



# 141<sup>st</sup> IPU Assembly

Belgrade (Serbia)  
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## Open Session of the Committee to Promote Respect for International Humanitarian Law

Panel debate

### ***Placing humanity first: The Geneva Conventions – Protecting people in armed conflict for 70 years***

*Wednesday, 16 October, 11.30 a.m. – 1 p.m.  
Hall 3/1 (first floor), Building A, Sava Centre*

#### **Concept note**

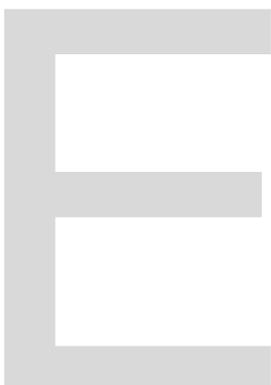
In 1949, the world was recovering from the horrors of the Second World War. It had brought humanity to the edge of an abyss, had caused inconceivable destruction and shed light upon the glaring lack of legal protection of civilians. The Geneva Conventions were born from the strong resolve of States to never see such destruction repeated, and from their agreement that even during armed conflict, there remained limits to what nations, communities, men and women, can inflict on each other.

The Geneva Conventions protect people; saving lives, alleviating suffering and responding to people's needs remain the driving force behind them. They are among the very few international treaties that have been universally ratified, and reflect not only law but also universal values of ethical behaviour. Envisaged to be applied in the worst of times, the Geneva Conventions preserve the core of common humanity.

Since their adoption, the Geneva Conventions have helped save countless lives and reduced suffering in hundreds of armed conflicts. They are at the heart of international humanitarian law (IHL)—a body of law which makes no judgement on the motive of fighting. IHL states that every person who is not or is no longer actively participating in the hostilities is entitled to protection and must be treated with humanity. Everyone, even the enemy, must be seen as a human and be protected. This means that:

- No one shall be subjected to torture or other forms of ill-treatment;
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence are prohibited;
- The wounded and sick must be given medical care;
- Hospitals and medical personnel must not be attacked;
- People who are detained must be treated humanely;
- Family members have the right to know the fate of their relatives; and
- The dead must be treated with dignity.

Marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Geneva Conventions is an opportunity to profile the protective power of law whilst highlighting the urgent need to take action when it is not respected. Humanitarian actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) witness the everyday achievements of international humanitarian law: a wounded person allowed through a checkpoint, a child receiving needed food, detainees being able to send a message to their families, and many other examples which may not always be visible to the public. In such instances, it is clear that respect for IHL is possible and that its implementation makes a meaningful difference.



However, in acknowledging the achievements of IHL, we must also continue to express strong concerns about its lack of application. We must continue to shed light and speak out against violations of IHL which persist and continue, especially in what pertains to gender based violence. Situations where women and girls are given as rewards in war; sons are abducted and raped; young women fleeing disaster and conflict are sexually enslaved; sexual atrocities are wielded as a means of torture against detainees, are still too common and need to be strongly acted upon.

We must also engage more forcefully in difficult conversations on how to apply the law in today's complex wars where conflicts are increasingly protracted, fought in urban, densely populated areas; where battles are asymmetric, where it is more difficult to distinguish between civilians and fighters; but where civilians are more victimized than ever and stigmatizations are omnipresent.

Upholding human dignity even in the midst of war is as relevant today as it was back in in 1949. This calls for strong political action. The panel debate will therefore be an opportunity to shed light on the importance and relevance of the Geneva Conventions, 70 years after their adoption; to discuss challenges in their implementation and respect of, in view of our constantly changing world; and to identify key actions and strategies that parliaments and their members can take towards respect of international humanitarian law.