International Humanitarian Law

What is it?

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is a set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict. It lays out the responsibilities of states and non-state armed groups during an armed conflict. This set of rules defines, among others, the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief in armed conflict, the freedom of movement of humanitarian relief personnel, the protection of civilians (including medical and humanitarian workers), and the protection of refugees, prisoners, the wounded and sick.

Why is this important?

IHL is based on the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War and the 1977 and 2005 additional protocols. The principles that guide humanitarian action – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – also have their basis in IHL. These include rules on the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief and the freedom of movement of humanitarian relief personnel.

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. Violations of IHL continue to be one of the most critical challenges for the protection of civilians and the protection of humanitarian and medical workers. 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.
How are we helping?

As most humanitarian actions take place within the context of armed conflict, violations of IHL heavily impact the EU’s humanitarian aid objectives in meeting the needs of affected populations, and also imperil the security of the EU’s humanitarian partners. As one of the largest humanitarian donors, the EU has thus always been firmly committed to promoting global respect for IHL.

All EU Member States have ratified the four Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols. The EU also is the only organisation that has adopted in 2005 (and updated in 2009) guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL.

In 2018, the EU also published the first report on the implementation of the Guidelines, demonstrating more visibly the wide range of measures the EU undertakes in support of IHL. In 2019, the EU published the second report on the implementation of the Guidelines.

The EU, through its Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department (ECHO) promotes the global respect of IHL and the humanitarian principles. Examples of activities supported by the EU include:

- Extensive advocacy on IHL, globally and in certain conflicts, both in bilateral and multilateral fora.
- Funding of partners’ IHL advocacy activities (e.g. in Palestine).
- 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. Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Ukraine, and Afghanistan).
- Funding activities aimed at increasing the capacities of humanitarian workers in advocating for IHL.
- Supporting IHL promotion through Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)/EU training missions.
- Implementing information campaigns on the protection of humanitarian workers, such as the annual World Humanitarian Day campaign.