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Protection of the natural environment in armed conflict: How can parliaments ensure environmental protection through the implementation of IHL?

Webinar series for parliamentarians on international humanitarian law

This is the second webinar of a series aiming to raise awareness among parliamentarians and provide them with expertise on international humanitarian law (IHL) and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts. This series is an initiative of the IPU Committee to Promote Respect for International Humanitarian Law, with the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Thursday, 9 July 2026

13:00–15:00 CEST (Geneva time)

BACKGROUND

The number of armed conflicts continues to rise. According to the ICRC, by the end of 2024 [there were around 130 armed conflicts](#) – more than double the number 15 years ago. While civilians are those who suffer the most in conflict settings, the consequences of armed conflict upon the natural environment are also far-reaching and of critical importance. While casualties of armed conflict have traditionally been measured in terms of dead and wounded combatants and civilians, as well as destroyed cities and livelihoods, the environment has often remained a silent victim of war.

Armed conflict can cause severe and long-lasting harm to the natural environment, jeopardizing the health, well-being, and even survival of affected populations. These impacts often span vast areas and persist long after hostilities have ceased. Over the years, parties to armed conflicts have sought to gain military advantage at the cost of polluting waters, torching crops, felling forests, poisoning soils, or killing wildlife. In contemporary armed conflicts, access to scarce water resources has been weaponized against civilians, with the contamination or destruction of these vital resources having severe consequences for the health and survival of entire communities.

Conflict-related environmental damage can create long-lasting legacy issues that persist well beyond the cessation of hostilities. For example, unexploded ordnance, heavy metals, asbestos, dust, biological wastes and radiological contamination can seep into and spread through water, air, soil and food systems, affecting human health, ecosystems and biodiversity. Compounding these challenges, the escalating climate crisis has further exacerbated the environmental impacts of conflict, amplifying their severity and long-term consequences.

While a certain amount of environmental damage may be inherent to armed conflict, it cannot be unlimited. IHL sets out rules that protect the natural environment and that seek to limit the damage caused to it by armed conflict. General provisions on the conduct of hostilities, as reflected notably in the [1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions](#) and customary international law, apply to the natural environment, reflecting the widely recognized principle that the natural environment is, by default, civilian in character and cannot be attacked unless it has been transformed into a military objective. When it comes to specific protection under IHL, there are rules designed to prevent severe harm to the natural environment during armed conflicts. For example, IHL prohibits the use of methods or means of warfare that are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment. It also prohibits actions such as the deliberate destruction of agricultural land and drinking water supplies to harm civilian populations.

Over the years, several key international legal instruments and guidelines have been adopted with the aim of ensuring the protection of the natural environment during armed conflict. In 1976, the international community adopted the [Convention on the Prohibition of Military or any Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques](#) (ENMOD Convention), with a view to explicitly ban the hostile use of the environment. Later, in 1998, the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#) classified as a war crime the act of causing widespread, long-term, and severe damage to the environment in violation of the principle of proportionality. More recently,

the ICRC published its [Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict](#) (2020), which reflect the current state of IHL as understood by the ICRC. The Guidelines are a compilation of existing rules and recommendations to safeguard the natural environment during armed conflict. Similarly, in 2022, the UN International Law Commission's [Principles on protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts](#), marked a significant step in the ongoing efforts to develop and clarify international legal frameworks for environmental protection during warfare. At the national level, legislative action aimed at addressing serious environmental crimes, including those committed during armed conflict, have been gaining momentum. In particular, the criminalization of "ecocide" has garnered significant attention, with an increasing number of States considering or already taking steps to incorporate it into their domestic legal frameworks.

Protecting the natural environment of conflict-affected communities – and safeguarding it for future generations – from the impact of warfare requires States to accelerate the implementation of IHL rules on the protection of the environment. To assist them in this task, in June 2026, the ICRC published its [Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict Under International Humanitarian Law: Implementation Guidance](#). This practical resource outlines concrete measures that national entities can take to implement these IHL rules. However, progress on national implementation remains limited, making parliamentary action more urgent than ever.

Parliaments play a vital role in ensuring that national legislation and policies governing armed conflict reflect the environmental protections enshrined in IHL. They can be instrumental in advancing the ratification of key IHL instruments, such as the ENMOD Convention, and in enacting laws that criminalize serious violations of IHL, including war crimes against the environment, including with the inclusion of the concept of "ecocide" in national frameworks. Beyond legislation, parliaments may also exercise oversight of armed forces and defence policies to ensure the integration of environmental considerations, allocate funding for military training on environmental protection and raise awareness among constituents of the environmental challenges faced by communities affected by armed conflict.

With this in mind, this webinar will bring together experts in IHL and environmental policy to discuss the protection of the natural environment during armed conflict. The speakers will shed light on the immediate and long-term impacts of armed conflict on the natural environment and highlight practical tools and strategies that parliaments can use to ensure the effective national implementation of key IHL rules safeguarding the environment. Additionally, parliamentarians from States that have taken measures or actions to advance the implementation of these rules will share their experiences and good practices. Participants will also have the opportunity to exchange insights, share their own experiences, and engage directly with the experts through a Q&A session.

Building on its resolution [Parliamentary strategies to mitigate the long-lasting impact of conflicts, including armed conflicts, on sustainable development](#) (adopted in April 2025), as well as the [Outcome Document of the Parliamentary Meeting at COP28](#) (December 2023), the IPU reaffirms its commitment to supporting parliamentarians in advancing efforts to reduce environmental damage caused by armed conflict. This initiative aligns with the Peace & Security and Climate Change policy priorities outlined both in the IPU's current [2022-2026 Strategy](#) and upcoming [2027-2031 Strategy](#).

The webinar is intended to be interactive and will be held online in English, with interpretation in French, Spanish and Arabic.

Guiding questions

1. What are the main challenges in addressing the impacts of armed conflict on the natural environment within the framework of IHL, and how can parliamentarians help overcome these challenges?
2. How does IHL protect the natural environment during armed conflict, and what key IHL instruments and obligations should parliamentarians be aware of to support such protection?
3. How can parliaments contribute to the effective national implementation and enforcement of IHL rules protecting the natural environment in armed conflict?
4. What steps can parliaments take during peacetime, both legislative and otherwise, to reduce the risk of environmental harm in the event of future armed conflicts?
5. How can parliaments ensure accountability for violations of IHL that harm the environment, and what role can they play in addressing serious environmental harm, including exploring efforts to recognize ecocide?
6. What role can parliaments play in fostering international dialogue and cooperation to enhance the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict?