blocking humanitarian aid and provide access to victims when the needs are real and lives are in danger. If neutral and independent agencies are denied access to victims and intimidation is widespread, civilians face a two-fold risk of suffering.

## European Union's humanitarian response

**All EU Member States have ratified the four Geneva Conventions** and their Additional Protocols. At EU level, the humanitarian principles are enshrined in the [European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#) signed in 2007. EU [Guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL](#) were adopted in 2005 and updated in 2009. Examples of concrete activities for the dissemination and implementation of IHL supported by the European Commission include:

- Funding of partners' IHL advocacy activities (e.g. Palestine) or doing its own IHL advocacy in certain conflicts (e.g. Syria, Colombia).
- Funding of IHL dissemination targeting a wide range of stakeholders, including military/security forces and armed non-state actors in key conflict-affected countries (e.g. Iraq, Colombia, Ukraine, and Afghanistan).
- Funding activities aimed at increasing humanitarian workers' capacities to advocate for IHL.
- Raising awareness among partners worldwide about the unintended consequences of new counter-terrorism legislation and policies, which may limit humanitarian action and IHL training.
- Implementation of information campaigns, such as the annual [World Humanitarian Day](#) campaign, to raise awareness.

