

WAR WATCH

IHL IN FOCUS REPORT

1 JULY 2024 TO 31 DECEMBER 2025



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Acknowledgements

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Cover image, Gaza Strip, Zeytoun neighborhood. Copyright ICRC (figures removed and image extended with AI).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Depths of Our Inhumanity

The years 2024 and 2025 proved devastating to civilians, with little evidence of willingness among warring parties to limit the barbarity inflicted upon the most vulnerable. In Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar, Ukraine, Yemen, and the many other situations of armed conflict described in this report, serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) were wrought against those whom the law was supposed to protect on a huge scale and with rampant impunity. Murder, torture, and rape were widespread; civilians and their homes, schools, and hospitals were bombed regularly and sometimes systematically. Genocide – the intended destruction of a protected national, ethnic, religious, or racial group – was found by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry to have been perpetrated against Palestinians in Gaza by Israel. In October 2025, the spectre of genocide was revived in Sudan, twenty years after the Janjaweed's crimes in Darfur, by that group's progeny, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), exterminating ethnic Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa in the aftermath of its capture of the city of El Fasher. While the threat to IHL is not yet existential, it is at a critical breaking point.

The Content of the Report

This report summarizes in twenty-three profiles the major armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas that occurred between 1 July 2024 and 31 December 2025 and their impact on civilians. Only situations of armed violence that amounted to an armed conflict under international law are covered (see Text Box 1 for details of the law). Most of the conflicts described below began before July 2024, but a few were short-lived, notably the international armed conflicts between Iran and Israel and between Iran and the United States in June 2025, or have since ended. One situation – the violence between the authorities in Haiti and the Viv Ansanm gang coalition that controls Port-au-Prince – is identified as an armed conflict for the first time. This classification means that serious violations of IHL by any party must now be treated – and prosecuted – as possible war crimes.¹

Each of the twenty-three profiles details the classification of the salient armed conflicts; multiple conflicts may run in parallel in a single State. Recorded and reported violations of IHL are summarized in three main sections – attacks on civilians (anyone who is not a member of the armed forces); attacks on civilian objects (eg homes, hospitals, or schools); and the treatment of detainees and others who fall under the control of a party to an armed conflict. The manifold serious violations of IHL described, however, are no more than illustrative of the plethora of war crimes perpetrated during the report's eighteen-month reporting period.

TEXT BOX 1: ARMED CONFLICTS AND APPLICABLE IHL

IHL recognizes only two types of armed conflict – international and non-international. While most conflicts are ‘non-international’, there have been more international armed conflicts in recent years. IHL does not use the term ‘internal’ when describing armed conflict, as a non-international armed conflict can occur on the territory of more than one State or involve multiple States against an armed group without becoming an international armed conflict.

An **international armed conflict** (IAC) involves use of armed force between two or more States or by one State on the territory of another without its consent. This includes a non-consensual use of force by one State against or on the territory of another that does not meet with force in response. The amount of violence required for an IAC to exist is very low.² An occupation by one State of even a small part of the territory of another – another form of IAC – exists even if no shot is fired in anger by the invader. That is so, even if the territorial State does not respond militarily.³

A **non-international armed conflict** (NIAC) exists when there is intense and regular use of force between a State and an organized armed group (or coalition of armed groups). Far less common in practice, a NIAC also exists when two organized armed groups fight each other on a similarly intense and regular basis.⁴ The requirement that violence be regular and intense excludes ‘situations of internal disturbances and tensions, such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature’.⁵ IHL does not require a set minimum number of deaths or injuries for a NIAC to occur.

Customary IHL applies to every armed conflict. These are binding rules generally accepted by States as such and which apply to all the parties to an armed conflict. Moreover, many of the rules are the same irrespective of the conflict classification.⁶ Most treaty IHL rules, though, apply only to IACs, particularly the four Geneva Conventions of 1949,⁷ to which all States have adhered,⁸ and Additional Protocol I of 1977,⁹ to which 175 of 197 States were party at the end of 2025.¹⁰

Treaty IHL rules regulating acts in NIACs are ‘Common’ Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions (the wording of the article is identical in the four Conventions), and Additional Protocol II of 1977,¹¹ to which 170 States were party at the time of writing. Additional Protocol II applies only to NIACs taking place between the armed forces of a State Party and an organized armed group that controls territory.¹² It is thus narrower in scope than Common Article 3, which applies to all NIACs.¹³

Armed Conflicts in 2024–2025

International Armed Conflicts

The following twelve IACs are covered in this report:

- Afghanistan *v* Pakistan (an IAC ongoing sporadically, including in November and December 2025)¹⁴
- Cambodia *v* Thailand (a conflict that broke out in July 2025 and ended temporarily with a ceasefire, before restarting in November 2025, but was again in a ceasefire at the year’s end)
- Iran *v* Israel (in October 2024 and again in June 2025)
- Iran *v* United States (on 21–22 June 2025)
- Iraq *v* United States (through US airstrikes conducted without the consent of Iraq’s government against the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a network of Shia militia groups)

- Iraq *v* Türkiye (ongoing, through Turkish attacks on Kurdish non-State armed groups without the consent of the Iraqi government)
- Israel *v* Lebanon (ongoing)
- Israel *v* Palestine (ongoing)
- Israel *v* Syria (ongoing)
- Israel *v* Yemen (through Israel's use of force on Yemeni territory against the Houthis without the consent of Yemen's 'Internationally Recognized Government', the IRG)¹⁵
- Russia (supported by North Korea) *v* Ukraine (ongoing)
- Syria (supported by Russia until December 2024) *v* Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve.¹⁶

An occupation involves control of another State's territory primarily as a result of invasion. Situations of occupation described in this report concern Israel's occupation of parts of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria; Russia's ongoing occupation of part of Ukraine (since April 2025, Ukraine no longer occupies part of Russia, specifically its Kursk region); Rwanda's occupation of parts of the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC);¹⁷ and Türkiye's occupation of part of northern Syria. This is not a comprehensive list of military occupations.

Non-International Armed Conflicts

There were in total sixty-seven non-international armed conflicts in twenty of the situations covered in the report:

- Afghanistan (three conflicts)
- Burkina Faso (two conflicts)
- Central African Republic (CAR) (six conflicts)
- Colombia (ten conflicts)
- DRC (five conflicts)
- Ethiopia (two conflicts)
- Haiti (one conflict: Haiti *v* Viv Ansanm coalition)
- Iraq (two conflicts)
- Israel – Palestine (two conflicts: Israel *v* Hamas; and Israel *v* Palestinian Islamic Jihad, respectively)
- Israel – Lebanon (one conflict: Israel *v* Hezbollah)
- Mali (three conflicts)
- Mozambique (one conflict: Mozambique *v* Islamic State Mozambique)
- Myanmar (six conflicts)
- Niger (two conflicts)
- Nigeria (three conflicts)
- Somalia (two conflicts)
- South Sudan (two conflicts)
- Sudan (three conflicts)
- Syria (six conflicts, two of which ended upon the change in the Syrian government in December 2024)
- Yemen (five conflicts).

In certain armed conflicts, the national authorities have been supported by the Wagner Group and Africa Corps.¹⁸ The Wagner Group is a private military company with very close ties

to the Russian State, but which was involved in a rebellion against Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2023. Although in certain circumstances, its members may be considered mercenaries under the treaty definition applicable in IACs,¹⁹ IHL has no corresponding formal definition for mercenaries operating in NIACs. While Wagner Group personnel operate like mercenaries – and are often labelled as such – several factors, including their ties with Russia and factual uncertainties, complicate their legal classification. Consequently, IHL in Focus ordinarily refers to the members of the Wagner Group as paramilitaries. In contrast, Africa Corps is a State company,²⁰ and its members are thus State agents, making Russia responsible for their conduct.

TEXT BOX 2: THE TWO BRANCHES OF IHL: GENEVA LAW AND HAGUE LAW

There are two distinct branches of IHL – Geneva Law and Hague Law.²¹ Hague Law governs the fighting (termed the ‘conduct of hostilities’), which includes the weapons and tactics that are used in warfare whether that occurs on land, at sea, in the air, in outer space, or in cyberspace. Geneva Law covers persons detained by the enemy (whether military or civilian), or otherwise under their control, including the civilian population in occupied territory.²² Key rules of Geneva Law are set forth in four Geneva Conventions adopted in 1949 – two covering the sick and wounded, a third covering prisoners of war, and the fourth protecting civilians in the power of the enemy.

Despite occasional suggestions that the distinction between Geneva Law and Hague Law is no longer important, this is incorrect. Distinct rules depend on the characterization of the acts or omissions in question. Violations of Hague Law are far harder to prove than are violations of Geneva Law – where manifold civilian deaths and injuries may occur without the law being breached – and successful prosecutions for Hague Law war crimes are correspondingly rare.

Key Hague Law rules

Hague Law requires that parties to any armed conflict target only lawful military objectives and never civilians or civilian objects.²³ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁴ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.²⁵ Attacks directed against civilians or civilian objects are serious violations of IHL. Indiscriminate attacks – those not targeting a lawful military objective, where the attacker does not care who or what he strikes – are also serious IHL violations.²⁶ An attack that is targeted at a military objective but which may cause excessive incidental civilian harm compared to the direct military advantage expected is disproportionate and is similarly unlawful.²⁷ Use of children under fifteen years of age as soldiers is also a serious violation of Hague Law.²⁸

Key Geneva Law rules

Geneva Law customary and treaty IHL rules provide fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting murder, torture or inhuman treatment, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials. Specific protection is afforded to civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs).²⁹ Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be non-arbitrary and must be conducted with appropriate legal safeguards.³⁰ Persons deprived of liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.³¹ Detaining authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care, are held in humane conditions, and are protected from violence or reprisals.³²

ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIANS

In conflict after conflict, whether it be international or non-international, one reality remains constant – civilians are being regularly, and sometimes systematically, targeted by State armed forces and non-State armed groups alike. Only the means by which civilians are struck may differ – bombs, shells, bullets, missiles, toxic chemicals, or incendiary weapons, among others. We do not know how many civilians have been killed in the conduct of hostilities during armed conflicts in 2024 and 2025, but we do know that the number is well over 100,000 in each of the two years. Only in two of the contexts reported upon – CAR and Somalia – did the number of civilian casualties drop in 2024.

Many of the dead were in Gaza. In April 2025, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) described the Gaza Strip as a ‘killing field’ with civilians trapped in an ‘endless death loop’.³³ The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics said 2025 marked the worst humanitarian and demographic year for Palestinians. Citing the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the Bureau said that more than 72,000 Palestinians (fighters and civilians) have been killed since 7 October 2023, with ninety-eight per cent of the deaths recorded in Gaza, the highest toll in the history of Israeli attacks on Palestinians. By the end of December 2025, the victims included 18,592 children and about 12,400 women, while about 11,000 people remained missing and the number of wounded rose to 171,195. Gaza’s population fell by about 254,000 people, a 10.6% decline compared with pre-conflict estimates.³⁴

In Israel, key population centres came under sustained missile attacks from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the June 2025 conflict with Iran. Iran mainly targeted Tel Aviv and areas around it.³⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) recorded at least thirty-six direct hits (excluding those that landed in open areas), which killed at least twenty-eight people in Israel, all but one of whom were civilians.

Aside from aerial bombings, there were also many suicide bombings targeting civilians. This was especially the case in Nigeria, with Boko Haram primarily responsible. In June 2024, the group conducted suicide bombings across three locations in Borno state over the course of two days.³⁶ The first attack was in the town of Gwoza, where a woman carrying a baby detonated an explosive device during a wedding reception. Subsequent attacks occurred near a hospital and then at the funeral for the victims of the first attack. Together, the bombings killed more than thirty civilians and injured another forty-two, many of whom were women and children. A few weeks later, another explosion in a tea-room in the same region killed nineteen and injured more than twenty.³⁷

Drone Wars

Armed drones are being ever more widely used in warfare, often in attacks against civilians. An egregious example is in Ukraine where a significant increase in the use of aerial drones targeting Ukrainian civilians killed 207 and injured 1,365 between December 2024 and May 2025 alone.³⁸ Around seventy per cent of the casualties occurred in Kherson province.³⁹ The circumstances of the attacks leave no doubt the drone operators knew the targets they fired upon were civilian: many of the drones have cameras that enable target sighting in real time, and video footage from these cameras has been widely disseminated online by the perpetrators, especially on social media site Telegram.⁴⁰ Russians involved in these operations boast on social media that their targets are ‘anyone or anything that moves’.⁴¹ The videos confirm eyewitness reports that civilians are ‘hunted’ and targeted deliberately, whether in vehicles – cars, buses, ambulances, fire

trucks, or humanitarian convoys – or just standing or walking outside.⁴² Civilians reported feeling terrorized, often staying indoors for fear of being attacked. Residents have been fleeing Kherson as a result.⁴³

But armed drones are no longer the preserve of State armed forces; dozens of armed groups are now using them in attacks. In the Sahel, for instance, the transnational armed group JNIM (Jama'a Nusra al-Islam wa al-Muslimin) has used drones with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to conduct attacks in both Burkina Faso and neighbouring States.⁴⁴ In March 2025, at least six attacks were reported.⁴⁵ As one Burkinabe civilian said: 'We used to see them coming from a distance.... But now, they come silently, like ghosts in the sky. We are powerless against such unseen threats.'⁴⁶

Ukraine has also become a development and testing ground for fully autonomous weapons systems. Autonomous systems bypass the risk of signals from operators being jammed. 'Most drones require a human pilot. But some new Ukrainian drones, once locked on a target, can use A.I. to chase and strike it – with no further human involvement.'⁴⁷ The consequences for civilians remain to be seen.

TEXT BOX 3: TERROR ATTACKS AND ACTS OF TERRORISM UNDER IHL

Terror attacks are those conducted during combat whose primary purpose is to spread terror among the civilian population.⁴⁸ This may arise from the use of certain weapons or from the targeted or indiscriminate bombing of populated areas. Using a drone to kill civilians in Kherson province and then posting the attack online is a clear example of a terror attack.

Acts of terrorism are perpetrated particularly against detainees, whether they be civilians or fighters 'hors de combat',⁴⁹ with a view to provoking extreme fear. Such acts are committed repeatedly and often in a publicly visible manner.⁵⁰ In Myanmar, State armed forces (the Tatmadaw) have continued to conduct a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. In one incident in 2024, the local population returned to one of the villages the Tatmadaw had entered and left. They discovered three bodies with dismembered limbs, and then in the centre of the village, a further three beheaded, burned, and dismembered bodies, with the heads of the victims placed on a fence.⁵¹ The army was overtly seeking to terrorize the population it considered sympathetic to rebel groups.

ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIAN OBJECTS

Civilian objects were widely – and in certain instances systematically – targeted during the reporting period. Objects attacked were homes, medical facilities, humanitarian aid supplies, detention centres, and transportation infrastructure, among others.

In Ukraine, Russian armed forces continued to fire explosive weapons into residential areas using missiles and glide bombs.⁵² Glide bombs started to be used against the city of Zaporizhzhia in the summer of 2024, killing many civilians, including eight who died after their apartment building was struck on 7 November 2024.⁵³ Residential areas in Ukrainian cities far from the front lines were also subjected to heavy aerial attacks. On 4 September 2024, a Russian airstrike on Lviv is reported to have killed seven people and damaged more than fifty civilian objects, including residential buildings, educational and medical facilities, and objects of cultural heritage. Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi reported

that four members of a single family were among the dead: a 43-year-old mother and her three daughters aged seven, eighteen, and twenty-one years. Only their father survived.⁵⁴

Satellite imagery published in early August 2025 by the UN Satellite Centre (UNOSAT) indicated that more than 192,000 structures in the Gaza Strip (seventy-eight per cent of the total), including an estimated 282,000 homes, had been destroyed or damaged by Israeli bombing since October 2023.⁵⁵ The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that, as of July 2025, more than eighty-six per cent of all cropland in Gaza had been damaged, with only 1.5 per cent accessible.⁵⁶ Eighty-three per cent of agricultural wells and seventy-one per cent of greenhouses in Gaza had been damaged.⁵⁷ As a result of repeated targeting of water facilities, wells, pipelines, desalination units, and sewage systems, eighty-nine per cent of Gaza's water and sanitation infrastructure had been destroyed or damaged, leaving more than nine in ten households short of water.⁵⁸

Under customary IHL, drinking water installations and supplies are objects 'indispensable to the survival' of the civilian population. They may not, in principle, be attacked unless they qualify as military objectives. If they do, attacks must respect the principle of proportionality and in no case may such attacks cause the starvation of the civilian population.⁵⁹ Starving civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival is a war crime under customary international law.⁶⁰

Attacks against Hospitals and Humanitarian Aid

Repeated attacks targeted hospitals in armed conflicts in 2024 and 2025. Sometimes the attacks have been on the basis of alleged military use, on other occasions the attack is a prelude to looting of equipment or terrorizing the staff so that they do not treat enemy fighters. All medical facilities are accorded special protection under IHL. Even if a facility is being used for military purposes such as storing weapons or soldiers, a warning must be given to end military use before any attack can be mounted.

Health clinics and hospitals have been repeatedly subjected to airstrikes in Myanmar. Control of territory by armed opposition groups – and the governance that has followed – has been a target of the Tatmadaw, seeking to undermine any perceived legitimacy of the rebel authorities.⁶¹ An especially large loss of life in a single attack occurred on the morning of 22 March 2025 against a clinic in Hnan Khar village. The attack in Magway region killed eleven civilians – a doctor and nurse (husband and wife), their five-year-old son, and eight patients. The clinic was in the middle of a village of nearly 1,000 households.⁶²

Israel's targeting of medical facilities in the Gaza Strip was often said to be due to the alleged presence of Hamas fighters or military equipment. By mid-August 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) had documented 772 Israeli attacks against healthcare facilities since the beginning of military operations in Gaza in October 2023. Of these, 115 occurred between 1 January and 10 August 2025, with the highest number recorded in May. The attacks killed 50 and injured 119.⁶³ Already by the end of July 2024, only 203 health facilities from a pre-war total of 572 were still functioning.⁶⁴

In Burkina Faso, medical facilities and activities were regularly attacked across five regions, but particularly in the Est and Sahel regions of the country.⁶⁵ Most of those incidents involved JNIM fighters burning down or firing upon health infrastructure. On 17 July 2024, in Djibo, a city close to the borders with Niger and Mali, the offices of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) were repeatedly shot at by an armed group operating in the area.⁶⁶ By October, the insecurity had prompted MSF to suspend its humanitarian activities in

Djibo.⁶⁷ This was particularly serious given that more than 420 health facilities had been forced to close due to poor security and lack of funds while another 309 were operating at minimal capacity, depriving up to four million people of access to healthcare.⁶⁸

Health infrastructure in Haiti, already fragile before the escalation of gang violence, suffered serious damage during the reporting period. By July 2025, only a third of health facilities in Port-au-Prince remained fully functional. The gangs had ‘burned, ransacked and destroyed’ hospitals and clinics, forcing many to close or suspend their operations, William O’Neill, the UN Designated Expert on Haiti told the Human Rights Council in Geneva.⁶⁹ Personnel were not spared from violence: gangs ‘murdered and kidnapped physicians, nurses and healthcare workers, including humanitarian workers’.⁷⁰

In Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province, health infrastructure has been severely affected by the armed conflict such that by July 2025, only one health centre in Macomia district was still functional, down from the seven that existed before the start of the conflict in 2017. The facility in Macomia town that did remain open was overwhelmed by the needs. Macomia was attacked by Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) in May 2024, forcing MSF and other humanitarian organizations to end or suspend activities. MSF was gradually able to resume operations only in April 2025.⁷¹

In the eastern DRC, multiple warring parties, including M23 and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), have blocked the delivery of aid and provoked renewed displacement of civilians. After M23’s capture of Goma in February 2025, fighters destroyed aid infrastructure in the city, which led to an outbreak of cholera. The destruction included more than US\$700,000-worth of water and sanitation infrastructure – pipelines, latrines, and tanks – forcing people to drink from contaminated streams and lakes.⁷²

MURDER, TORTURE, AND RAPE OF DETAINEES

Murder of Civilians

Civilians have been murdered in cold blood in almost every conflict reported on in 2024 and 2025. When an unarmed civilian is killed in cold blood by a soldier or fighter during an armed conflict (whether or not the victim is a detainee), this is murder – and a war crime.

