

Check against delivery



**ICRC**

**Keynote address given by Pierre Krähenbühl**

**Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross**

**151<sup>st</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly**

**General-Debate: Upholding humanitarian norms and safeguarding**

**humanitarian action in times of crises**

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## **Opening**

Senator Gabriela Morawska-Stanecka, Vice-President of the IPU, representing IPU President Tulia Ackson, Secretary General Martin Chungong, Excellencies, Honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to join you. I speak with gratitude for the Inter-Parliamentary Union's long-standing commitment to humanitarian principles and with urgency about a moment when those principles are under strain.

At a time where wars are being normalized as inevitable, the theme before us asks us to do more than reflect; it demands that we act now to preserve human dignity in war and to translate principle into concrete protection. It also demands the courage to invest in mechanisms to prevent and end conflicts.

Two historical touchstones remind us of the enduring relationship between parliamentary action and humanitarian endeavour: Henry Dunant, whose ideas gave rise to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Frédéric Passy, a pioneer of parliamentary cooperation, were each awarded the very first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901. That coincidence underscores how law, politics and humanitarian commitment have long shaped efforts to reduce suffering.

We come as longstanding partners to the IPU: to continue providing technical support, operational experience and first-hand accounts from the field so your laws and budgets protect people when it matters most.

### **The humanitarian landscape**

The ICRC currently classifies more than 130 armed conflicts worldwide, the highest number in recent decades. Behind that figure are millions of lives fractured, families torn apart, children denied food and schooling, and entire societies hollowed out. These are not abstractions; they are the stories my colleagues witness every day.

In **Gaza**, the scale of devastation is immense. We welcome the recent ceasefire and the negotiations leading to it. But we all know, that at this stage, the situation is unfortunately all too fragile. Even if a ceasefire holds, it will not erase months of destruction: neighbourhoods reduced to rubble, hospitals and water systems crippled, and children dying of hunger. Civilians have been killed in homes and medical facilities, and many were struck down while searching for food and water. Indiscriminate warfare and extreme restrictions on humanitarian aid have rendered life unliveable and stripped it of dignity. Hostage-taking is absolutely prohibited under IHL and its practice has caused profound suffering. It has torn families apart and inflicted deep wounds on survivors. Thousands of Palestinian detainees are still in custody and their families anxiously await their release.

In the conflict between **Russia and Ukraine**, we observe that large-scale drone and missile attacks are killing civilians far from the frontlines. Essential infrastructure is being destroyed deliberately. Over 146,000 people – civilians and military personnel from both sides – are reported missing to the ICRC, each case representing a family trapped in anguish and uncertainty.

**In Sudan**, civilians face relentless death, displacement and destruction. More than 12 million people have been uprooted over more than two years of conflict. An estimated 70-80% of health facilities in affected areas are no longer functioning, leaving two out of three civilians without access to care.

**In Myanmar**, decades of conflict have left communities vulnerable, movement restricted and access to services strangled, a situation worsened by this year's earthquake.

In **Afghanistan**, mines and unexploded ordnances continue to maim and kill decades after fighting began. In **Syria**, over 36,000 missing people are registered with the ICRC in Syria alone – and this is only a fraction of the true number. The collapse of electricity and water systems pushes millions further into desperation.

Conflicts are proliferating and intensifying even as funding for humanitarian response shrinks, and access to people in need is blocked by insecurity and administrative impediments. Aid workers face arrest, expulsion and attack; hospitals,

ambulances and medical staff are deliberately targeted or rendered inoperable; water and power systems are struck; and explosive remnants maim long after shooting stops.

The ICRC responds with neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. We provide medical care, trace missing persons, protect detainees, support hospitals and water systems, clear explosive remnants, and engage in confidential dialogue with parties to secure access. These operations save lives and restore dignity, but they are increasingly difficult when the commitment to uphold humanitarian norms is weakened.

### **Upholding the integrity of international humanitarian law**

The Geneva Conventions were negotiated after humanity had witnessed its worst excesses to place clear limits on what belligerents may do and to strengthen protection for civilians. International humanitarian law exists to distinguish fighters from non-combatants, to restrict means and methods of warfare, and to preserve a minimum of humanity amid violence.

Yet that protective framework is under pressure from multiple fronts.

Three principal threats now endanger IHL:

- **Widespread violations and complacency** – the scale of blatant breaches, and the insufficient political or legal response to them, is staggering.
- **Selective application and permissive interpretation** – readings of the rules that hollow out core protections and create dangerous precedents.
- **Reluctance to ratify, implement or remain bound** – including withdrawals – creating legal gaps and retreat from commitments that put countless lives at risk and can reverse decades of hard-won progress.

Dismissing the law in the name of national interest is short-term thinking with long-term consequences; it shapes how conflicts are fought tomorrow and further lowers the bar at a moment when the world is already on fire.