In Haiti, the largest single massacre during the reporting period was on 6–7 December 2024 in Wharf Jérémie in the capital’s Cité Soleil neighbourhood. The so-called Wharf Jérémie gang, a member of the Viv Ansanm coalition, murdered somewhere between 184 and 207 people, with victims including women and children as well as older persons up to eighty years of age. The youngest of the victims was a three-month-old baby.⁷³ Gang members specifically targeted persons suspected of practicing Vodou and older persons who were accused of witchcraft. The bodies of many victims were mutilated and burned.⁷⁴ The leader of the Wharf Jérémie gang is said to have ordered the massacre to punish those he suspected of having used witchcraft to harm his child.⁷⁵

In Sudan, murder of captured fighters was prevalent, notably following torture. On 7 March 2025, a mass grave was found at an RSF base near the village of Garri after it was retaken by the SAF. There were at least 550 unmarked burial sites, many of which contained multiple bodies. The detainees had been tortured or starved to death.⁷⁶ In November 2025, after El Fasher fell to the Armed Forces after an eighteen-month siege, there were separate massacres of unarmed civilians, including hundreds of patients and medical staff in a hospital. Videos and witness accounts show trenches filled with bodies, with

RSF fighters hunting down civilians as they tried to flee. Blood pools in several locations around the city could be seen by satellites in spatial orbit.⁷⁷ At an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, Tom Fletcher, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, criticized Member States for letting the crisis reach this point. ‘I have found the limits of my ability and the UN’s authority’, he said, calling on States to ‘stop arming’ the RSF, though without naming the responsible party – the United Arab Emirates.⁷⁸

In Burkina Faso, a series of massacres of civilians occurred during the reporting period. In one incident on 25 August 2024, JNIM forces stormed an Evangelical Christian church in Sanaba during Sunday service. Witnesses reported how fighters tied the hands of men attending the service before cutting their throats.⁷⁹ A survivor of another attack recounts an exchange with a JNIM fighter before his brother was shot in his chest: ‘I’m here to avenge my father’s assassination. Your brother had denounced my father to the military, and the military killed him in your forge.’⁸⁰ The man survived because he was not on the list of people thought to have denounced JNIM fighters to the government.

In Colombia in 2024, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified seventy-two incidents of ‘massacres’ – defined locally as the summary execution of at least three persons – killing a total of 252 people.⁸¹ Human rights defenders, especially Indigenous and community leaders, as well as former FARC fighters continued to be the main victims of these war crimes, which were predominantly perpetrated by armed groups.⁸² According to data from the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ), between 1 July 2024 and 4 April 2025, 127 community leaders were killed across 89 municipalities in Colombia. Most of the victims were community leaders thirty-seven of whom were confirmed as killed, followed by twenty-two Indigenous leaders.⁸³ The killing of human rights defenders and Indigenous and community leaders serves to undermine community structures and erode civilian resistance, facilitating armed group consolidation of territorial and social control.⁸⁴

In Syria, of particular concern are the events that occurred between 7 and 9 March 2025 as part of the NIAC between the interim Syrian and the insurgent Pro-Former Government Forces (PFGF). Evidence demonstrates that armed forces of the new government and private individuals systematically killed Alawi civilians along Syria’s coastal regions. Investigative findings point to coordinated acts of violence at more than forty locations, killing up to 1,500 men, women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Witnesses described how individuals would first be identified as Alawi before being taken outside their houses to be shot and killed. Victims were referred to as ‘Alawi pigs’ that had to be killed.⁸⁵

Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Almost every armed conflict has involved widespread sexual and gender-based violence. In the DRC, the multiple armed conflicts have seen an epidemic of such violence, which has been perpetrated by almost all parties. Victims ranged in age from year-old infants to elder persons of seventy-five years.⁸⁶ Reports of summary executions of victims after rape persisted. While women and girls continued to form the vast majority of victims, men and boys were also affected.⁸⁷ Acts, which directly involved senior M23 members, formed part of a widespread and systematic attack against civilians – the hallmark of crimes against humanity.⁸⁸

In Colombia, the United Nations has reported that gender-based and sexual violence similarly forms part of armed groups’ strategies of social control – serving to deter civilians

from joining opposing groups and to punish women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ+ persons, who are seen as obstacles to the armed groups' ideology and control. They are also considered a potential source of illicit income through human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Indigenous persons, Afro-descendants, migrants, child recruits and, more broadly, confined populations are the primary victims of sexual violence.⁸⁹ More than one in three of total recorded cases are Indigenous and Afro-descendant persons.⁹⁰ Instances of rape, child marriage, and forced contraception committed against girls as young as 12 years of age who had been recruited into armed groups were reported in 2024.⁹¹

In Sudan, crimes continued in the days following the fall of El Fasher in October 2025 in and around the city. Women and girls who escaped the city described brutal sexual violence by RSF fighters. Survivors told of being gang-raped by RSF fighters with the abuse lasting for hours or even days in certain instances. The violence sometimes occurred in the presence of family members. 'RSF soldiers took turns on us', said a 20-year-old woman and mother of four who was kept captive for two days by fighters. 'Each time, a group would arrive in military vehicles, take us to a room, and rape us violently before leaving.' The woman was with a group of twelve other women and girls who were also gang-raped.⁹²

Treatment of Prisoners of War

Prisoners of war (POWs) are members of enemy armed forces who are captured or who surrender. Under customary international law, POWs cannot be put on trial for taking part in armed conflict or for any acts that comply with IHL (though they may be prosecuted for war crimes). The status of POW does not exist in a NIAC, although all detainees must still be treated humanely and hostage-taking is prohibited.

Ukrainian POWs have been systematically abused by Russian forces. OHCHR recorded credible allegations of the execution of 106 Ukrainian soldiers captured by Russian forces between late August 2024 and May 2025.⁹³ The most notorious incident was recorded on video and verified by multiple independent analysts. It involved ten captured Ukrainian soldiers being lined up and executed by automatic rifle fire by their Russian captors in September 2024 near Mykolaivka village in Donetsk.⁹⁴ These exactions coincided with express exhortations on Telegram by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to execute prisoners – 'They have no right to live. Execute, execute, execute.'⁹⁵ Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 'instructed frontline commanders to take no prisoners'.⁹⁶ Russian soldiers similarly received orders to take no prisoners.⁹⁷ Orders to 'deny quarter' – not accept the surrender of fighters – are war crimes. That is so, even if the order is not carried out.⁹⁸

Russian authorities continue to systematically torture Ukrainian POWs and other detainees with deaths from torture and deprivation of medical treatment regularly reported. Forms of torture include sexual violence, electric shocks, suffocation, strangulation, 'welcome beatings' (*priyomka*), dog attacks, and mock executions. Credible reports record rape, threats of rape and castration, electric shocks on genitals, and beatings while nude. Both male and female POWs are abused. Sexual violence against POWs is explicitly prohibited under IHL and is a war crime.⁹⁹

PROTECTION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Even when the abuse has ended, the sequelae may last a lifetime. Many are left with disabilities and the lack of protection afforded to them is a second form of victimization.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the second most widely ratified human rights treaty after the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with 193 States Parties at the time of writing.¹⁰⁰ Yet, persons with disabilities have been described as ‘the largest minority group in the world’,¹⁰¹ while at the same time being largely sidelined in international discourse on violence.¹⁰²

Indeed, the Convention explicitly protects persons with disabilities in armed conflicts,¹⁰³ but in the words of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, they are all too often the ‘forgotten victims’ in such situations.¹⁰⁴ For instance, UN Security Council resolutions addressing situations of armed conflict have barely alluded to persons with disabilities over the course of many years while the UN Department of Peace Operations’ 2019 policy on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping operations has a single reference to the need to plan for the needs of persons with disabilities.¹⁰⁵ This gap in protection needs urgently to be addressed.

In Sudan, for instance, the ongoing conflicts are causing a major increase in the number of persons with disabilities. Injuries from bullets, shelling, and bombings often lead to amputations and severe burns.¹⁰⁶ Horrific treatment inflicted on detainees, notably by the RSF, has resulted in permanent physical and psychological disabilities. After being freed from Garri military base in March 2025, some civilians were so traumatized they could not walk or speak, while others whose serious injuries had not been treated had permanent impairments. One detainee was beaten so frequently that he adopted a prolonged foetal position to protect himself and has since been unable to straighten his legs to walk.¹⁰⁷ Those exposed to famine while in utero, particularly during the first half of the pregnancy, are likely to have a shortened life expectancy.¹⁰⁸

As of December 2024, Ukraine’s Ministry of Health reported that at least 50,000 Ukrainians – soldiers and civilians had lost limbs – since the February 2022 invasion. That estimate had doubled by the end of 2025.¹⁰⁹ Many of the tens of thousands of amputations have been caused by landmines. Olga Rudnieva, head and co-founder of the ‘Superhumans Center’, said: ‘Some people have double, triple, quadruple amputations. All these people will need prosthetics, or some will use wheelchairs.’ Incoming fire is often so intense it may take hours (or even days) to get a wounded soldier to hospital. With more than one million people on the front line, Ms Rudnieva said that Ukraine will become ‘the country of people with disabilities’.¹¹⁰

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

What is described and summarized in this report is neither inevitable nor unavoidable. It is a choice we make as a species to murder, torture, rape, and abuse our own.

Every State in the world is duty bound to ‘respect and to ensure respect’ for international humanitarian law ‘in all circumstances’.¹¹¹ The United Nations and other international and regional organizations have similar obligations under customary law.

One of the clearest examples of the gap between rhetorical commitments to international humanitarian law and actual practice lies in the transfer of weapons. International law prohibits States from assisting any actor, State or non-State, in carrying out attacks against civilians. While the UN Arms Trade Treaty has been ratified by a large number of States, its obligations are too often sidelined in favour of political considerations. This must change. The continued export of arms to Israel, Russia, and others has contributed directly to

violations on the ground. At the same time, drones are increasingly reaching armed groups, where they risk being used indiscriminately or deliberately against civilian populations.

More civilians were killed in Ukraine in 2025 than in the two previous years, with a seventy per cent increase on the number of casualties suffered in 2023. Even after the cease-fire in Gaza in October 2025, a further 400 civilians died in the two months that followed.¹¹² By the end of 2025, victims since the beginning of the Gaza conflict included 18,592 children and about 12,400 women, while about 11,000 people remained missing. The reported number of wounded had risen to 171,195.¹¹³ Certain categories of weapons continue to pose a disproportionate risk to civilians when used in or near populated areas. States should give priority to limiting the use of inherently imprecise munitions, including gravity-delivered air weapons and inaccurate long-range artillery, and to restricting air operations to precision-guided systems. Even incremental shifts in this direction could significantly reduce civilian harm, but would depend on States agreeing to clarify and update existing rules of IHL.

Increasingly journalists are being targeted as part of a method of warfare. By late 2025, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) had reported a record number of journalists and media workers – 127 – were killed, the result particularly of the Gaza conflict.¹¹⁴ That too needs to end. Although the number of humanitarian workers killed in 2025 – 329 – was a drop on the previous year (385),¹¹⁵ this is still far too high.

Addressing widespread impunity for serious violations of international law should be treated as a policy priority. This includes ensuring sustained political and financial support for judicial institutions and accountability mechanisms at both domestic and international levels. Persistent under-resourcing, alongside political measures that constrain or undermine judicial independence, risks weakening the enforcement of IHL and eroding its deterrent effect.

In addition to the fundamental and urgent need for all conflict parties to respect IHL in good faith, and for all States to ensure respect for IHL by others, this report makes the following key recommendations:

1. Consonant with international treaty and customary law, weapons exports must never be permitted where there is a clear risk that the arms or ammunition to be delivered will be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of IHL.
2. New treaty rules are needed to prohibit the use against populated areas of air-dropped gravity ordnance or inaccurate long-range artillery, particularly when fired from multiple-barrelled rocket launchers. The use of armed drones and autonomous weapons systems that do not enhance the protection of civilians must similarly be prohibited.
3. Rampant impunity must be tackled by ensuring the systematic prosecution of war crimes, including through the consistent exercise of universal jurisdiction. Adequate financial, political, and technical support must be provided to the International Criminal Court and domestic criminal tribunals for their work in repressing war crimes.

This report is a record of both what has, and has not, been done in armed conflicts around the world. It is a grim, grisly snapshot of our inhumanity. No one in a position of authority, though, can say they did not know. A famous international lawyer, Hersch Lauterpacht, once remarked that IHL was at the vanishing point of international law. It is our actions – or inaction – that will determine in the years to come whether IHL comes to vanish altogether.

ENDNOTES

1 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary IHL Rule 158: 'Prosecution of War Crimes', <https://bit.ly/3LT34k>: 'States must investigate war crimes allegedly committed by their nationals or armed forces, or on their territory, and, if appropriate, prosecute the suspects. They must also investigate other war crimes over which they have jurisdiction and, if appropriate, prosecute the suspects.' A war crime is a serious violation of IHL that attracts individual criminal responsibility and for which the requisite intent or knowledge of the perpetrator, commander, aider, or abettor is established.

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3 See eg: Art 2, Geneva Convention IV.

4 ICTY, *Prosecutor v Tadić*, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction (Appeals Chamber) (Case No IT-94-1), 2 October 1995, <https://bit.ly/2YR8mzd>, para 70.

5 Art 1(2), Additional Protocol II. This rule, which is also found in the Rome Statute, is of a customary nature. Art 8(2)(d), Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; adopted at Rome, 17 July 1998; entered into force, 1 July 2002. See similarly ICTY, *Prosecutor v Limaj*, Judgment (Trial Chamber) (Case No IT-03-66-T), 30 November 2005, para 87; S. Vité, 'Typology of armed conflicts in international humanitarian law: legal concepts and actual situations', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol 91, No 873 (March 2009), 69–94, <https://bit.ly/4obdcA0>, p 76.

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11 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts; adopted at Geneva, 8 June 1977, entered into force, 7 December 1978 ('Additional Protocol II').

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1. AFGHANISTAN



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 to support the country's communist government. Mujahadeen fighters united against the Soviet Armed Forces and the Afghan Army it backed with the United States (US) providing weapons to the Mujahadeen. In 1984, Osama bin Laden travelled from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan to support the resistance against the Soviets and four years later, he formed al-Qaeda – 'the base' – to continue their jihad. The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, leaving a communist government under Mohammad Najibullah behind. In 1992, the Mujahadeen and other armed groups seized Kabul, ousting him from power.

Beginning in 1995, the newly formed Taliban – 'students' – quickly grew into an effective fighting force, gaining control of ninety per cent of the country within the coming four years. The al-Qaeda attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 led to a US invasion that ejected the Taliban from power and forced bin Laden to flee to Pakistan. But amid widespread government corruption, in the years that follow, and despite a huge NATO force, a Taliban renaissance led the group to gradually regain control of the country.¹ In August 2021, following a chaotic evacuation of Afghan and international personnel from the capital by United Kingdom (UK) and US forces and others, the Taliban once again became the government of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.² Since then, the nation has faced ongoing violence from a range of armed actors.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The period under review was marked by continued insecurity in several regions of Afghanistan, with civilians caught in violence between non-State armed groups and the Taliban Armed Forces. The violence primarily involved hostilities between the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP),³ but also with the National Resistance Front (NRF)⁴ and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF).⁵ In addition, sporadic clashes between the Pakistan Armed Forces and the Taliban have caused civilian casualties.

Taliban control over Afghanistan's territory remained largely unchallenged during the period under review.⁶ Under international law, given its effective control of territory and national institutions, the Taliban government continues to be the authority representing Afghanistan. Successful operations against IS-KP lessened the ability of that group to conduct deadly attacks, especially from the second quarter of 2025 onwards.⁷ IS-KP did not, however, cease all military operations, but continued to target both Taliban forces and civilians, especially those belonging to Shi'a and Hazara religious minorities along with foreign nationals.⁸ The NRF and the AFF continued to mount small-scale attacks on Taliban forces, primarily in the centre of the country.⁹ Armed activities by the two groups increased in 2024, before decreasing in the first half of 2025.¹⁰ Attempts to persuade China to provide support to the opposition to the Taliban in the second half of 2025 appeared to have failed.¹¹

The Humanitarian Situation

Reports by the United Nations (UN) and other actors documented the increasingly widespread and systematic violations of human rights in Afghanistan, particularly affecting women and girls.¹² Repressive measures against the media and journalists, including new rules on censorship and a ban on working for Afghan media in exile, combined with the

arbitrary arrest of journalists, have had a chilling effect on media reporting of facts related to the armed conflicts and hence also on alleged violations of international humanitarian law (IHL).¹³

The Afghan economy remains in a fragile state, with high rates of poverty and limited access to essential goods and services. Extreme weather events, especially droughts and floods, along with cuts in humanitarian aid, contribute to the dire economic situation.¹⁴ Funding cuts have caused many health centres to close and interrupted essential humanitarian assistance, including services to treat malnutrition in children and to ensure the provision of water.¹⁵

Mass returns of Afghan refugees from neighbouring Pakistan pose further challenges.¹⁶ In September 2025, the UN Secretary-General said: ‘More than 2.1 million Afghans have returned in the first six months of 2025, alone, placing additional strain on humanitarian response and available resources’.¹⁷ He estimated that 22.9 million people from a population of 46 million needed humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ In June 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) assessed that although the situation was slowly improving, more than twelve million people were still facing high acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) in March and April 2025, nearly two million of whom were in a situation of emergency (IPC Phase 4).¹⁹ The situation was expected to deteriorate further during the winter lean season in November 2025 to March 2026. An estimated 17.4 million people (more than one in three of the population) were projected to face IPC Phase 3 or above, with 4.7 million in emergency Phase 4.²⁰

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There were three non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in Afghanistan throughout the review period:

- Afghanistan *v* Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP)
- Afghanistan *v* National Resistance Front (NRF)
- Afghanistan *v* Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF).²¹

The three conflicts are regulated by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL. Afghanistan is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,²² but none of the NIACs taking place in the country met the criteria for its application as the relevant non-State armed groups did not exercise a level of territorial control that would enable them to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol. Relevant provisions of the Additional Protocol do, though, remain applicable to all those detained in connection with the earlier armed conflict that opposed the Taliban and the security forces of the erstwhile Islamic Republic of Afghanistan before the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.²³

In addition to the three NIACs, a low-intensity international armed conflict (IAC) persisted between Afghanistan and Pakistan during the reporting period. This conflict is regulated by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL. Additional Protocol I of 1977 is not applicable because Pakistan is not a party to it. Peace talks between the two States broke down in November 2025, although a ceasefire agreed upon in October in Doha was holding to a degree at the time of writing.²⁴

Afghanistan is a party to the International Criminal Court, having acceded to the Rome Statute in 2003.²⁵ All events covered in this report are therefore potentially within

the material jurisdiction of the Court. In July 2025, as described below, the leader of the Taliban and another senior official were indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity based on the Taliban treatment of women and girls.²⁶

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review continued to see serious violations of the protection afforded by IHL to civilians and civilian infrastructure across the territory of Afghanistan, with civilians continuing to be attacked on a regular basis. Indiscriminate and deliberate attacks by IS-KP – many targeting ethnic and religious communities – may amount to both war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Taliban have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and executed suspected opposition supporters, former Afghan security personnel, journalists, and children, in violation of IHL.

Civilians also suffered from restricted humanitarian access and reduced health-care due to discriminatory Taliban policies. Despite the proclamation of a general amnesty in 2021, repression continues, along with a lack of due process for former security officials who are being investigated or charged with criminal offences.

The context of the many IHL violations that continue to occur is one of widespread impunity and lack of accountability. While evidence is mounting, thus far, there has been little accountability.²⁷ On 6 October 2025, the UN Human Rights Council established an independent investigative mechanism for Afghanistan to ‘collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of international crimes and the most serious violations of international law ... in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, in accordance with international law standards, in national, regional or international courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes’.²⁸

In February and August 2025, reviving earlier practice,²⁹ the US government cited past investigations by the ICC into alleged US war crimes as one of the reasons for imposing sanctions on certain ICC officials.³⁰ Sanctioned individuals include all the judges currently serving at the ICC who had formed part of the Appeals Chamber in 2020. That chamber had authorized the Office of the Prosecutor to initiate investigations into alleged war crimes committed in Afghanistan since 2003, including by US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials and US military personnel.³¹

In Australia, measures taken by the government also fell short of the duties under international law to investigate and prosecute those responsible for war crimes³² and to make full reparation for the loss or injury caused.³³ In 2020, a military inquiry had concluded that thirty-nine Afghan civilians had been murdered – in some cases, after being tortured – by Australian soldiers deployed in the framework of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).³⁴ Although the Australian government acknowledged its duty to compensate the families of the victims, it has described this as an *ex gratia* payment.³⁵ More than a decade has already passed since some of the murders and, by February 2025, no valid claim had been filed before the competent body.³⁶ To this day, only one person has been charged with war crimes in relation to the facts unveiled by the 2020 report.³⁷

In the United Kingdom, no substantial progress was made to prosecute the perpetrators of alleged war crimes in Afghanistan.³⁸ New allegations of earlier British war crimes, including the murder of a child, surfaced in May 2025 in a BBC documentary.³⁹ The

Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan, ongoing at the time of writing, is examining allegations the Special Air Service (SAS) murdered detainees and unarmed civilians, including children, during operations. At the beginning of December 2025, a whistleblower claimed that two former heads of UK Special Forces had suppressed evidence of possible war crimes by SAS officers.⁴⁰

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.⁴¹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives⁴² and, as such, are protected against attack.⁴³ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁴⁴

Attacks directed against civilian objects

Due to the relatively limited weaponry available to armed opposition groups, the effects of their attacks generally fell primarily on civilians rather than on buildings. Attacks by the Pakistan armed forces have, however, caused damage to civilian objects in Afghanistan and raised questions as to their compliance with IHL. The attacks resulted in damage to homes and, seemingly, a religious building. On 1 February 2025, an airstrike hit a mosque in Paktika province, killing three civilians. Pakistan denied having conducted any airstrike at that location.⁴⁵ It appears, however, that only Pakistani manned aircraft and drones were observed overflying Afghanistan during the reporting period.⁴⁶ On 28 March 2025, a Pakistan airstrike that hit a home is said to have killed seven civilians, five of whom were children.⁴⁷

Civilians under Attack

Parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁴⁸ Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities. In case of doubt, persons should be considered civilians.⁴⁹ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁵⁰ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful military objectives. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian objects.⁵¹

Hostilities in Afghanistan killed or injured civilians by means of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombings, and as a result of cross-border firing of mortar shells and airstrikes (including drone strikes), as well as small arms fire. Figures advanced by the United Nations range from a few dozen casualties (deaths and injuries) to just under one hundred for each three-month period on which the UN Secretary-General reports to the UN Security Council.⁵² Not all attacks were claimed by, or could otherwise be attributed to, a specific armed actor, including those party to one of the four ongoing armed conflicts.

Direct attacks against civilians, as well as acts of violence aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population, are strictly prohibited under IHL, and can constitute war crimes.⁵³ Where such acts form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against

any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack, they may also constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law.⁵⁴

Attacks directed against civilians

IS-KP has claimed several attacks that deliberately targeted civilians.⁵⁵ In some cases, attacks took the form of shootings. For instance, on 12 September 2024, fourteen Hazara Shi'a civilians were killed and four others wounded by IS-KP gunmen in central Afghanistan. The victims, all Hazara Shi'a, were travelling back from a pilgrimage in Kerbala.⁵⁶ On 21 November 2024, eleven civilians were murdered by gunfire in the Sayed Padshah Sufi shrine in Baghlan.⁵⁷ On 21 January 2025, a Chinese national working for a mining company was ambushed and killed by IS-KP fighters along with a member of Taliban security forces in Khwaja Baha ud Din district of Takhar province.⁵⁸

In other cases, explosive devices were used to target groups of civilians.⁵⁹ On 2 September 2024, a member of IS-KP detonated his explosive vest targeting the Taliban prosecution services, killing six civilian men and one woman and wounding at least twenty-nine other civilians.⁶⁰ Al Jazeera reported that an IS-KP social media post explained that: 'The bomber waited until government employees finished their shifts and then detonated the explosive in the middle of a crowd'.⁶¹ On 1 December 2024, another suicide bombing killed four, including the Taliban Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, Khalil Ur-Rahman Haqqani, and wounded four others in a mosque within the headquarters of the ministry in Kabul.⁶² On 13 February 2025, a suicide bomber detonated his explosive vest inside the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, killing three men and wounding ten others.⁶³

Such direct attacks against civilians are serious violations of IHL and war crimes.⁶⁴ The nature of these attacks also strongly suggests an intention to spread terror among the civilian population.⁶⁵ The regularity of the attacks may in the future meet the threshold for this customary law war crime. In addition, to the extent that the attacks are directed at members of ethnic and/or religious communities on ethnic, cultural, or religious grounds, they may also constitute the crime against humanity of persecution under the Rome Statute of the ICC and customary law. On the occasion of the issuance of arrest warrants against Haibatullah Akhundzada (the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) and Abdul Hakim Haqqani (the Chief Justice), the ICC Prosecutor commented that the 'investigation in the Situation in Afghanistan continues, focusing on alleged crimes by individual members of the Taliban and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province'.⁶⁶

Potentially indiscriminate attacks by Afghanistan, IS-KP, and Pakistan

The principle of distinction obligates parties to any armed conflict to distinguish between members of armed forces and civilians. In general, and unless they are incorporated into the State's armed forces or participate directly in hostilities, the police benefit from a presumption of protection against attacks as civilians.⁶⁷ In the current Afghan context, however, it appears that at least some police forces – such as the forces of the government's General Directorate of Intelligence – are taking part in armed operations against opposition armed groups.⁶⁸ As a consequence, attacks against these police forces do not necessarily violate the IHL principle of distinction.

Although, in some cases, IS-KP appears to have directed attacks against Taliban security forces, including the police, it often used means of warfare that could not distinguish between combatants and civilians. For instance, on 22 August 2024, IS-KP attacked

the vehicle of the Chief of Police of Nuristan province in the Dara Noor district of Nangarhar with an IED. It is not known if he was directly participating in hostilities at the time. In any event, the attack killed five boys and one accompanying adult and wounded four other civilians.⁶⁹ Such attacks may violate the customary law prohibition of indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.⁷⁰

Armed clashes between Pakistani and Taliban armed forces also caused civilian casualties, with some cases indicating that insufficient concern was directed to protecting civilians.⁷¹ The firing of mortar rounds by Pakistani armed forces, due to the limited accuracy of the weapons, may amount to an indiscriminate attack in certain circumstances.⁷² Their use has resulted in civilian casualties, such as, for instance, on 1 July 2024, in Kunar province, when mortar rounds killed one woman and wounded a man and a boy – all believed to be civilians.⁷³

In communications with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Pakistan tended to deflect responsibility for civilian casualties resulting from their operations and ascribe it to the Taliban regime's 'provocations'.⁷⁴ For instance, between 3 and 5 March 2025, Taliban and Pakistani forces exchanged fire at the Torkham border crossing.⁷⁵ On 5 March 2025, three journalists on assignment for Afghan media agencies were wounded when Pakistani forces fired mortar rounds across the border.⁷⁶ The Embassy of Pakistan in Afghanistan told UNAMA that 'in the early hours of 3 March 2025, Afghan forces resorted to unprovoked and indiscriminate firing across the border at Torkham (Khyber District), with heavy weapons. The firing continued until 5 March 2025, resulting in several casualties on the Pakistan side, including those of civilians, because of which Pakistani forces were compelled to respond'.⁷⁷

Airstrikes by Pakistan also caused significant numbers of civilian casualties. For instance, the three victims of an airstrike on 1 February 2025 against a mosque in Paktika province were two vaccinators and a local civilian also involved in a polio vaccination campaign in the region.⁷⁸ On 24 December 2024, airstrikes in Paktika province resulted in at least forty-five civilians killed (thirty children, eight women, and seven men) and eight wounded (six children and two women).⁷⁹ The strikes were apparently aimed at Pakistani Taliban (TTP) centres in Afghanistan and, according to media in Pakistan, killed several TTP militants and destroyed four operational centres belonging to the group.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the foreseeable extent of civilian harm appears difficult to reconcile with the customary IHL rule of proportionality in attack.

Attacks against humanitarian workers

Under IHL, personnel engaged in the delivery of humanitarian aid must not be attacked and must be protected.⁸¹ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.⁸² On 26 December 2024, an earlier Taliban order from 2023 that banned women from working for domestic and international NGOs or the United Nations, was reiterated, severely impeding delivery of humanitarian assistance.⁸³ The UN Human Rights Council strongly condemned the measure.⁸⁴ The UN Security Council reiterated that 'the full, rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access consistent with international humanitarian law and other applicable international legal obligations for all humanitarian personnel, including women and international and national non-governmental organizations, is essential'.⁸⁵

Attacks against humanitarian workers, including acts of violence, as well as arbitrary detention and abductions of their dependents, occurred often in the reporting period. The Taliban were the primary authors.⁸⁶ On 2 February 2025, for example, a member

of the Taliban security forces fired shots at the UN compound's observation post in Kabul, wounding a security guard.⁸⁷ In May 2025, dozens of female national UN staff received death threats from unidentified individuals.⁸⁸

Use of landmines

Throughout the reporting period, landmines continued to pose a persistent threat to civilians in Afghanistan. When deployed in populated areas or places frequented by civilians, they may have indiscriminate effects.⁸⁹ If they are not directed at specific military objectives, this renders their use a violation of the principle of distinction.

Afghanistan is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits the Taliban from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as a munition that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind non-State armed groups directly under international law. Nevertheless, these groups are subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians.

Moreover, Afghanistan is also party to Amended Protocol II of 1996 to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (Amended Protocol II), which binds all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁹⁰ Although the Protocol does not ban all use of anti-personnel mines, it specifically prohibits their indiscriminate use and requires each party to an armed conflict to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from their effects.⁹¹ Similarly, customary law mandates that 'when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects'.⁹² While not inherently indiscriminate, anti-personnel mines, including the improvised devices used by non-State armed groups in Afghanistan, all too often kill or seriously injure civilians.

Afghanistan is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory as soon as possible.⁹³ The takeover of Afghanistan and the subsequent sanctions imposed on the Taliban have had a significant negative impact on clearance rates. Clearance over the last five years totals almost one hundred square kilometres but annual clearance output – at least according to official figures – has halved since 2021. At these lower rates, fulfilling the clearance obligations in the Convention will likely require another fifteen years at least. Mine action has, however, managed so far to escape some of the most draconian Taliban policies on the employment of women.⁹⁴

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Customary and treaty IHL provide fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture or inhuman treatment, collective punishments, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials. Specific protection is afforded to civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁹⁵

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, non-arbitrary, and carried out with appropriate legal safeguards.⁹⁶ Persons deprived of liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.⁹⁷ Detaining authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care, are held in humane conditions, and are protected from violence or reprisals.⁹⁸

Murder of civilians and persons hors de combat

The Taliban authorities have detained, tortured, and killed many residents suspected of providing support to armed opposition groups since they took control in 2021, including during the reporting period.⁹⁹ For instance, on 16 May 2025, following an NRF-claimed attack at a Taliban military outpost in a village in the Panjshir province, which is said to have caused seventeen casualties among its forces, the Taliban detained twenty residents, triggering fears of recourse to collective punishment.¹⁰⁰ In some cases, it appears that residents were targeted by the Taliban 'because their geographical origin or religion is unjustly conflated with allegiance to armed groups that are in conflict with the Taliban'.¹⁰¹

In another case, in June and early July 2025, members of the NRF were detained in Abdullah Khel district, Panjshir province, and summarily executed, after having been tortured for several days.¹⁰² The families of the deceased were prevented from collecting their bodies.¹⁰³ These acts constitute the war crimes of murder, torture, and inhumane treatment, as well potential violations of the IHL duties (that formally apply in IACs) facilitate the return of the remains of the deceased upon request of their next of kin¹⁰⁴ and to dispose of bodies in a respectful manner.¹⁰⁵

Treatment of members of former Afghan Defence and Security Forces

Numerous reports indicate that former Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and other former security officials have been arbitrarily arrested, held in detention, tortured or subjected to other ill-treatment, and, in some cases, summarily executed, because of their affiliation with the former government.¹⁰⁶ For instance, between 1 July and 30 September 2024, UNAMA documented at least twenty-four instances of arbitrary arrest and detention; ten instances of torture and ill-treatment; and the murder of at least five former ANDSF members.¹⁰⁷

Additional Protocol II of 1977 was applicable to the NIAC that opposed the Taliban to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from the time Afghanistan became a State Party in 2009.¹⁰⁸ Even though the NIAC that had opposed the (now defunct) Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban has ended, former ANDSF members or other former officials of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan who are deprived of liberty for reasons related to the conflict remain protected by Articles 5 and 6 of the Protocol until their final release, even if their deprivation of liberty started after the end of the NIAC.¹⁰⁹ This also encompasses fundamental guarantees under Article 4 of the Protocol, which are referred to in Article 5.

Fair-trial rights

Repressive measures against journalists have also affected those covering events related to the ongoing armed conflicts. On 5 October 2024, the General Intelligence Directorate detained Afghan News Agency's journalist Mahdi Ansary. He was subsequently sentenced by a court in Kabul to eighteen months in prison for 'propaganda' against the Taliban authorities.¹¹⁰

Although the specific grounds for his arrest and conviction remain unclear, it has been reported that the journalist had been involved in investigative work on a suicide bombing claimed by IS-KP against members of the Hazara community in October 2023, and had published a commemorative message on his social media profile days before his arrest.¹¹¹ His detention and subsequent conviction are sufficiently connected with the armed conflicts to be regulated by IHL. Yet, his lawyer was not allowed to be present during his trial,¹¹² in breach of the fair-trial guarantees due to him under Common Article 3

of the Geneva Conventions and customary IHL.¹¹³ Reportedly, he was also subjected to ill-treatment during detention, including prolonged solitary confinement.¹¹⁴

The conviction of former officials of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for acts that were lawfully committed under the laws in force in Afghanistan at the time would breach the principle of legality as reflected in Article 6(2)(c) of Additional Protocol II.¹¹⁵

Abductions and hostage-taking

Where an abduction seeks to compel the adverse party in an armed conflict to do or to abstain from any act, this violates the IHL prohibition of hostage-taking.¹¹⁶ Even where the requisite intent cannot be demonstrated, these acts would amount to arbitrary deprivation of liberty and cruel or inhuman treatment.¹¹⁷ In many cases, the fate and whereabouts of detainees in Afghanistan have been concealed by the detaining party, which violates the IHL prohibition on enforced disappearance¹¹⁸ and the obligation to register persons deprived of their liberty in NIAC.¹¹⁹

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and forbid their participation in combat.¹²⁰ Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees such as access to food, medical care, and education. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.¹²¹

During the reporting period, children continued to be especially affected by the ongoing hostilities in Afghanistan. Incidents of their recruitment and use, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against them, and their abduction have all been documented. The United Nations verified 1,647 grave violations against 559 children (434 boys, 125 girls) having occurred in 2024. The killing (180) and maiming (363) of 543 children (422 boys, 121 girls) was mainly attributed to unidentified perpetrators (454), although cross-border shelling and airstrikes by the Pakistani armed forces accounted for fifty victims and acts by the Taliban for twenty-two. IS-KP was considered responsible for ten victims and the NRF for seven.¹²² Recruitment and use of eleven boys by the Taliban was also verified, four of whom were used in combat.¹²³

The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council reported that: 'In North Afghanistan and areas close to the Pakistani borders, ISIL-K indoctrinated children in madrassas, establishing a suicide training course for minors aged approximately 14 years old.'¹²⁴ Subjecting children to such training manifestly violates the duty under customary IHL on all parties to armed conflict to afford special respect and protection to children affected by armed conflict.¹²⁵

Sexual and gender-based violence

Although not directly related to the ongoing armed conflicts, discriminatory measures against women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ people not only remained in force in Afghanistan but were amplified with the promulgation on 21 August 2024 of a 'Law on the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice'. The law codifies a set of regulations and policies which

the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan has described as an ‘institutionalized system of oppression, discrimination and control’.¹²⁶ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women termed the systematic persecution in Afghanistan ‘gender apartheid’.¹²⁷

On 8 July 2025, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Chief Justice for the crime against humanity of persecution on gender grounds against ‘girls, women and other persons non-conforming with the Taliban’s policy on gender, gender identity or expression’ and on political grounds against persons ‘perceived as “allies of girls and women”’.¹²⁸

In September 2025, Heather Barr, Associate Director of the Women’s Rights Division at Human Rights Watch, wrote in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs that:

The situation in Afghanistan is the most serious women’s rights crisis in the world. An inadequate international response poses grave dangers to the rights of women and girls everywhere. It signals to other armed groups and governments that wholesale attacks on women’s rights will meet little resistance by the international community. It accepts a drastic lowering of the bar on what level of dehumanization of women and girls can be tolerated and even seen as normal.¹²⁹

Figure 1.1: UN Map of Afghanistan © United Nations



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2. BURKINA FASO



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Burkina Faso has been affected since 2016 by insecurity stemming from neighbouring Mali. Thirty people were killed in terrorist attacks in the capital, Ouagadougou, signalling the start of an Islamist insurgency in northern and eastern Burkina Faso by jihadist groups. The installation of armed groups across its territory led to the outbreak of armed conflicts against the authorities beginning in 2019. Two military coups in 2022 led to the nation's suspension from the African Union and its subsequent withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2025. In 2023, the Burkinabe military had expelled the small French military force stationed in the country, accompanied by the announcement that they would develop links with Russia instead.¹

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The period under review was characterized by a pervasive level of insecurity in Burkina Faso, with civilians trapped in a cycle of violence between non-State armed groups and State actors. The non-State armed groups that are party to the two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in the country – Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) – intensified their assaults, causing significant civilian as well as military casualties. These included a number of massacres. In August 2024, for example, a JNIM offensive in the town of Barsalogho against the Burkina Faso Armed Forces (FABF) and the self-defence militia, the Volunteers for Defence of the Homeland (VDPs),² involved the mass killing of at least 100 civilians.³

In March 2025, State security forces fighting alongside VDP members were similarly implicated in massacres of civilians, particularly of ethnic Fulani (also known as Peul), in the town of Solenzo and neighbouring areas in Banwa province.⁴ Attacks appear to follow a similar pattern, with soldiers and VDPs entering Fulani villages after clashes with armed groups, accusing inhabitants of complicity, rounding up the men and then summarily executing them en masse. The Burkina Faso Army is said to have 'led and participated in the massacre of more than 130, possibly many more, ethnic Fulani civilians by pro-government militias' in the western Boucle du Mouhoun region.⁵ A Fulani herder who fled the village of Pinpissi in Banwa province on 10 March 2025 said that, about two weeks before he left his village, 'we noticed that the VDPs were holding many meetings', and that he had been told that the VDPs 'wanted to kill all Fulani, that for them ending terrorism means killing all Fulani people.'⁶ Incidents of civilian harm perpetrated by State actors are exploited by non-State armed groups to justify additional attacks on the military and fuelling a cycle of retaliatory violence.