What makes these trends possible is a deeper social process. Dehumanization strips people of dignity in words, policy and practice and acts as an enabler: by eroding empathy and normalizing suffering, it lowers political and legal barriers to permissive policies, weakens demands for accountability, and makes legal backsliding more politically tolerable. Norms like IHL are bulwarks against that slide, but they can be reimagined, weakened or ignored if dehumanizing narratives become mainstream.

That is where parliaments must act.

Defend the law against permissive reinterpretations; resist selective application and double standards; and promote universalization and faithful national implementation.

### **Investing in IHL: a strategic imperative**

Integrating IHL into legislation, doctrine and training is strategic. States that do so reduce civilian harm, strengthen operational effectiveness and preserve legitimacy at home and abroad.

As states enhance civilian and military readiness for future crises, parliaments must reaffirm their commitment to IHL. Conflict preparedness is not limited to investment in firepower; it demands sustained peacetime investment in IHL so that compliance in wartime is possible. If states invest in defence, they must also budget for IHL.

Real preparedness requires political courage and practical measures:

- **Enact and update legislation** to implement treaty obligations and provide clear legal frameworks for operations in armed conflict.
- **Embed qualified legal advisers** in operational planning and require documented **legal reviews of new weapons**.

- **Maintain independent oversight and accountability mechanisms** to investigate, prosecute and punish war crimes.

The cost of neglect is far higher than the modest investments needed to prevent and mitigate harm. Investing in IHL is an investment in stability, operational success and the long-term reduction of human and financial costs of conflict.

### **The Global IHL Initiative: a collective commitment**

Just a year ago, China, Brazil, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa, together with the ICRC, launched the Global IHL Initiative to galvanize political commitment to uphold the rules of war. The Initiative confronts a hard truth: despite being foundational to the protection of civilians, compliance with IHL is too often lacking. This state-led, collective effort aims to reverse that trend by making IHL a political priority, mobilizing leadership across regions and sectors, and producing practical, forward-looking recommendations for national action. Our message is simple but urgent: in war, humanity must prevail.

The Initiative has rapidly become a global effort. Ninety-one states have joined, 27 co-chairs from every continent are leading seven workstreams with the ICRC, and the first phase of consultations engaged roughly 130 states through global and regional meetings.

A progress report, drafted with the co-chairs and released last week, summarizes discussions across all workstreams and identifies concrete areas for further reflection and action. The Initiative will culminate in a global high-level meeting in 2026 to consolidate recommendations and convert political momentum into measurable commitments.

Key messages emerging from the consultations include:

- **Reaffirm IHL's centrality** – despite persistent violations, upholding IHL is essential to reducing suffering and to achieving lasting peace in armed conflicts.
- **Focus on protection** – IHL's object and purpose are fundamentally protective and humanitarian; its application must centre on protecting those affected by war.
- **Strengthen cooperation** – the Initiative provides a new type of space where all states can come around the same table to engage in a respectful and constructive manner. At a time where other multilateral channels are strained, the Initiative offers renewed hope that peer-to-peer dialogue can help rebuild mutual understanding and improve IHL's effectiveness.
- **Make IHL a political priority** – respect for IHL must be treated as a core political and legal obligation.
- **Strengthen national implementation and accountability** – effective national systems to implement and enforce IHL,

including to investigate, prosecute and punish serious violations, are vital to prevent further violations and ensure accountability.

Parliaments can turn this momentum into measurable national change. We ask parliamentarians to adopt three concrete actions in support of the Initiative:

- **Allocate resources for IHL capacity building and national implementation**, including predictable multi-year budget lines for legislative reform, judicial and prosecutorial training, military and civilian training, and national coordination mechanisms.
- **Integrate IHL into domestic law and military training**, by reviewing and amending legislation to enshrine IHL obligations and conditioning defence budgets on demonstrated, recurrent IHL training for armed and security forces.
- **Advocate for your country's formal endorsement and active participation in the Initiative**, urging your government to join and meaningfully engage in its consultations.

## **Closing**

If the ways wars are fought today are a glimpse of the future, then the question before us is not only the fate of international humanitarian law but the fate of humanity itself. The longer

dehumanization goes unchecked and legal protections erode, the harder it becomes to reverse the spiral.

The Global IHL Initiative offers a real chance to restore political priority to IHL. Parliamentarians are uniquely placed to translate international commitments into domestic realities through laws, budgets, oversight and public leadership. Lead with courage and clarity: allocate predictable resources, integrate IHL into training and legislation, protect humanitarian space, and use your political weight to turn commitments into action.

**Together, we need to break a vicious cycle, where wars are treated in an all too casual manner, as always inevitable. Over and over, we see a similar process where wars are normalized, glorified even, where the enemy is dehumanized, treated and referred to as less than human. And finally, after devastation and extreme suffering is done, we repeat once more “Never again”. Only to be repeated, again and again. This is the cycle that need to be broken, and we need your voice, political courage and leadership to do so.**

Choose a world where common humanity is the norm, not the exception. If we do not act now, the brutality we see today risks becoming the baseline for future conflicts.

Thank you.