The Humanitarian Situation

Parallel to the worsening violence, civil rights and freedoms continued to contract during the reporting period. Press freedom was eroded in successive media bans in 2024, including of the BBC and Voice of America in April, and of TV5 Monde in June.⁷ Freedom of expression was further curtailed through arbitrary arrest and widespread intimidation by State organs and agents of journalists, lawyers, and activists. The disbanding of the Association of Journalists of Burkina Faso and increased harassment of the media have disempowered civil society and provoked a widespread climate of fear.⁸

The humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso is serious and protracted. By the middle of 2025, up to five million people were internally displaced, while almost 42,000 additional refugees, primarily from Mali, had sought asylum in the country.⁹ Non-State armed groups, which effectively control at least forty per cent of national territory, routinely restrict humanitarian access and besiege or otherwise isolate nearly two million people.¹⁰ Frequent attacks on medical personnel and facilities in the Est and Sahel regions have compelled humanitarian organizations to cease operating on a meaningful basis.¹¹ These constraints, combined with spiralling inflation and declining agricultural production, have precipitated acute food insecurity in many regions, leaving millions at risk of starvation.¹² In 2024, and for the second year running, Burkina Faso headed the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s list of the world's most neglected displacement crises.¹³

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

During the reporting period, two NIACs continued on the territory of Burkina Faso:

- Burkina Faso (supported, in certain instances, by VDP units) *v* JNIM.
- Burkina Faso *v* Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP).¹⁴

Burkina Faso's armed forces are supported by multiple groups of VDPs. These community self-defence militia are composed of volunteers who are paid to serve the defence and security interests of their village or locality.¹⁵ Contracted by the State for this purpose, they report to the Ministry of Defence.¹⁶ When used in an offensive role, they are a militia belonging to the State of Burkina Faso and are bound by international humanitarian law (IHL).¹⁷ Indeed the 2020 legislation governing the VDP explicitly requires that they comply with applicable IHL.¹⁸ In other instances, such as when they engage purely in self-defence or defence of their communities against attacks, their members remain civilians, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.¹⁹ Everyone retains the individual right of self-defence and defence of others against unlawful violence, and such conduct does not make them a party to armed conflict.

Both armed conflicts are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL. Burkina Faso is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977. The NIACs between Burkina Faso and JNIM and between Burkina Faso and the ISSP continue to meet the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II – specifically that they exercise a level of territorial control that would enable them to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol – and this treaty is also directly applicable.

Burkina Faso is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, having adhered in 2004.²⁰ On 22 September 2025, the military junta running the country announced that Burkina Faso was withdrawing from the Court (along with Mali and Niger).²¹ This declaration was, however, without legal effect as, at the time of writing, it had not made a formal notification to the depositary of the Statute, the UN Secretary-General. If and when it does so, the withdrawal will take effect one year after such notification. All events covered in this report therefore potentially fall within the material jurisdiction of the Court, although Burkina Faso was not a situation under preliminary examination by the Office of the Prosecutor.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review saw continued violations across the territory of Burkina Faso of the protection to be afforded to civilians and civilian infrastructure under IHL. The conduct of hostilities in populated areas or in the vicinity of civilian infrastructure led to significant destruction of civilian objects, including medical units and schools.²² Civilians continued to be subject to regular attacks from armed State and non-State actors alike. Particular concerns included indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), sieges mounted by non-State armed groups that disproportionately affected civilians, and unlawful forced displacement. The presence of IEDs significantly undermined the delivery of aid to people living in besieged areas.²³

Allegations persisted of enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and ill-treatment in detention, in particular by governmental forces, as a means to silence individuals expressing their concern about the political and economic situation in the country. Looting and destruction of property were also frequently reported. The protection of children continued to be a major challenge with regular recruitment by armed groups, while more than 5,000 schools remain closed due to the violence, impacting on the right to education.²⁴ Women and other at-risk groups faced sexual and physical abuse and discrimination. The humanitarian situation is exacerbated by greatly weakened healthcare services nationwide.²⁵

Overall, scant progress – or even effort – has been made by the authorities to investigate conflict-related atrocities.²⁶ As a consequence, public trust in the rule of law has been undermined and the cycle of impunity perpetuated. Burkina Faso's announced intent to withdraw from the International Criminal Court, although not formalized at the time of writing, further undermines the prospects for improvement.²⁷

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.²⁸ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives³⁰ and, as such, are protected against attack. Certain civilian objects are afforded specific protection due to their importance to the civilian population or their particular vulnerability to destruction and damage during times of armed conflict.

Evidence indicates that, in its efforts to extend its control across the country, JNIM in particular has devastated civilian infrastructure, frequently firing on or burning down homes, shops, and schools.³¹ The continued attacks on schools by both the VDP and non-State armed groups have caused many to close.³²

Attacks on medical units and transports

Under IHL, medical units and transports must not be attacked and must be protected.³³ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.³⁴ Yet, during the reporting period, medical facilities and activities were regularly attacked across five regions, but particularly in the Est and Sahel regions of the country.³⁵ Most of the incidents involved JNIM fighters burning down or firing upon health infrastructure. On 17 July 2024, in Djibo, a city close to the borders of Burkina Faso with Niger and Mali, the offices of Médecins Sans

Frontières (MSF) were repeatedly shot at by an armed group.³⁶ The same day, a health entity was partially burned down and a medical centre was vandalized.³⁷

Due to the continued insecurity of its facilities and personnel in the region, MSF decided in October 2024 to temporarily suspend its humanitarian activities in Djibo.³⁸ This is particularly concerning in an overall context where more than 420 health facilities had to close due to security and financial concerns, while another 309 are operating at minimal capacity, depriving up to four million people of access to healthcare.³⁹ On 11 May 2025, during another major attack on Djibo, JNIM fighters again set fire to medical facilities and pharmacies.⁴⁰

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁴¹ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁴² In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁴³ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must be proportionate,⁴⁴ and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or, in any event, to minimize incidental civilian deaths and injuries (and damage to civilian objects).⁴⁵

Attacks directed against civilians

During the reporting period, civilians in Burkina Faso have been regularly killed or injured in the ongoing hostilities between State forces and JNIM and the ISSP. Data indicate that the number of civilian deaths has consistently increased over the past few years, with the greatest civilian harm occurring in the NIAC between Burkina Faso and JNIM.⁴⁶ Many incidents involved the targeting of civilians by the various parties to the two armed conflicts. Deliberate attacks on civilians are a serious violation of IHL and may constitute war crimes.⁴⁷

Evidence demonstrates that Burkina Faso's armed forces and associated VDP fighters have pursued counterterrorism operations that have themselves been characterized by indiscriminate violence affecting civilians.⁴⁸ Operations have also involved widespread reprisals against communities suspected of having collaborated with non-State armed groups. Fulani have been repeatedly singled out in those attacks, with multiple, independent reports corroborating the pattern of civilian targeting.⁴⁹

Similar patterns of attacks on civilians saw JNIM assailing other communities it believed were collaborating with government forces, although officially the group claims to avoid targeting civilians.⁵⁰ In August 2025, JNIM's Sharia Committee in Burkina Faso claimed to Human Rights Watch that 'we have never targeted the Tamboura people. Our action is not based on any ethnic or racial considerations, but exclusively on the necessity to respond to those who have declared war on us'.⁵¹ These claims are, however, contradicted by the evidence, with a series of incidents indicating that civilians have been deliberately targeted. JNIM reportedly killed at least 133 people in the town of Barsalogo in August 2024 after the security forces had forced community members to dig a trench around the town.⁵² Sources report that JNIM labelled those they killed as members of the 'Burkinabe military and affiliated militias'.⁵³ Similar incidents continued to be reported in 2025. In April, JNIM killed 100 civilians in a rural commune in the west of the country after residents signed to join the VDP.⁵⁴

The scale and public nature of reprisals against civilians suspected of collaborating with the ‘enemy’ appear to indicate an intent to terrorize civilians. Acts of violence whose primary purpose is to spread terror among the civilian population are serious violations of IHL and possible war crimes.⁵⁵

Attacks against medical personnel

Under IHL, medical personnel must not be attacked and must be protected.⁵⁶ Serious violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.⁵⁷ Attacks on medical personnel were reported on multiple occasions in the context of the NIAC between Burkina Faso and JNIM during the reporting period. In 2024, at least five medical personnel were murdered in four incidents in the regions of Boucle du Mouhoun, Est, and the Sahel. Sources indicate that certain killings were conducted by State forces or the VPD for alleged collaboration with JNIM, while others involved JNIM fighters as perpetrators, such as a pharmacist kidnapped and killed by the group in the course of an attack on a public bus in the province of Gnagna in 2024.⁵⁸

These attacks must be viewed within the broader context of insecurity facing medical personnel and other humanitarian aid workers in Burkina Faso. Evidence attests to a growing, negative sentiment towards medical professionals and aid workers. The spreading of false information on social media has contributed to this, with comments describing doctors as ‘terrorist accomplices’⁵⁹ or in relation to MSF, the accusation that the NGO ‘buy[s] weapons to give to criminal terrorist groups’⁶⁰ or that they use ‘taxpayers’ money to buy equipment that ends up with terrorists’.⁶¹

Use of improvised explosive devices

Throughout the reporting period, IEDs continued to pose a grave and persistent threat to civilians across Burkina Faso. In 2024, 185 IED incidents were reported in which more than 180 civilians were killed, including many women and children.⁶² In the first quarter of 2025 alone, 127 detonations were recorded, indicating a deteriorating trend. IEDs are said to cause more civilian than military victims.⁶³

Indeed, when deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, IEDs are likely to have indiscriminate effects.⁶⁴ If they are not directed at specific military objectives, this violates the principle of distinction. Where measures are not taken to limit their impact on civilians, this may also violate the principles of proportionality and precautions in attack.⁶⁵ IEDs are deployed by the groups involved in the armed conflicts in Burkina Faso. Most notably, JNIM appears to often place devices along supply routes and in proximity to populated areas.⁶⁶

The types of IED deployed by armed groups range from victim-activated devices amounting to anti-personnel mines (or improvised anti-vehicle mines) to command-detonated and time-delay devices.⁶⁷ JNIM has begun using drones IEDs to carry out attacks in both Burkina Faso and neighbouring States.⁶⁸ In March 2025, at least six such attacks were reported in Burkina Faso.⁶⁹ As one Burkinabe civilian noted: ‘We used to see them coming from a distance.... But now, they come silently, like ghosts in the sky. We are powerless against such unseen threats.’⁷⁰

Burkina Faso is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its forces from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as an explosive munition placed under, on, or near the ground that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind non-State armed groups directly under

international law, but they remain subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take feasible precautions to protect civilians. The effects of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature employed by non-State armed groups, are often indiscriminate.

Moreover, Burkina Faso is also party to Amended Protocol II of 1996 to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which binds all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁷¹ Although the Protocol does not ban all use of anti-personnel mines, it specifically prohibits their indiscriminate use and requires each party to an armed conflict to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from their effects.⁷² Similarly, customary law mandates that ‘when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects’.⁷³

Burkina Faso is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory as soon as possible, irrespective of who has used them.⁷⁴ On 30 April 2025, it formally requested, for the first time, an extension to its treaty clearance deadline, seeking a new date of 31 December 2028.⁷⁵ The request was granted at the Convention’s Twenty-Second Meeting of States Parties in early December 2025.⁷⁶

Sieges

During the reporting period, non-State armed groups, in particular JNIM, continued to employ siege tactics in manifold parts of national territory. Armed groups use sieges to consolidate control over territory, weaken military and civilian resistance (including members of VDPs), and impose their own governance, supplanting that of the State.⁷⁷ According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, by June 2024, up to two million civilians were trapped in thirty-nine besieged towns, many of which were cut off entirely from humanitarian assistance.⁷⁸ Towns in the Sahel and Boucle du Mouhoun regions were particularly affected.⁷⁹ Tactics include isolation of towns, restrictions on access to farmland, destruction of infrastructure, sabotage of telecommunications, and obstruction of essential services.⁸⁰ As a consequence, those trapped in besieged areas report widespread and severe humanitarian consequences, including acute food shortages, the collapse of health services, and many deaths from treatable disease. The destruction of water systems and restrictions on agricultural access further exacerbates the humanitarian crisis. In Djibo, a town of some 60,000 inhabitants, the siege is said to have made farming and trade impossible.⁸¹

Humanitarian aid is sporadically delivered by air, but remains insufficient to meet the needs. The difficulty of humanitarian access is exacerbated by armed groups targeting convoys that attempt to reach besieged areas. Most of the attacks were claimed by the ISSP. On 2 January 2025, for instance, the ISSP attacked a convoy escorted by government forces that was transporting civilians to Seytenga.⁸² Similarly, on 28 July 2025, the ISSP attacked a civilian convoy bringing humanitarian aid to the besieged town of Gorom Gorom, a town in the north and the capital of Oudalan province.⁸³

Siege tactics, while not outlawed by IHL, are severely constrained under both treaty and customary law. Of particular importance are the prohibition on the starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare,⁸⁴ the rules on humanitarian relief,⁸⁵ and the rules on the evacuation of civilians from the vicinity of military objectives.⁸⁶ The extensive and systematic use of siege tactics against populated areas by JNIM and the ISSP appears to have violated multiple IHL rules. Moreover, since parties to armed conflicts are obliged to facilitate the delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance, although military

escorts may pose risks to civilians and humanitarian aid, they do not render a civilian convoy as such a military objective. Even where soldiers may lawfully be targeted, IHL requires that such actions comply with the rule of proportionality in attack and with the duty to take all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm.

Forced displacement

The armed conflicts in Burkina Faso have continued to generate very significant levels of displacement. Although official estimates for the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have not been updated since March 2023, recent calculations place it at between 3 million and 5 million.⁸⁷ Around eighty per cent of the IDPs are women and children.⁸⁸ Furthermore, since the start of 2025, close to 230,000 people from more than 36,800 households are thought to have fled their homes as a consequence of the violence – a ninety-two per cent increase compared to the same period in 2024.⁸⁹ Many displaced households are left without shelter, food, or medical care.⁹⁰

Under customary IHL, in both IAC and NIAC, parties are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless it is required for the population's security or for imperative military reasons.⁹¹ To be lawful, displacement must also be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety, and nutrition and with a view to preventing the separation of members of the same family.⁹² The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁹³

Multiple testimonies recount, however, how members of armed groups come to villages, kill the men, seize civilian property, and order the women and children to leave.⁹⁴ Many people trapped within besieged cities seek every opportunity to escape these places; as one woman trying to flee the besieged town of Djibo said, she was 'living in total hell'. She had lost her daughter 'because of hunger, because of the blockade imposed by the jihadists'.⁹⁵ Another individual from the Fulani community describes how they live in a constant fear of being targeted by one or the other party to the armed conflicts on a simple accusation of being aligned with them. 'You have to leave, because if you stay, someone will just come and kill you,' he said.⁹⁶

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Treaty and customary IHL offers fundamental guarantees of protection to anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting murder, torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, collective punishment, all forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and unfair trials.

Murder of civilians

As noted above, a series of massacres of civilians occurred during the reporting period. The extent of these attacks may be such as to indicate the commission not only of war crimes but also of crimes against humanity. In one incident on 25 August 2024, JNIM forces stormed a Christian Evangelical church in Sanaba during Sunday service. Witnesses reported how fighters tied the hands of men attending the service before cutting their throats.⁹⁷

In other instances, civilians with perceived links to the government or its security forces were targeted.⁹⁸ A survivor of one attack recounts an exchange with a JNIM fighter

before his brother was shot in his chest: 'I'm here to avenge my father's assassination. Your brother had denounced my father to the military, and the military killed him in your [blacksmith's] forge.'⁹⁹ The man survived because he was not on the list of names of people thought to have denounced JNIM fighters to the government. Video footage was found showing a JNIM leader holding papers with a list of more than ninety handwritten names. Those listed are mainly ethnic Tamboura in Djibo, a community JNIM blames for having fled areas under their control or for joining the VDP.¹⁰⁰

Verified video footage of incidents on 10 and 11 March 2025 in and around the town of Solenzo depicts VDP fighters equipped with rifles and bladed weapons assaulting a large cart of men and women. The violence was accompanied by celebratory noises.¹⁰¹ Further scenes show fighters stepping over corpses and, in one instance, a severely wounded young woman is interrogated about her 'jihadist commanders' and threatened with execution in front of her two-year-old child – cruel treatment of a person in the power of the enemy. As a backdrop, members of the VDP appear on camera praising the 'effective work' being undertaken.¹⁰²

As part of its assaults, often JNIM has instructed civilians not to cultivate certain crops, especially tall-growing crops such as millet or corn, as these hinder the fighters' operations. Those not complying with these instructions fear they will be murdered.¹⁰³

Pillage

IHL strictly prohibits pillage and unlawful destruction of civilian property during armed conflict in IAC and NIAC. Pillage is theft by members of armed forces or groups of private property and may constitute a war crime.¹⁰⁴ Evidence indicates that both JNIM and VDP units breached this prohibition during the reporting period. Reports indicate, for instance, that, as part of its offensive to establish control over areas in Burkina Faso, JNIM forces have burned or looted shops, petrol stations, a pharmacy, and health facilities.¹⁰⁵ They have also pillaged medical supplies on multiple occasions at gunpoint.¹⁰⁶

Allegations of looting livestock have also been made against the VDP.¹⁰⁷ Incidents are said to occur in operations aimed at re-establishing control over areas where armed groups previously held sway. Concerns voiced about the government's handling of allegations of such conduct, which goes largely unpunished, are subsumed within a broader narrative of a 'war on terrorism'.¹⁰⁸

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and are serious violations of IHL.¹⁰⁹ The armed conflicts in Burkina Faso have been marked by repeated incidents of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls especially. The harm is exacerbated not only by the ongoing hostilities and related displacement but also by broader economic instability.

The number of women and girls abducted, often by non-State armed groups, is reported to have more than doubled in 2024 and into 2025.¹¹⁰ Testimonies described how the groups traded among each other captured women and girls, using them either as sex slaves or forcing them to engage in combat.¹¹¹ The United Nations also attributed at least two instances of rape of girls to members of the VDP.¹¹²

Unlawful deprivation of liberty, enforced disappearance, ill-treatment, and deaths in detention

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must not be arbitrary and must be conducted with respect for fundamental legal safeguards.¹¹³ Persons in detention must thus be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions in place on torture or other ill-treatment.¹¹⁴ Authorities must also ensure that detainees have access to medical care and that they are protected against violence. The unlawful killing of a detainee is likely to constitute a war crime.¹¹⁵ Enforced disappearance, which involves secret detention or the failure to disclose the fate or whereabouts of a detainee, violates IHL's prohibition of the practice as well as the requirement to register detainees and the right of families to know the fate of their relatives.¹¹⁶

The reporting period evidenced persistent patterns of unlawful deprivation of liberty and inhuman or degrading treatment of civilians by governmental forces. Many incidents occurred as part of one of the NIACs, with civilians often subject to unlawful arrest based on accusations of affiliation with armed groups. A cattle trader in the Fulani community from Djibo said: 'They started arresting people, bringing them to the city, beating them, undressing them. It was humiliating.'¹¹⁷

Of particular concern are the frequent arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearance by State forces of civil society actors, journalists, and magistrates who attempt to draw attention to the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso.¹¹⁸ The authorities use a general mobilization decree of April 2023 as the legal basis for forced recruitment,¹¹⁹ while publicly justifying arbitrary detention as the suppression of potential 'terrorists' or 'anti-Muslimism', or of those who act against the 'interests of the nation'.¹²⁰ On 1 April 2025, the government published a list of people on social media it was actively searching in relation to their 'criminal association in relation to a terrorist enterprise'.¹²¹ Among the names were not only those of JNIM leaders but also prominent journalists and activists who have criticized the government.

On 24 March 2025, three journalists were arrested by Burkina Faso's security forces after having expressed their concerns about the systematic intimidation and kidnapping of journalists by the government.¹²² After four months of enforced requisition to the military in Fada N'gourma, two were released in July.¹²³ Considering the situation, many journalists have fled the country because: 'When you don't agree with [the government], you have the choice between exile, prison, or the front, and therefore death.'¹²⁴ Repression has also occurred against members of the judiciary. In August 2024, five magistrates were detained and forcibly dispatched to the front to fight against armed groups.¹²⁵

While some of the arrested individuals were released in July 2025, the fate of many others remained unknown at the time of writing.¹²⁶ This amounts to violations of IHL provisions aimed at preventing enforced disappearance, including the obligation to register persons deprived of their liberty in NIAC.¹²⁷ These acts may also violate the IHL obligation to respect family life¹²⁸ and to take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and to provide their family members with information on their fate.¹²⁹

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees of access to food, medical care, and education.¹³⁰

The killing and maiming of children, rape of and other forms of sexual violence against children, and child abductions have been widely documented. In January 2025, the United Nations listed Burkina Faso as being among the countries with the highest numbers of children being killed or maimed due to armed conflict.¹³¹ These were attributed to each of the armed forces – the FABF and the VDP as well as JNIM and the ISSP.¹³²

IHL explicitly prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of 15 years or their use in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups.¹³³ Violations of the prohibition amount to possible war crimes. Burkina Faso is a State Party to the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which raises the age for participation to eighteen years.¹³⁴ Yet recruitment and use of children in combat, particularly (but not only) by non-State armed groups, continues to occur.¹³⁵ Testimonies suggest that children are trained to use weapons and explosives and are deployed in combat, including for suicide missions.¹³⁶

Treatment of the dead

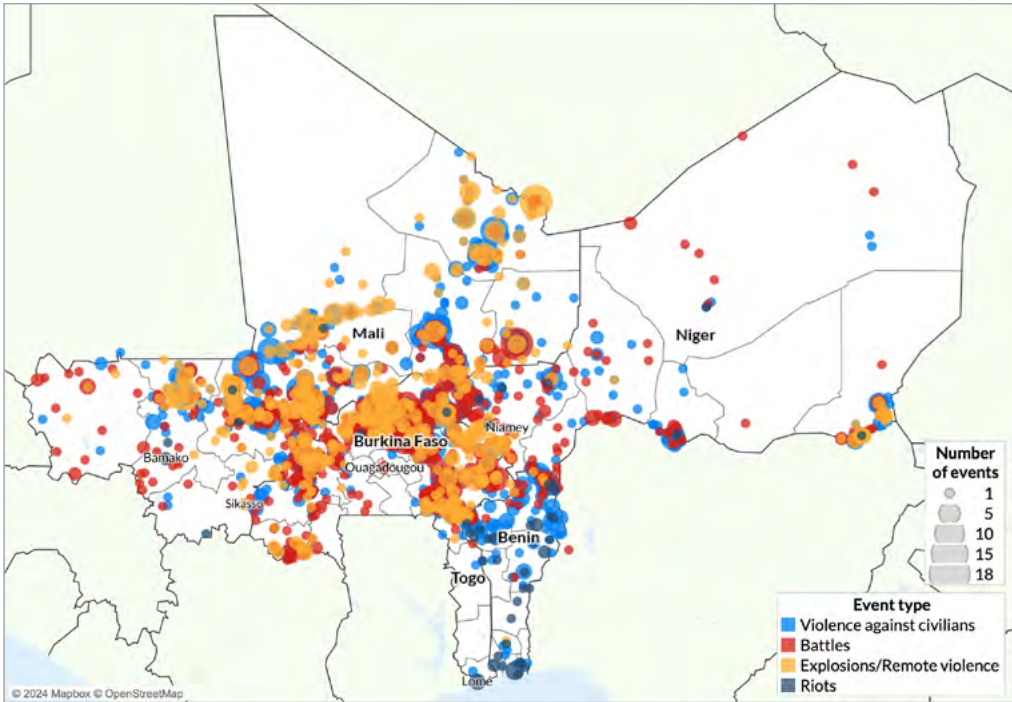
IHL contains explicit provisions on the respectful treatment of the dead in armed conflict, aimed at preserving human dignity and alleviating suffering for families of the deceased. It requires parties to a conflict to search for, collect, and evacuate the dead without delay,¹³⁷ and to prevent their despoilment or mutilation.¹³⁸ Bodies must be treated with respect and correctly identified whenever possible. IHL also obliges parties to record information on the dead and transmit it to the relevant authorities or agencies to help ensure families know the fate of their relatives. Burial or cremation must be conducted in a dignified manner, preferably according to the religious rites of the deceased, and graves must be respected and maintained.¹³⁹

During the reporting period, accusations emerged that members of the Burkina Faso Armed Forces had engaged in acts of cannibalism against the bodies of jihadist fighters. The shocking claim is supported, in part, by video recordings disseminated on social media that appear to show soldiers handling and consuming portions of the corpses of the alleged adversaries.¹⁴⁰ The consumption of body parts of dead fighters is a serious breach of the rules governing the treatment of the deceased and, if substantiated, would amount to war crimes.¹⁴¹

Figure 2.1: UN Map of Burkina Faso © United Nations



Figure 2.2: Violence in Burkina Faso and the Sahel in 2024 © ACLED



ENDNOTES

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3. CAMBODIA – THAILAND



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

A new armed conflict between Cambodia and Thailand broke out in July 2025, reflecting a simmering border dispute between the two nations that dates back decades. The dispute pertains to undemarcated areas along the shared border of the two nations, which stretches for more than 800 kilometres, and concerns, in particular, claimed ownership of the temples of Prasat Ta Muen Thom (Ta Muen Thom in Khmer), Prasat Ta Khwai (Prasat Ta Krabey in Khmer), and Preah Vihear (which Thais call Phra Viharn). The border was drawn by French cartographers in 1907 when France was the colonial ruler in Cambodia.¹

After Cambodia's independence in 1953, Thai troops occupied the temple of Preah Vihear, leading to Cambodia taking the dispute to the International Court of Justice.² In 1962, the Court ruled that the temple belonged to Cambodia,³ but it left the status of the surrounding area unresolved. In 2011, clashes between Cambodian and Thai forces in the vicinity of Preah Vihear killed at least sixteen people. A further judgment by the International Court of Justice reaffirmed that the temple and also the surrounding area were in Cambodian territory.⁴

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

On 28 May 2025, a skirmish near the temple killed one Cambodian soldier. Renewed hostilities between 24 and 28 July saw fighting spread to a dozen border sites, leaving at least forty-eight people dead and more than 300,000 civilians displaced. On 28 July, a ceasefire was agreed upon in Kuala Lumpur. The Kuala Lumpur peace framework involved US President Donald Trump and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The two nations pledged to withdraw all heavy weapons from the border areas, clear all landmines, and resolve border claims.⁵ The agreement did not hold. Hostilities in November escalated into major clashes along the border beginning on 7 December 2025.⁶

On 18 December 2025, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said airstrikes and use of heavy weaponry in and around populated areas raised serious concerns regarding protection of the civilian population. In his statement he said, 'I am alarmed by reports that areas around villages and cultural sites are being struck by fighter jets, drones, and artillery.'⁷

Cambodia and Thailand agreed upon a 72-hour ceasefire on 27 December 2025. The Thai Minister of Defence, General Natthaphon Narkphanit, said that the two sides had signed a joint statement committing to maintain current troop deployments without further movement but to withdraw all heavy weapons from border areas. After the ceasefire, an Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) Observer Team would observe the situation for a further seventy-two hours before all Thai villagers displaced since the start of fighting on 7 December returned to their homes.⁸

The Non-International Armed Conflict in Southern Thailand

In the south of Thailand, a separate armed conflict, which is of a non-international character, continues between the Thai army and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional – the BRN. The armed group is committed to securing self-determination for Malay Muslims. As part of its armed struggle, the BRN has consistently targeted civilians, including Buddhist monks, teachers, police officers, older persons, and children.⁹ Thai authorities have perpetrated widespread torture in repressing the rebellion that has been ongoing since 2004. More

than 7,000 people have been killed in the violence and over 13,000 wounded. An emergency decree was imposed over the three southernmost provinces in 2005, allowing the security forces to detain suspects without charge for up to thirty days. It also gave security personnel immunity from prosecution for any actions they carried out in the line of duty.¹⁰

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

An international armed conflict (IAC) between Cambodia and Thailand that began during the reporting period was entering a ceasefire as 2025 came to a close. This IAC is regulated by customary international humanitarian law (IHL), in particular Hague Law rules governing the conduct of hostilities. Both States are party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Cambodia, but not Thailand, is a State Party to Additional Protocol I of 1977.¹¹

A non-international armed conflict (NIAC) persisted in southern Thailand throughout the reporting period between Thailand and the BRN. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL applies to the NIAC. Thailand is not a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.¹² Both Cambodia and Thailand are States Parties to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.¹³ Neither State is party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.¹⁴

Cambodia is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁵ This means that acts by Cambodian nationals and acts on Cambodian territory, including by members of Thai forces, potentially fall within the jurisdiction of the Court. Thailand has signed but not ratified the Rome Statute. Acts by the Thai armed forces and police in the NIAC in the south of Thailand do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Court.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Both the IAC between Cambodia and Thailand and the NIAC in Thailand's south saw violations of IHL by parties during the reporting period. On 8 December 2025, the UN Secretary-General expressed his concern at the renewed clashes between Cambodia and Thailand and urged the parties 'to exercise restraint and avoid further escalation'. The border dispute had, he said, 'already resulted in significant civilian casualties, damage to civilian infrastructure, and displacement on both sides of the border'. The Secretary-General stressed that both parties 'must protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian relief'.¹⁶

Violations in the NIAC in the south of Thailand include attacks against civilians and the torture of detainees. The BRN has consistently targeted civilians – both Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims – despite pledges not to do so, including during the reporting period.¹⁷ In May 2025, Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said that 'a pledge is not enough. The BRN needs to stop committing war crimes'.¹⁸

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives²⁰ and, as such, are protected against attack.²¹ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²²

Potentially indiscriminate attacks

On 24 July 2025, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces launched volleys of unguided Grad rockets into four Thai provinces bordering Cambodia in what appears to have been an indiscriminate attack.²³ Grad rockets are used for area attacks rather than to hit specific targets,²⁴ meaning the risk to civilians in the area is particularly acute. All forty rockets from a single launcher can be fired in twenty seconds, either in a single salvo or in small bursts.²⁵ The Thai army claimed that Cambodia launched further attacks within civilian areas in the Sao Thongchai subdistrict of Kantharalak district in Sisaket province on 13 December 2025.²⁶ Thai government spokesperson Siripong Angkasakulkiat said that the action was ‘cruel and inhumane’.²⁷

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.²⁸ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.²⁹ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.³⁰ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate,³¹ and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or, in any event to minimize, incidental civilian impact.³²

Thailand claims that on 24 July 2025, Cambodian soldiers ‘launched indiscriminate attacks on Thai territory across four provinces of Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket and Ubon Ratchathani.’ Later that day, ‘Phanom Dong Rak Hospital in Surin Province was struck by Cambodian artillery fire. ... Civilian infrastructure, including a hospital and a school, also sustained significant damages. As of 25 July 2025 at 14:00 hrs., the attacks had resulted in 13 deaths and 46 injuries of civilians.’³³

As of mid-December 2025, amid renewed hostilities between the two States, Thailand reported that at least one civilian had been killed along with fifteen of its soldiers, and that more than 400,000 people had been displaced. In Cambodia, it was reported that eleven civilians had been killed and at least seventy-five injured, with more than 100,000 people displaced.³⁴ On 10 December 2025, Cambodia had sent a letter to the president of the UN Security Council alleging that, in attacking its military positions, Thailand had ‘extended their attacks into non-combat, civilian zones’ in Banteay Meanchey province’ as well as into Puset and Battambang provinces. The ‘ongoing aggressions’, Cambodia further alleged, ‘resulted in numerous deaths and injuries, including innocent civilians’.³⁵ Cambodia described ‘Thailand’s deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilian areas’ as ‘a serious breach’ of IHL.³⁶ The Cambodia government reported on 15 December that more than 300,000 Cambodian citizens had sought safety in IDP camps in border provinces, including in Banteay Meanchey and Mongkol Borey.³⁷

Cambodia further claimed targeting of civilians and civilian objects by Thailand on the morning of 15 December 2025. According to the Cambodian Minister of Information, the Thai military used F-16 combat aircraft to drop two bombs in Chong Kal and Srei Snam districts of Siem Reap province, near internally displaced person (IDP) camps, ‘penetrating more than 70 kilometres into Cambodian territory’. This, Cambodia alleged, amounted to a deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, declaring: ‘Thailand has violated international law by attacking civilians.’ Video footage, the Minister said, ‘shows students at a school in Srei Snam district fleeing after the Thai military dropped bombs near their school’.³⁸ It has not been possible to authenticate or verify the video.

In mid-January 2026, Nikkei Asia compiled a reported civilian toll from government social media and official websites, concluding that Cambodian deaths had exceeded 110 in the December conflict, of whom thirty-one were said by the Cambodian government to be civilians³⁹.

Alleged use of anti-personnel mines by Cambodia

Thailand has accused Cambodia of using anti-personnel mines in violation of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. Seven Thai soldiers were injured by landmines that the government says were newly emplaced by Cambodian soldiers.⁴⁰ Cambodia denies having used landmines.⁴¹ Any use of anti-personnel mines by a State Party to the Convention, whether during peacetime or armed conflict, is a serious violation of international law. That is so, even if soldiers, not civilians, are killed or injured as a result. At the time of writing, the Convention's compliance mechanism was being engaged.⁴²

Use of cluster munitions by Thailand

Thailand has acknowledged using cluster munitions in Cambodia. A Royal Thai Army press release in July 2025 said the army uses cluster munitions to target military objectives and in compliance with the principle of proportionality.⁴³ Indeed, although Thailand is not a State Party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, any use of cluster munitions must comply with the principles of distinction and proportionality in attack.

Despite claims to the contrary,⁴⁴ cluster munitions are not inherently indiscriminate weapons. They do, however, pose significant risks for civilians. In December 2025, Cambodia again accused Thailand of using cluster munitions.⁴⁵

NIAC in southern Thailand

There were fifty-seven recorded BRN attacks on civilians in April 2025 alone, resulting in eighteen dead and fifty injured among the Buddhist Thai and Malay Muslim populations in Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla, and Yala provinces. On 22 April, for instance, BRN fighters shot dead a sixteen-year-old Buddhist novice, and wounded a twelve-year-old, in an attack on a pick-up truck taking Buddhist monks and novices from Wat Kura temple to collect alms in Songkhla province's Sabayoi district.⁴⁶

In addition to targeted attacks, children have been victims of indiscriminate shootings and bombings. In late April 2025, BRN fighters detonated a motorcycle bomb outside Khok Khean police station in Narathiwat province, as a pick-up truck with many students from an evening Quran study passed by. At least seven Muslim children were wounded, with one girl left in critical condition.⁴⁷

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Under customary IHL, special protection is afforded to 'protected persons', including several categories of civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁴⁸ IHL provides certain fundamental guarantees for anyone who is in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, all forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials.

Murder of civilians

On 25 June 2024, unidentified gunmen in Pattani province shot dead Roning Dolah, a prominent human rights defender who assisted ethnic Malay Muslim victims of arbitrary

arrest and torture by Thai security forces.⁴⁹ There had been no progress in investigating his killing at the time of writing.⁵⁰

Rape

In November 2025, Thai soldiers were accused of gang-raping a Cambodian migrant worker. The alleged incident concerned an attack on an eighteen-year-old Cambodian who was attempting to cross the closed border between the two States and return home amid the hostilities. The woman was among a group of thirteen Cambodians who were making the journey, but according to the Cambodian Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, they were confronted by Thai soldiers and physically attacked. The woman was separated from her travelling companions and subjected to an 'abhorrent case of sexual violence perpetrated by seven Thai soldiers in black uniform'.⁵¹

Torture and arbitrary deprivation of liberty

Thailand has engaged in arbitrary deprivation of liberty of individuals in the context of the NIAC in the south. Under the Executive Decree on Government Administration in Emergency Situations and under martial law, Thai security forces can arrest and hold suspected BRN members for up to thirty-seven days without effective judicial oversight. This has led to deaths in military custody in the past.⁵²

Thailand adopted the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act in 2022, and it entered into force in February 2023. But there have been numerous cases related to counterinsurgency operations in the southern provinces in which police and military personnel tortured ethnic Malay Muslims in custody.⁵³ Writing a year after the law was adopted, the International Commission of Jurists' Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific declared:

Thailand has a poor track record when it comes to providing redress and accountability for victims of the crimes of torture and enforced disappearance, and this legislation was meant to correct this failure. Yet one year has passed and to our knowledge only a single case of alleged ill-treatment has reached the court, despite numerous allegations of abuse, with little information provided to the public.⁵⁴

Child recruitment and use in hostilities

In the past, the BRN has recruited children into its ranks, some as young as fourteen years of age.⁵⁵ Recruiting children under fifteen is a war crime under customary law.⁵⁶

The 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict prohibits all compulsory recruitment of children under 18 years of age and requires States Parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that they do not take a direct part in hostilities.⁵⁷ Both Cambodia and Thailand are States Parties to the 2000 Optional Protocol. Cambodian law prohibits all recruitment of children into its armed forces.⁵⁸ Thailand likewise sets eighteen years as the minimum age for recruitment.⁵⁹

Prisoners of war

In the July 2025 hostilities, Thailand captured twenty Cambodian soldiers, eighteen of whom it continued to detain for the rest of the year.⁶⁰ The soldiers were prisoners of war under Geneva Convention III of 1949 who must be released and repatriated 'without delay

after the cessation of active hostilities'.⁶¹ This obligation is tied to the ‘facts on the ground’, rather than to the formal end of an armed conflict or to an agreement between the Parties, though active hostilities must have ceased ‘with a sufficient degree of stability and permanence to activate the obligation’.⁶²

Cambodia complained that Thailand had not returned the eighteen soldiers it had captured once the ceasefire came into effect.⁶³ Although Thailand is not a State Party to Additional Protocol I, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) found that ‘unjustifiable delay in the repatriation of prisoners of war’ is a war crime under customary law.⁶⁴ In late December 2025, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was considering releasing the soldiers if the ceasefire held. It called on Cambodia to return Thai citizens who had been captured along border areas.⁶⁵ Thailand returned to Cambodia the eighteen soldiers it had held for five months as prisoners of war on the last day of the year.⁶⁶

Figure 3.1: UN Map of Cambodia © United Nations



Figure 3.2: UN Map of Thailand © United Nations



ENDNOTES

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4. CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The origins of the multiple NIACs in the Central African Republic (CAR) are found in the fighting that broke out in December 2012 and which saw an alliance of Muslim armed groups known as Séléka oust President François Bozizé three months later. Another alliance, this time of Christian non-State armed groups referred to as Anti-Balaka (meaning ‘invincible’ in Sango), then formed to confront the new government in Bangui.¹ To support the government’s efforts to stabilize the political and security situation, the United Nations (UN) Security Council established the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR – MINUSCA – in 2014.² The mission’s mandate was later broadened to include protection of civilians, humanitarian aid, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of armed group fighters, and human rights monitoring.³

In February 2019, the government and fourteen armed groups signed the ‘Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic’, which proclaimed it was a ‘comprehensive consensual agreement’ that would ‘put a definitive end to the crisis’.⁴ It failed to achieve this goal. In 2023, President Faustin Archange Touadéra changed the nation’s constitution to allow him potentially to stay in power indefinitely,⁵ a decision that led to further violence.

On 17 December 2020, ten days before presidential and parliamentary elections were due to be held, former fighters of the previously rival Séléka and Anti-Balaka groups had joined forces to establish the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC) to oppose President Touadéra.⁶ The CAR Armed Forces (FACA) and its military allies have since been engaged in a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) with the CPC, a conflict that continues to meet the minimum threshold of violence set by international humanitarian law (IHL), albeit at a relatively low level of intensity. This conflict has seen the commission of manifold war crimes.⁷ With the support of the Wagner Group and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), State armed forces retook major cities across CAR in 2021.⁸

Another wave of violence was launched in January 2023 when CPC fighters attacked FACA using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and armed drones.⁹ This conflict has evolved to include a struggle for control over mining sites and transhumance corridors (traditional pastoral paths of herders).

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

During the reporting period, five NIACs on the territory of CAR involved the State armed forces fighting an organized non-State armed group. FACA have received military support from the Wagner Group since 2018, and, since late 2020, by the RDF.¹⁰ A CPC splinter group, the Coalition pour le Changement Fondamental (CPC-F) has, since September 2024, been engaged in a low-intensity NIAC with CAR.¹¹ A sixth NIAC was being fought between two organized non-State armed groups. Parties to the five conflicts have committed serious violations of IHL against both Christian and Muslim communities.

On 30 July 2024, the UN Security Council lifted the arms embargo on the CAR authorities that had been in place since 2013.¹² Progress has been made in reducing the level of armed violence across much of the country. As of June 2025, while security remained fragile in the west and east of the country, fewer incidents were recorded in the centre. Speaking for the RDF, Brigadier General Ronald Rwivanga described the overall situation as ‘relatively calm’, even claiming: ‘We successfully repelled the rebels’.¹³ But armed

groups continue to attack civilians, and in the north-east, armed incursions were linked to the armed conflict in neighbouring Sudan, with suspected Rapid Support Forces (RSF) vehicles sighted in Am Dafok and Aouk in Vakaga prefecture. The UN Secretary-General warned the Security Council in June 2025 that spillover from the conflict in Sudan continued to fuel insecurity there.¹⁴

Another armed group that formed in 2023 in eastern CAR, Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG) ('Too many Azande people have died'), fought against the Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), a group formed in 2014 from former Séléka forces. AAKG has targeted Muslim and Fulani communities in the region, abducting civilians and repeatedly engaging in acts of sexual violence, including the perpetration of gang rapes.¹⁵ In 2024, hundreds of AAKG fighters were integrated into FACA although a rump force remained.¹⁶

Wagner Ti Azande (WTA), which is also fighting the UPC in the east of the country, has strong 'ties' to FACA but does not in practice operate under its effective control.¹⁷ Indeed, the United Nations has observed that while 'integrated' into FACA, the armed forces' control over the WTA 'remains loose' and it 'often defies the command of the FACA'.¹⁸ The group gained its moniker from the fact that its Azande membership were trained by the Wagner Group. The WTA is sometimes described as nothing more than a rebranding of the AAKG,¹⁹ but in reality stands separate from it. The two groups even mounted joint military operations during the reporting period.²⁰

On 23 April 2025, President Touadéra announced that the leaders of Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (3R), a group formed in CAR's north-west in 2015 to protect Fulani herders from attacks by Anti-Balaka militia, and the UPC had both committed to lay down their arms and rejoin the 2019 Political Agreement. The agreement, which followed discussions in N'Djamena facilitated by the Chadian government,²¹ provided for a ceasefire, the dissolution of the two armed groups, and the establishment of cantonment sites for DDR.²²

On 10 July 2025, Ali Darassa, the founder of UPC, and Sembé Bobo, the commander of 3R, duly announced the disbanding of their respective movements. But while this is undoubtedly a major symbolic step, as the International Crisis Group has cautioned, this may not translate into an end to the hostilities, as thousands of fighters across the country may refuse to demobilize in the absence of a 'credible' DDR process.²³

The Humanitarian Situation

Violence, while lessening at the time of writing, still affected 2.8 million people – half of CAR's total population. In particular, tensions escalated around mining sites and transhumance corridors (seasonal areas of grazing) with clashes between transhumant herders and 3R fighters, and involved killings, sexual violence, kidnappings, and forced displacement of civilians.²⁴ As the UPC and 3R comprise mainly herders, this has accentuated the government's 'tendency' to 'conflate pastoralists with insurgents'.²⁵

The United Nations reports that one in every five Central African remains displaced either within the country or abroad, mainly in neighbouring countries because of conflict, violence, lack of essential services and extreme weather events. IHL and human rights violations and extreme weather events such as floods continue to lead to new displacements. About thirty-eight per cent of the population are vulnerable to the point that humanitarian aid alone is not enough to sustain them.²⁶

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

Six non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) occurred in CAR throughout the review period, including one between two non-State armed groups:

- CAR (supported by Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the RDF) *v* UPC
- CAR (supported by Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the RDF) *v* 3R
- CAR (supported by Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the RDF) *v* CPC-F
- CAR (supported by Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the RDF) *v* CPC
- CAR (supported by Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the RDF) *v* AAKG (supported by WTA elements)
- UPC *v* AAKG.

The conflicts are all regulated by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL. CAR is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977, but none of the NIACs between FACA and the five non-State armed groups meets the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of the Protocol – specifically the need for a level of territorial control that would enable the groups to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol. The NIAC between the AAKG and the UPC cannot be regulated by Additional Protocol II as the Protocol requires one of the parties to be the territorial State.²⁷

Criminal responsibility for international crimes

CAR is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which it ratified in 2001.²⁸ All events covered in this report therefore potentially fall within the Court's material jurisdiction. In 2022, however, following a referral by the CAR government eight years earlier, the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC ended its investigation into alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes committed since 1 August 2012 by the Séléka and Anti-Balaka armed groups.²⁹

Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo, the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Mouvement de libération du Congo, was charged with crimes against humanity (murder and rape) and war crimes (murder, rape, and pillage), which he was accused of committing in CAR in 2002–03. In 2018, the ICC Appeals Chamber decided, by majority, to acquit Mr Bemba Gombo of all charges.³⁰

On 24 July 2025, the trial of Anti-Balaka leaders Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona and Alfred Yékatom, who were accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Bangui and western CAR between September 2013 and at least February 2014, concluded with their conviction on multiple counts. Mr Yékatom was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and Mr Ngaïssona to twelve years. On 26 September, the Defence Team for the two men, along with the Office of the Prosecutor, filed notices of appeal.³¹

At the time of writing, the trial of Seleka commander Mahamat Said Abdel Kani, who is accused of committing war crimes (torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity) and crimes against humanity (severe deprivation of liberty, torture, persecution, and other inhumane acts) in Bangui in 2013, was coming to a conclusion. Closing statements took place on 25 and 26 November 2025 since which the judges have been deliberating.³²

The Special Criminal Court

The Special Criminal Court (SCC), inaugurated in Bangui in 2018, is a court for the prosecution of international crimes. The SCC is part of the domestic criminal justice system

in CAR, but is staffed by international as well as national experts. In April 2024, the Court issued an arrest warrant for former president François Bozizé. He is charged with the commission of crimes against humanity between 2009 and 2013 by the Presidential Guard and other security services at the Bossembélé military training centre located to the north of Bangui. In September 2024, the SCC referred the case against Mr Bozizé to the Court's Trial Chamber. Mr Bozizé fled from CAR in 2013, returning six years later as CPC leader before going into hiding in Guinea-Bissau, where he is said to be now. According to the SCC's rules of procedure, he can be tried *in absentia*.³³

In June 2024, a former Anti-Balaka leader, Edmond Beïna, was arrested on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes allegedly committed in 2014 in Djomo, Gadzi and Guen in Mambéré-Kadéï province in the south-west. In November 2024, the ICC made public its issuance of an arrest warrant for Mr Beïna in 2018. The CAR government has challenged the ICC's jurisdiction on the grounds that the same case is being prosecuted in CAR.³⁴ In September 2025, the ICC declared it was established that the case against Mr Beïna was 'genuinely being prosecuted at the domestic level' and, therefore, the case must be declared inadmissible before the ICC.³⁵

A year earlier, Abakar Zakaria Hamid, a former Seleka leader, was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes linked to a 2014 attack at the Notre-Dame church in Bangui, which was being used at the time as a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs).³⁶

At the time of writing, however, the future of the SCC was highly uncertain owing to lack of funding. In October 2025, Amnesty International warned that its closure would be 'a catastrophic blow to thousands of victims' and survivors' prospects of securing justice'. Amnesty called on the African Union and the European Union, and their Member States, to 'step up' by providing sustained funding and human resources support.³⁷

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review continued to see serious violations of the IHL rules protecting civilians across CAR. In his June 2025 report to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General condemned the 'persistent' violations of IHL, singling out sexual violence, whose continued perpetration he described as being 'of grave concern'.³⁸

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.³⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives⁴⁰ and, as such, are protected against attack.⁴¹ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁴²

Attacks against livestock

Since 2014, the International Crisis Group has repeatedly emphasized the critical need to reduce violence between herders and farmers in order to stabilize the situation in CAR. A further concern is cattle rustling by FACA troops. Since 2021, as the army regained control of the countryside with the support of the Wagner Group and the RDF, FACA soldiers organized cattle-rustling networks similar to those the armed groups had run near the

traditional herding corridors. The ensuing theft led pastoralists to abandon these routes, driving their cattle instead through farmers' fields, which made them vulnerable to reprisal. Herders have accordingly lost what little confidence they had left in the State, increasingly looking to the militias for protection.⁴³

Under IHL, livestock are civilian objects protected from attack.⁴⁴ Cattle may also be considered objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.⁴⁵

Attacks against humanitarian aid

There were a number of attacks on convoys seeking to provide desperately needed humanitarian aid to remote communities during the reporting period. In late March 2025, for instance, gunmen attacked a humanitarian convoy near Zemio town in Haut-Mbomou prefecture, killing one NGO worker and three ethnic Fulani civilians.⁴⁶ Under IHL, parties to armed conflicts are obliged to facilitate the delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance.⁴⁷ Attacks on MINUSCA, which is not party to any of the armed conflicts in CAR, may amount to a war crime.⁴⁸

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁴⁹ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁵⁰ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁵¹ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. Such attacks must, however, be proportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or at least minimize incidental civilian deaths and injuries (and damage to civilian objects).

Attacks directed against civilians

Civilians were deliberately targeted by the parties to the armed conflicts during the reporting period in violation of IHL. In the south-east, new violence erupted in Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures in the second half of 2024. Both the AAKG, which is based in the south-east of CAR, and the UPC, a member of the CPC coalition, attacked civilians. The AAKG targeted Muslims presumed to be sympathetic to the UPC,⁵² while 3R attacked civilians outside towns along the north-west border with Cameroon. In July 2024, 3R reportedly killed at least a dozen civilians outside Bocaranga. This followed the summary execution of at least sixteen farmers outside Bohong three months earlier.⁵³

WTA and AAKG fighters repeatedly targeted civilians over their alleged association with UPC and the Muslim community. From 1 to 7 October 2024, WTA and AAKG fighters committed atrocities against civilians in Dembia and Rafai, targeting, in particular, Muslim and Fulani communities as well as Sudanese asylum-seekers. In total, they murdered fourteen people and raped twenty-one women.⁵⁴

On 25 November, near Kopia village in Ouaka prefecture, suspected UPC fighters killed ten motorcycle taxi drivers and passengers.⁵⁵ Attacks by 3R fighters in Lim-Pendé prefecture in the north-west between 25 and 28 February 2025 resulted in thirteen civilian deaths and the burning of hundreds of homes. In Nana-Mambéré and Mambéré-Kadéï prefectures, Anti-Balaka and 3R fighters killed, kidnapped, or extorted civilians around mining sites and transhumance corridors.⁵⁶

Use of improvised explosive devices

Throughout the reporting period, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) continued to pose a threat to civilians in CAR.⁵⁷ CAR is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits FACA from using any anti-personnel mine, defined as a munition (including IEDs) that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not, however, bind non-State armed groups directly under international law. CAR is not a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons whose Amended Protocol II of 1996 on landmines and booby-traps, binds all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, all armed groups that are party to an armed conflict are subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians. Customary law further requires that when landmines are used, ‘particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects.’⁵⁹ When deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, these devices may often have such effects.⁶⁰ That said, use of IEDs by non-State armed groups in CAR did not result – at least in 2024 – in significant contamination by improvised anti-personnel mines.⁶¹

Forced displacement

Considerable forced displacement in CAR over the past decade is linked to the multiple armed conflicts on its territory. On 26 July 2024, the Prime Minister of CAR and the UN Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement launched the national strategy for durable solutions for IDPs and returnees in the Central African Republic 2024–2028. In rare, good news, reflecting the reduction in violence in certain areas of the country, 117,936 of 455,533 registered IDPs returned to their homes between January and October 2024.⁶²

Under customary IHL, parties to any armed conflict are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless it is required for their security or for imperative military reasons.⁶³ Breaches of these prohibitions may be war crimes.⁶⁴ Any displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁶⁵ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁶⁶

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Customary and treaty IHL provide fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, collective punishments, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials. Special protection is afforded to civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁶⁷

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and constitute war crimes.⁶⁸ The conflicts in CAR have been marked by gender-based violence, with women and girls regularly targeted. For 2024, the United Nations recorded acts of sexual violence against more than 200 girls, with most of these war crimes attributed

to the CPC (58 cases), followed by the UPC (26 cases), and 3R (22 cases).⁶⁹ The United Nations stated that between October 2024 and February 2025, while conflict-related sexual violence persisted throughout the country, it was most prevalent in Lim-Pendé prefecture, where it was said to be perpetrated primarily by 3R fighters.⁷⁰

A wave of sexual violence was seen in the first week of October 2024 also in Mbo-mou prefecture, with WTA fighters targeting mainly the Fulani community and other Muslims, as well as a camp for Sudanese refugees and asylum-seekers. MINUSCA documented the rape of fourteen women and seven girls aged between twelve and seventeen years during the assault, many of whom were gang-raped. In addition, two girls and one woman were sexually enslaved while one woman was forced into marriage.⁷¹ None of the victims received adequate medical assistance, either through fear of being stigmatized or due to lack of medicine and rape kits in local hospitals.⁷²

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of fifteen years in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and forbid their participation in combat.⁷³ Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.⁷⁴

During the reporting period, children continued to be disproportionately affected by the ongoing hostilities in CAR. For 2024, the United Nations verified 733 grave violations against 479 children (283 boys, 196 girls).⁷⁵ A total of 331 children (238 boys, 93 girls) were recruited and used by armed groups, with the CPC responsible for 191 of these victims, the UPC for 123, and the AAKG for 70. At least fifty-one children are said to have served in combat roles with armed groups.⁷⁶

Treatment of persons detained in relation to an armed conflict

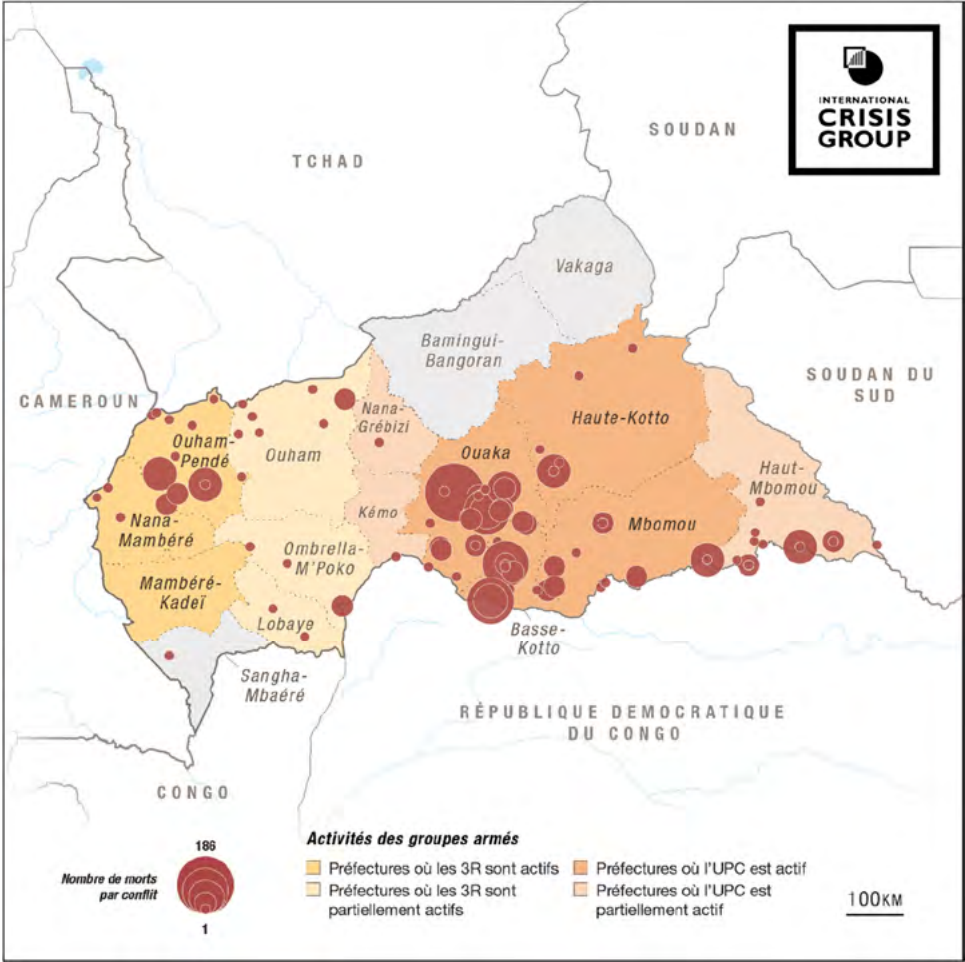
At the end of 2023, 1,749 detainees were awaiting trial, some of whom had been held for almost six years without trial.⁷⁷ It is not known how many were being detained in relation to the conflicts but ethnic and religious minorities have been disproportionately targeted for arbitrary arrest and detention in operations by FACA and its Wagner Group/Africa Corps allies.⁷⁸ Moreover, after the years of armed conflict and violence that have blighted the country, the judicial and prison systems in CAR have either been completely destroyed or severely weakened. Where they still exist, prisons suffer from extreme overcrowding, food shortages – sometimes leading to deaths from malnutrition – and a lack of adequate medical care and environmental hygiene.⁷⁹

As MINUSCA further recalls, the establishment of functioning courts and prisons is essential. Its Judicial and Penitentiary Section continues to support reform of the prison system with a view to ensuring its ‘compliance with international standards and practices in prison administration’. Currently, there is a heightened risk of security incidents, mass escapes, and infectious diseases. The situation is particularly critical at Ngaragba Central Prison, which has for a long time hosted three times its official capacity of 382 inmates.⁸⁰ By May 2025, the figure was said to have risen further.⁸¹ This was despite the opening in January of a prison block for high-security detainees.⁸²

Figure 4.1: UN Map of the Central African Republic © United Nations



Figure 4.2: Conflicts linked to transhumance in 2016–25
© International Crisis Group/Natural Earth, OSM



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5. COLOMBIA



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The armed conflicts in Colombia trace back to 1964 when two guerrilla movements were created to fight the government and the State armed forces – the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). During the 1980s, disparate paramilitary groups emerged to combat these organizations, and in 1997, they consolidated as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). Although the AUC collectively demobilized between 2004 and 11 April 2006,¹ former members created new armed groups, notably the *Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia* (EGC, also known as the Gulf Clan), which remains a party to non-international armed conflicts. All of Colombia's many armed conflicts have been characterized by widespread violations of international humanitarian law (IHL),² with Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities disproportionately affected.

A watershed in Colombia's history occurred on 24 November 2016, when the government and the FARC-EP – then the largest non-State armed group in the country – signed a peace agreement after protracted negotiations in Havana.³ FARC-EP demobilization began in 2017 although dissident factions rejected the accord and continued to attack the authorities and rival armed groups. Today, the conflicts in Colombia are increasingly fragmented, with disputes and alliances between armed groups shifting over time as they compete for territorial control of areas previously occupied by the FARC-EP. In November 2022, the Colombian government and the ELN began peace negotiations.

Key Events since 1 July 2024

In 2024, as part of its 'Total Peace' ('Paz Total') policy, the Government announced negotiations and ceasefires with the ELN, the EMC (Estado Mayor Central, a dissident FARC-EP group),⁴ and the EGC. The Colombian government's 'Total Peace' policy was instituted under Law 2272 of 2022 as a strategic decision to seek peace with all armed groups active in the country. The policy also seeks implementation of previously concluded peace agreements.⁵ Even where new agreements were reached, however, armed groups often failed to comply with the terms.⁶

The government suspended talks with the ELN after it launched a major attack on 16 January 2025 in Catatumbo in the north-east of the country. The attack took place amid clashes between the ELN and a dissident FARC-EP group.⁷

The Humanitarian Situation

The humanitarian consequences of the ELN attack, which killed many and provoked significant displacement, were described as among the worst in nearly three decades.⁸ Armed groups have forged alliances with organized crime groups in the departments of Arauca, Cauca, and Chocó; the Bajo Cauca region in Antioquia; and the south of the department of Bolívar, provoking humanitarian emergencies in both border and urban areas.⁹

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

In the reporting period, ten non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) took place in Colombia.¹⁰ Four involved the Colombian Armed Forces fighting a non-State armed group, as follows:

- Colombia *v* National Liberation Army (ELN)
- Colombia *v* Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC) (formerly, the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC)
- Colombia *v* Estado Mayor Central (EMC)
- Colombia *v* Comandos de la Frontera (CDF), another dissident FARC-EP group.

These four NIACs are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, Additional Protocol II of 1977¹¹ (to which Colombia adhered in 1995), and customary IHL. The criterion that the armed group exercise such territorial control as to be able to sustain military operations and to implement the Protocol was met throughout the reporting period.

Six other NIACs involved two non-State armed groups fighting each other:

- ELN *v* EGC
- ELN *v* EMC
- ELN *v* Frente 33 of the Estado Mayor de los Bloques y el Frente (EMBF)
- EMC *v* Frente 57 Yair Bermúdez
- EMC *v* EGC
- EMC *v* Segunda Marquetalia.

These NIACs are regulated by Common Article 3 and customary IHL. Although the requirement for territorial control could be met in each case,¹² for Additional Protocol II to apply, one of the parties must be the armed forces of the State.¹³

Colombia is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, having ratified it in 2002.¹⁴ Colombia is not a situation under investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, the humanitarian situation in Colombia deteriorated significantly,¹⁵ with civilians increasingly the victims of serious violations of IHL. Civilians were attacked by the parties to the multiple armed conflicts, with some murdered in cold blood or forcibly disappeared while others were used as human shields. Children continued to be forcibly recruited and used in combat. Sexual violence, especially against women and girls, increased – seemingly part of a strategy of armed group control. Indiscriminate use of improvised anti-personnel mines and remotely controlled improvised explosive devices (IEDs) killed or injured civilians, contributing to displacement. The 9.3 million people living under the presence, influence, and/or control of armed groups¹⁶ were particularly exposed to violations.

Civilian Objects under Attack

In 2024, civilian objects were frequently damaged in attacks and on some occasions were deliberately targeted.¹⁷ Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁸ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.¹⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.²⁰ Indiscriminate attacks – those not directed against a lawful military objective – are prohibited.²¹

Special protection against attack is afforded to hospitals and other medical facilities under IHL,²² yet the United Nations documented 15 separate attacks on hospitals in Colombia in 2024.²³ While many of the perpetrators could not be reliably identified, certain attacks were attributed to FARC-EP dissidents (including the EMC), and – albeit to a lesser extent – the CDF, the EGC, and the ELN, as well as (more infrequently) State armed forces.²⁴

Schools and education were particularly affected by the violence,²⁵ with some badly damaged in the course of hostilities.²⁶ The United Nations reported an increased number of attacks on schools in 2024, with twenty-seven incidents recorded in total (eighty-eight if one includes threats and attacks on teachers; damage to infrastructure; and the use of IEDs).²⁷ The most affected areas were in Cauca and, to a lesser extent, the departments of Antioquia, Arauca, Norte de Santander, and Putumayo.²⁸

Civilians under Attack

Use of anti-personnel mines

Colombia continues to suffer a high toll from anti-personnel mines. These victim-activated munitions are improvised in a variety of ways by many armed groups.²⁹ In 2024, mines killed or injured 108 people of whom 66 – almost two thirds – were civilian, indicating that considerable use was either directed against civilians or was indiscriminate.³⁰ Of particular concern was the increase in child casualties – rising from twelve per cent of the total in 2023 to twenty-three per cent in 2024.³¹ In an incident in August 2024, a young girl lost her leg after stepping on an anti-personnel mine while walking from her home to school in San Vicente del Caguán (Cauquetá).³² FARC-EP dissidents were said to be responsible.³³ A further 102 mine victims were recorded in only the first nine months of 2025.³⁴

In addition to causing traumatic amputations, anti-personnel mines are known for their devastating long-term effects.³⁵ They can severely restrict the freedom of movement of civilians, preventing them from accessing essential services.³⁶ Thus, even if emplaced in strict compliance with IHL – a rare occurrence – the effects may still fall primarily on civilians, displacing or confining entire communities and undermining food security.³⁷

Fourteen Colombian departments were affected by different forms of explosive ordnance in 2024, with the Pacific region the most severely impacted – Cauca, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca combined accounted for 65 per cent of all recorded casualties. For the first time in eight years, casualties were reported in Amazonas, signalling the spread of contamination to new areas.³⁸ As long as territorial control remains a key objective, mine use is expected to continue. Some armed groups that had not previously done so are now relying on landmines to try to secure strategic corridors.³⁹

Colombia is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which comprehensively prohibits anti-personnel mines.⁴⁰ As it is a disarmament treaty, it binds directly only State actors and not the armed groups in Colombia. Colombia is also, however, party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its amended Protocol II of 1996, which applies to all parties to armed conflict, including non-State actors in a NIAC.⁴¹ Although the protocol does not ban all use of anti-personnel mines, it specifically prohibits their indiscriminate use and requires that a party to an armed conflict take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from their effects.⁴² Likewise, customary IHL requires that ‘when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects’.⁴³

Use of armed drones

Increased use of armed drones by armed groups raised serious concerns under the principle of distinction,⁴⁴ including the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks, as well as the principles of proportionality and precaution in attack.⁴⁵ Where civilians are deliberately targeted by a party to an armed conflict, this is likely to be a war crime. Where the Colombian military are targeted by armed drones in connection with one of the many armed conflicts, this may comply with the principle of distinction, but if excessive civilian harm is expected to result when compared to the military advantage, an attack will be disproportionate and therefore unlawful.

During the reporting period, armed groups made widespread use of drones⁴⁶ to drop explosive munitions, as well as for surveillance and reconnaissance, or to enforce confinement of civilians.⁴⁷ The Colombian Army reported 119 drone attacks in 2024, injuring thirty-two soldiers, seven police officers, and twenty-eight civilians.⁴⁸ The use of drones increased by more than half in only the first eight months of 2025, with 180 attacks already recorded.⁴⁹ Cauca has been the most affected department: since 2024, armed groups, notably the EMC, have conducted nearly 100 daily drone operations and, by April 2025, they had mounted a total of 245 drone attacks against Colombian security forces.⁵⁰ Drone attacks, including by the ELN, have also been recorded in Arauca, Antioquia, Narino, Norte de Santander, and Putumayo.⁵¹

As armed groups use commercially available drones to deliver munitions, the attacks are imprecise and often result in civilian harm.⁵² In July 2024, a ten-year-old boy playing football in El Plateado (Cauca) was killed in a drone attack while a further twelve people were injured. According to Colombia, the attack, which was targeting its soldiers, was conducted by a faction of the EMC – a claim it denied.⁵³

Confinement and human shields

Reports indicate that armed groups have used civilians as human shields during armed confrontations, often in connection with instances of confinement – where civilians are prevented from leaving their communities or homes. Under IHL, use of human shields – the placing or moving of civilians to seek to prevent certain locations or forces from being targeted – is prohibited.⁵⁴ Deliberately using civilians to protect members of armed groups against attacks also violates the principle of distinction and the duty to separate civilians from military objectives whenever it is feasible to do so.⁵⁵

Confinement may be a personal decision to minimize the risk of being caught in crossfire between armed groups. Forced confinement of civilians is a deliberate tactic used by the groups to protect their fighters against attacks.⁵⁶ In 2024, confinement increased markedly: a total of 138,419 civilians, most Indigenous or Afro-descendant, were said to have been restricted in this way.⁵⁷ Confined civilians are prevented from accessing basic necessities,⁵⁸ as well as being at risk of being killed or injured, and, in the case of children, unlawfully recruited.⁵⁹

In Chocó alone, between January and April 2025, more than 26,000 people were reportedly confined,⁶⁰ while in 2024, the department accounted for forty-one per cent of the total number of confinements.⁶¹ Confrontations between armed groups, notably the ELN and the EGC,⁶² were described as the main cause of confinement.⁶³ Community leaders reported armed group incursions into homes, with civilians sometimes forced to stand between opposing fighters.⁶⁴ Similar practices were reported in 2024 in Antioquia, Arauca, Bolivar, Caquetá, Cauca, and Putumayo.⁶⁵

In 2025, instances of confinements were also recorded in Catatumbo in Norte de Santander department, including in Tibú and El Tarra, where, on 20 March, Frente 33 of the EMBF members occupied homes and compelled residents, including women and children, to remain during the group's combat with the ELN.⁶⁶ In the Amazon, 'Campesino Guard' units – unarmed self-protection groups – are said to have been deployed by the EMC to block military or police access to areas they control, preventing them from entering the areas as they could not lawfully shoot unarmed farmers.⁶⁷ The blockages are thought to be connected to illicit extraction of minerals in the Amazon and Orinoquia regions along the border with Venezuela.⁶⁸

Forced displacement

Forced displacement remains the primary driver of humanitarian emergencies in Colombia.⁶⁹ Entire communities were sometimes forcibly displaced by the presence or emplacement of improvised anti-personnel mines in 2024. More often, civilians were compelled to flee due to direct threats, fear of recruitment (including of their children), or escalating violence. Displacement was fuelled by armed groups' efforts to strengthen territorial control and through their competition for control of illicit activities.⁷⁰ Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities were again disproportionately affected, comprising around half of all those displaced.⁷¹

In 2024, displacement occurred across 15 departments, including Antioquia, Bolívar, and Cauca, although Nariño remained the most affected.⁷² In February 2025 alone, more than 5,000 people were displaced due to fighting between armed groups in Colombia.⁷³ In Chocó, clashes between the ELN and the EGC had displaced 3,600 civilians as of that month.⁷⁴ According to testimonies, armed groups barred civilians from returning home after work or school under threat of violence, claiming the area had to remain cleared for combat.⁷⁵

Forced displacement has been especially acute in Catatumbo. According to community leaders, when fighting broke out between the ELN and Frente 33 of the EMBF, residents left their homes immediately and attempts to return were met with warnings from ELN members, including threats they would be killed or forcibly disappeared.⁷⁶

In addition to displacements of groups or communities, an alarming rate of forced displacement of individuals or small groups due to threats, assassinations, extortion, intimidation, forced recruitment, or risks of sexual violence from armed groups was recorded in 2024. The most affected department was Valle de Cauca followed by Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Nariño, and Norte de Santander.⁷⁷

Under IHL applicable in NIACs, displacement of civilians for reasons related to the conflict is prohibited 'unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand'.⁷⁸ Although arguably certain instances of displacement fall within these narrow exceptions, such as to protect civilians against hostilities, others involved their being forced to leave or having their movement restricted for other – unlawful – reasons, sometimes achieved through threats of violence.

Humanitarian aid

In 2024, humanitarian access was severely curtailed in areas most affected by combat and where humanitarian needs were increasingly urgent. Under IHL, parties to a NIAC 'must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction,

subject to their right of control.⁷⁹ While humanitarian relief is subject to the consent of the parties concerned, this consent cannot be withheld ‘arbitrarily’.⁸⁰ Armed groups have failed to comply with their IHL obligations to permit and facilitate humanitarian access on multiple occasions.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded many restrictions on humanitarian access in 2025 with a total of 127 incidents affecting 105,900 people recorded between January and April alone. This compares to 101 such events affecting 568,500 for the whole of 2024.⁸¹ Armed groups often accuse civilians of aiding one of their enemies, based solely on the fact that they had remained in their communities. Groups continue to restrict or deny relief on the basis that it would go to their enemies and not civilians in need.⁸²

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Murder of civilians and former fighters

In 2024, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified 72 incidents of ‘massacres’ – defined as the extrajudicial execution of at least three people – involving the murder of 252 in total.⁸³ Human rights defenders, especially Indigenous and community leaders and environmental defenders, as well as former FARC fighters continued to be the main victims of these crimes, which were predominantly perpetrated by armed groups.⁸⁴ Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples were also regularly targeted.⁸⁵ According to data from the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ), between 1 July 2024 and 4 April 2025, 127 community leaders were killed across 89 municipalities in Colombia. Most of the victims were *líderes comunales* (community leaders), with thirty-seven recorded deaths, followed by twenty-two Indigenous leaders.⁸⁶

In Colombia, political opposition or social leadership is widely perceived as a threat to an armed group’s control of an area. The killing of human rights defenders, and in particular Indigenous and community leaders, serves to undermine community structures and erode civilian resistance, enabling the consolidation of territorial and social control.⁸⁷ In 2024, of 122 human rights defenders killed, OHCHR assessed that 89 were targeted in relation to their work, with seventy-one per cent believed to have been killed by armed groups.⁸⁸ In a single territorial conflict between two armed groups in Arauca⁸⁹ – likely the ELN and the EMC, the main groups fighting in the region – twelve community leaders were murdered.⁹⁰

In the first half of 2025, 74 human rights defenders, including Indigenous and community leaders, were reported to have been murdered.⁹¹ Escalation in fighting between the ELN and the EMBF in Catatumbo since January coincided with multiple murders of community leaders. In just one month, armed groups killed three community leaders they perceived as a threat.⁹² Departments where these atrocities are common include Cauca (ten targeted killings of leaders from 1 July 2024 to 4 April 2025) and Antioquia (thirteen over the same period),⁹³ as well as in Arauca, Nariño, Putumayo, and Valle del Cauca.⁹⁴ Other departments affected include Huila, where on 26 August 2024, Carlos Cerquera, a thirty-nine-year-old community leader, was murdered by FARC-EP dissidents in Villa Mercedes de La Plata. His killing followed a meeting in which he had expressed concern about the growing presence of armed groups in the region.⁹⁵

Although most incidents documented in 2024 were perpetrated by armed groups (and certain unspecified criminal organizations), the Colombian Army was also said to

have committed violations. The United Nations verified eighteen murders allegedly committed by police or the military, including the killing of three Afro-descendant civilians.⁹⁶

In 2024, environmental defenders denouncing the negative environmental effects of activities such as mining and logging, and defending the collective rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, were also murdered by armed groups involved in deforestation, illegal mining, or wildlife trafficking. The United Nations documented the murder of twenty-five environmental defenders during the year.⁹⁷ Reports indicate that, in the areas under their control, armed groups profit from deforestation and land control through taxation, extortion, and the appropriation, sale, and use of land. Activities include road construction and the building of trafficking corridors; the establishment of new coca plantations and cattle ranches; and illegal logging, mining, and wildlife trafficking.⁹⁸ These activities, for which the EMC is particularly known in the remote parts of the Amazon in the departments of Amazonas, Caquetá, Guaviare, and Meta where it enjoys considerable territorial control,⁹⁹ are said to sustain the group's military operations.¹⁰⁰

A further recurring trend has been the assassination of former FARC-EP members. The UN Verification Mission in Colombia recorded thirty-three such killings in 2024, with twenty-nine for only the first half of 2025. A total of 470 people were killed (of whom eleven were women) since the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC in 2016.¹⁰¹ According to the UN Verification Mission, most of the killings were perpetrated by armed groups in the departments of Antioquia, Cauca, and Huila. The victims were targeted on account of their leadership roles; their refusal to be recruited into the groups; or their involvement in truth and justice processes.¹⁰² These and similar killings constitute murder and are *prima facie* war crimes.¹⁰³

Child recruitment

The recruitment and use of children to participate in hostilities increased in areas under armed group control in 2024.¹⁰⁴ While ages are not always specified, some of the victims were under fifteen years of age.¹⁰⁵ Such recruitment is a serious violation of IHL and a war crime under customary law.¹⁰⁶ In 2024, OHCHR reported cases of recruitment of girls as young as twelve years old.¹⁰⁷ An earlier study by the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar and UNICEF covering 2013–2022 found that the vast majority of child recruits were between twelve and seventeen years of age, with the average age of boys 14.2 years, and for girls, 13.8 years.¹⁰⁸

The United Nations recorded the recruitment of at least 450 children of all ages (179 boys, 166 girls, 5 sex unknown) by armed groups, in particular dissident FARC-EP groups (362, including 156 by the EMC, 15 by the CDF, and 14 by the Segunda Marquetalia), as well as the ELN (56) and the EGC (39). Two children (ages unknown) were also recruited by the Colombian army. Of the 450 children recorded as having been recruited in total, 87 were used in combat.¹⁰⁹ The total number of child recruits – and those used as soldiers – is, however, presumed to be considerably higher.¹¹⁰ Strategies of recruitment included financial incentives, seduction, use of social networks, and threats.¹¹¹

With respect to confirmed child recruitment, seventy-six per cent of cases occurred in six departments – Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, Huila, Putumayo, and Nariño – with forty per cent of the total occurring in Cauca alone.¹¹² Most of the victims were from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.¹¹³ Recruited children were routinely subjected to sexual violence and corporal punishment, including mutilation, while some were used to recruit other children by force.¹¹⁴

A number of children were also murdered by their own or a rival group. Instances of child recruits in armed groups being killed as internal reprisals were recorded by OHCHR in 2024, such as two child recruits who were tortured and killed in Guavarie.¹¹⁵ In 2024, UNICEF noted an increase in instances of torture and killings of child recruits attempting to leave a group or who were suspected of affiliation with a rival group.¹¹⁶ Child recruits were also victims of enforced disappearances in 2024, with seventy-seven cases documented by the ICRC, including twenty-three who were under the age of fifteen.¹¹⁷

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty and hostage-taking, commonly referred to domestically as *secuestro* (kidnapping),¹¹⁸ have long been used by Colombian armed groups for raising funds as well as for political or military leverage.¹¹⁹ Although the Colombian government and the ELN agreed to suspend extortion-motivated kidnappings in December 2023, incidents persist among armed groups including the ELN (which later denounced that agreement).¹²⁰

Governmental bodies registered around 300 kidnappings in 2024, but the actual number is probably far higher.¹²¹ Some, but not all, of these incidents are linked to armed conflict. For example, in April 2025, the government claimed that the ELN continued to deprive of liberty at least fifty people in Catatumbo for allegedly collaborating with the Frente 33 of the EMBF, and another eighteen were in a similar situation in the department of Arauca.¹²² Similarly, in Tibú (Catatumbo, Norte de Santander), on 19 March 2025, the Frente 33 of the EMBF detained a peasant leader, Joaquín Enrique Villamizar, accusing him of collaborating with the ELN and possessing ammunition and weapons.¹²³ Mr Villamizar was subsequently released and, as the senior peace adviser to the Norte de Santander government, Luis Fernando Niño, observes, those under the ELN's territorial control may have no choice but to comply with its orders.¹²⁴

Civilians, including children, were the most common victims of hostage-taking and arbitrary deprivation of liberty. In 2024, the United Nations documented sixteen child abductions, notably by the ELN and FARC-EP dissident groups, including the Segunda Marquetalia and the EMC.¹²⁵ Some seizures have included military victims,¹²⁶ such as on 22 June 2025, when fifty-seven Colombian soldiers were abducted by individuals wearing civilian clothes in Cauca, reportedly under pressure from the EMC. They were freed the following day by Colombian forces.¹²⁷ Several instances of arbitrary detention by the police or the military were also reported in 2024.¹²⁸

These actions typically breach the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty and, in certain circumstances, of hostage-taking.¹²⁹ Under IHL, hostage-taking amounts to a war crime in all armed conflicts.¹³⁰

Enforced disappearance

In 2024, enforced disappearances related to armed conflicts and other armed violence increased by thirteen per cent in comparison with the previous year. Affecting mainly civilians (82 per cent, 206 cases), the departments of Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca accounted for eighty-five per cent of all documented cases.¹³¹ Instances of missing members of armed groups (forty-four) and, to a far lesser extent, members of the Colombian security forces (two) were also recorded in 2024.¹³²

Prohibited under customary IHL applicable to all armed conflicts,¹³³ enforced disappearances have been described as part of armed groups' strategy to terrorize the civilian population and, in some instances, as the result of irregular deprivation of liberty,

recruitment, murder and/or mismanagement of bodies.¹³⁴ In one incident, a communal and social leader from Cubará (Boyacá), Luis Obdulio Ramón, a 59-year-old man, was abducted from his farm, allegedly by the ELN. His body was found a month later.¹³⁵

Forced labour

Cases of forced labour, prohibited under IHL applicable to NIACs,¹³⁶ were also recorded during the reporting period. Notably, according to reports, the Frente 33 of the EMBF set up ‘resocialization camps’ in the Catatumbo region where people deemed to have violated the armed group’s rules were forced to work. One victim, a 35-year-old man, said he was taken from his house on 8 December 2024 and brought to a ‘resocialization camp’ for allegedly collaborating with the Colombian Army, based on a video of a Colombian Army helicopter that he had posted on WhatsApp. According to his testimony, he and twenty-seven other people were forced to cut sugarcane every day from 4 am to 6:30 pm. He witnessed the murder of a couple who were arguing as well as sexual violence perpetrated by commanders of the Frente 33 of the EMBF against women and girls held in the camp.¹³⁷

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

In 2024, the National Victims’ Unit recorded 1,097 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, the overwhelming majority of which were committed against women and girls (1,009), but also against men and boys (73), as well as those of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (15).¹³⁸ These figures represent a sixty-eight per cent increase over 2023, with most cases recorded in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca.¹³⁹ The United Nations has reported that gender-based and sexual violence forms part of armed groups’ strategies of social control – serving to deter civilians from joining opposing groups and to punish women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ+ persons, who are seen as obstacles to the armed groups’ ideology and control – as well as a source of illicit income through human trafficking for sexual exploitation.¹⁴⁰

Indigenous persons, Afro-descendants, migrants, child recruits and, more broadly, confined populations are the primary victims of sexual violence,¹⁴¹ with Indigenous and Afro-descendants accounting for 37 per cent of the total number of cases.¹⁴² Instances of rape, child marriage, and forced contraception committed against recruited girls as young as twelve years of age were reported in 2024.¹⁴³ Of the forty-nine children who were victims of sexual violence documented by the United Nations in 2024, three were boys.¹⁴⁴ While most abuses were attributed to armed groups – in particular the EGC, the ELN, FARC-EP dissident factions, including the EMBF – the United Nations has also verified allegations of gender-based and sexual violence by members of the Colombian security forces.¹⁴⁵

Under-reporting of gender-based and sexual violence remains significant, driven by the normalization of such violence, the stigmatization of survivors, and limited access to legal and medical support services. Nonetheless, OHCHR received multiple reports of trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls in locations under the control of armed groups in Antioquia, El Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander.¹⁴⁶ OHCHR also documented murders, threats, displacement, and attacks against individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.¹⁴⁷

The above incidents constitute sexual violence, which is explicitly prohibited under IHL as violence to life and person and outrages upon personal dignity.¹⁴⁸ The prohibition covers rape, enforced prostitution, and other forms of sexual violence, as well as similarly cruel or degrading treatment. These prohibitions are enshrined in treaty and

custom, and serious violations are war crimes.¹⁴⁹ In some instances, armed groups employed sexual mutilation to terrorize populations.¹⁵⁰ This has been identified as the second most common form of sexual violence perpetrated against men.¹⁵¹ Women have reportedly been forced to witness such acts to intimidate male relatives and deter enlistment in rival groups.¹⁵² In addition to being war crimes as sexual violence, this may also constitute acts of terrorism under IHL and international criminal law.¹⁵³

Treatment of persons with disabilities

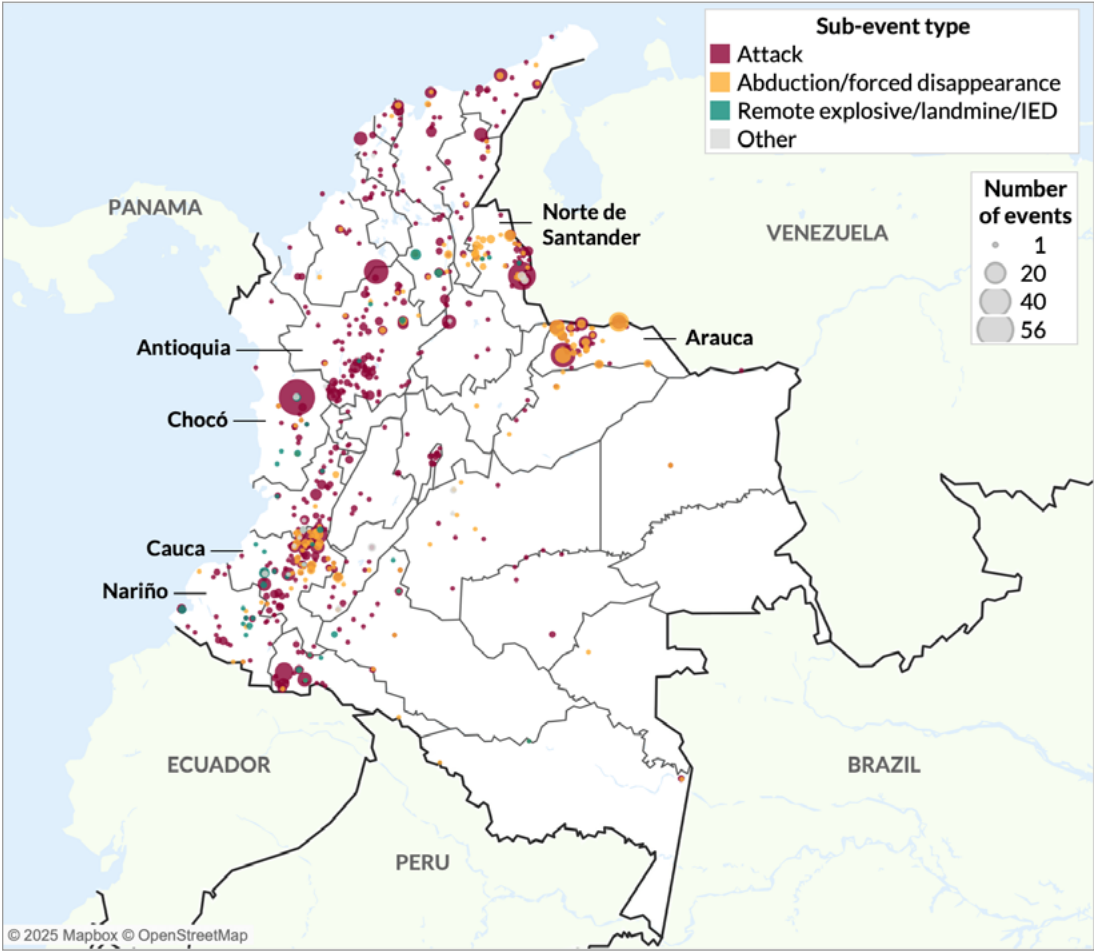
According to official data, 4.5 per cent of Colombia's population over five years of age live with a disability,¹⁵⁴ with visual impairments the most prevalent.¹⁵⁵ Colombia adhered to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011. The Convention requires that the State take, in accordance with IHL and international human rights law, 'all necessary measures' to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in armed conflict.¹⁵⁶ Persons with disabilities have been largely excluded from peace talks in the past, with those with psycho-social and intellectual impairments said to remain 'invisible members of the society'.¹⁵⁷ In July 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Heba Hagrass, urged Colombia to translate its robust legal framework into concrete actions and for the authorities to disaggregate data based on disability.¹⁵⁸

The widespread use of anti-personnel mines and IEDs inevitably causes significant numbers of traumatic amputations with the survivors needing lifelong care in order to be reintegrated effectively into society. International NGO Humanity & Inclusion (HI) provides rehabilitation and mental health and psychosocial support for both armed conflict and migration settings.¹⁵⁹ In northern Colombia, HI assisted more than 20,600 people in 2024, with nearly 7,000 receiving physiotherapy, crutches, and/or prostheses, and 4,800 receiving psycho-social support.¹⁶⁰

Figure 5.1: UN Map of Colombia © United Nations



Figure 5.2: Violence by Armed Groups affecting Civilians in Colombia in 2024 © ACLED



ENDNOTES

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6. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Since 1996, conflict in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has caused approximately six million deaths.¹ The First Congo War (1996–97) broke out in the wake of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, following which some two million Hutus crossed into the DRC (then known as Zaïre). Those who settled in refugee camps in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu included Hutu extremists responsible for the genocide. Rwandan troops under President Paul Kagame and Tutsi militias in the DRC operating with his support invaded Zaïre, which was then ruled by Mobutu Sese Seko. After defeating Mobutu, DRC opposition leader Laurent Kabila was made president. President Kabila decided to change the country's name back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Second Congo War began in 1998 following a deterioration of relations with Rwanda. President Kabila ordered all foreign troops out of the country and allowed Hutu armed groups to organize at the border once again. Rwanda invaded in 1998. Laurent Kabila was assassinated in a 2001 coup attempt but his son, Joseph Kabila, seized power. The Second Congo War is considered the deadliest since the Second World War, with an estimated death toll of three million.

Among many armed groups to emerge in the early 2000s was the March 23 Movement (M23), which was composed mainly of ethnic Tutsis. In 2013, the United Nations (UN) Security Council authorized a brigade of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to support the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) in their fight against M23. M23 stopped fighting in 2013.

Félix Tshisekedi was controversially declared the winner of the DRC's presidential elections of December 2018 – with evidence that another candidate had actually won more votes – although the handover from President Kabila marked the first peaceful transfer of power in the history of the DRC. President Tshisekedi had to confront outbreaks of Ebola virus and the continuing violence in the east, which was spurred by the abundant presence of natural resources, especially precious minerals. In 2022, M23 rebels resurfaced, seizing control of large parts of North Kivu province by July 2023.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The DRC, the second largest country in Africa, had five non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) on its territory during the reporting period. Two involve the State armed forces – the FARDC – fighting a non-State armed group, namely, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO). A third NIAC is being fought between the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and CODECO. The two other NIACs involve one organized armed group fighting another: CODECO against Zaïre; and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) against M23.

In addition, and despite its consistent denials,² Rwanda exerts a level of control over the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23)³ such that the NIAC between the DRC and M23 is also an international armed conflict (IAC) under international humanitarian law (IHL).⁴ Control over M23, a group led mostly by Congolese Tutsis and which operates under the umbrella of the 'Alliance Fleuve Congo' (AFC),⁵ has been buttressed by the presence of Rwandan regular forces in the eastern DRC.⁶ These regions are rich in minerals, particularly gold, tin, tantalum, and tungsten.⁷ More than 120 armed groups are engaged in violence in the provinces of North and South Kivu and Ituri.⁸

On 27 January 2025, M23 seized control of the city of Goma in eastern DRC, the provincial capital of mineral-rich North Kivu, following a ‘coordinated offensive’ with Rwandan troops. M23 and RDF troops entered Goma on multiple fronts, sparking intense clashes and heavy artillery exchanges.⁹ On 16 February, M23 took Bukavu, the provincial capital of South Kivu and second largest city in the east.¹⁰ The group then captured Walikale, a mining hub in North Kivu, on 19 March 2025 – the farthest west they have ever reached. M23 later said they would withdraw from the town in a ‘gesture of peace’.¹¹ They made good on the pledge in early April 2025.¹²

In September 2025, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a report on the hostilities against M23 and the subsequent occupation. The fact-finding mission, which was established pursuant to a February 2025 Human Rights Council resolution,¹³ concluded that between January and July 2025, all parties to the conflicts committed serious violations of international law that may constitute international crimes. The mission recommended the prompt establishment of a formal commission of inquiry, as the Council resolution had mandated.¹⁴

Attempts to broker a sustained peace between the DRC and Rwanda have so far proved unsuccessful. A ceasefire agreed upon in July 2024 following Angolan mediation did not hold, although at a meeting a month later in Rubavu in Rwanda, officials discussed the neutralization of the FDLR and the withdrawal of Rwandan forces as the basis for a durable peace.¹⁵ Nevertheless, on 29 August 2024, the DRC launched proceedings against Rwanda in the East African Court of Justice, alleging violations of its sovereignty and the perpetration of crimes against civilians.¹⁶

On 14 October 2024, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court announced renewed investigations into possible crimes committed in North Kivu since January 2022.¹⁷ Operations by M23 and the RDF in Kalehe territory in South Kivu between December 2024 and January 2025 prompted deployment to the DRC of the Burundi army, the Force de Défense Nationale du Burundi (FDNB), which occurred with the consent of the DRC government.¹⁸

On 27 June 2025, the ministers for foreign affairs of the DRC and Rwanda signed a peace agreement brokered by the United States and Qatar in Washington, DC. The deal demands the ‘disengagement, disarmament and conditional integration’ of armed groups fighting in eastern DRC and the withdrawal of the RDF from Congolese territory. By signing the Washington peace agreement, it has become more difficult for Rwanda to deny its involvement in the conflict.¹⁹ Former Congolese president Joseph Kabila (who has been sentenced to death in absentia by a DRC military court for crimes against the DRC),²⁰ derided the peace deal as ‘nothing more than a trade agreement’.²¹

The following day, six armed groups, namely the Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO), Zaïre, the Mouvement Populaire d’Autodéfense de l’Ituri (MAPI), the Force de résistance patriotique en Ituri (FRPI), the Front Patriotique et Intégrationniste du Congo (FPIC), and Chini Ya Tuna, signed a cessation of hostilities agreement in Aru, Ituri province.²² Nevertheless, violence by and between some of these groups has continued. In early October 2025, MONUSCO publicly condemned killings by CODECO and Zaïre in Ituri, each group claiming to be protecting its own people.²³ The FPAC-Zaïre armed group (commonly known as the Ituri Self-Defense Popular Front) is mainly composed of members of the Hema (or Hemu) community.

Serious IHL violations continued beyond the end of June 2025: in July, M23 launched a major offensive operation in Bwisha chefferie in Rutshuru town in North Kivu

– a predominantly Hutu area and traditional FDLR stronghold – in which survivors described the summary execution of hundreds of mostly Hutu civilians, including dozens of children (including infants) with machetes and axes.²⁴

In mid-November 2025, the DRC government signed a ‘framework for peace’ with M23 in Qatar.²⁵ The framework, which contained eight protocols on different issues such as humanitarian access, prisoner exchange, the return of IDPs, and the protection of the judiciary, did not, though, end the fighting.²⁶ In early December, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi and Rwanda President Paul Kagame travelled to Washington, DC, to sign an ‘historic peace and economic agreement’ brokered by US President Donald Trump.²⁷

Peacekeeping

The Southern African Development Community Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC) was a military force tasked to support the DRC government’s struggle against M23. SAMIDRC deployment began in mid-December 2023 with troops from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania.²⁸ Its mandate was renewed on 20 November 2024 for a period of one year.²⁹ But after a surge in attacks in eastern DRC in January 2025, which resulted in the death of fourteen South African soldiers on 13 March 2025 (along with others from Malawi and Tanzania), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) decided to terminate the mission ahead of the stipulated end date.³⁰ Phased withdrawal began in late April 2025,³¹ with the final phase initiated in June.³²

MONUSCO has long been supporting the FARDC in the struggle against a range of armed groups in the DRC. Its offensive role in the hostilities alongside the FARDC, conducted through its ‘Force Intervention Brigade’, means that MONUSCO is also a party to the IAC between the DRC and Rwanda (through M23 as its proxy) and the NIAC between the DRC and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a group affiliated with Islamic State.³³ While, at the time of writing, M23 and the ADF had yet to clash with each other, their simultaneous operations in geographically proximate areas was straining the military capacities of the FARDC.³⁴

As of July 2025, MONUSCO had more than 13,500 personnel in the DRC, of whom almost 10,000 were troops.³⁵ MONUSCO’s ‘strategic priorities’ are set by the UN Security Council, namely to ‘contribute to the protection of civilians in its area of deployment’ and to ‘support the stabilisation and strengthening of State institutions in the DRC’.³⁶ After a proposal to withdraw in 2024,³⁷ MONUSCO’s mandate was extended until 20 December 2025, ‘including, on an exceptional basis and without creating a precedent or any prejudice to the basic principles of peacekeeping, its Force Intervention Brigade’.³⁸ The mission’s presence beyond that date was uncertain at the time of writing.

The Humanitarian Situation

The consequences of the widespread violence in the DRC are also seen in the displacement of civilians, with the DRC home to one of the world’s largest displaced populations.³⁹ More than thirteen million people are facing acute hunger, and over five million have fled their homes.⁴⁰ The DRC continues to be one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

International Armed Conflicts

The conflict between the DRC (and its supporting forces – Burundi, MONUSCO, and SAMIDRC) and M23 is of an international character owing to the level of control exerted by Rwanda over the group. The Group of Experts established pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2582 found that the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) had ‘effective control’ and exerted ‘de facto direction’ over M23 operations,⁴¹ meaning that Rwanda is also responsible under international law for the illegal acts of M23.⁴² Rwanda is also engaged in belligerent occupation of certain areas within the DRC, both directly and through its proxy, M23. The leader of M23, Sultani Makenga, is a Congolese Tutsi who previously fought in the Rwandan army.

The DRC is a State Party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I of 1977.⁴³ The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I apply to the IAC with Rwanda and its belligerent occupation of the DRC. Customary IHL also applies to all parties to an IAC.

Members of local ‘Wazalendo’ (meaning ‘patriot’ in Swahili) groups – an ‘eclectic coalition’ of armed groups and self-defence militia armed by Kinshasa to fight M23⁴⁴ – are to be considered civilians directly participating in hostilities rather than a party to the IAC, as they do not fulfil the criteria for organization, and are neither members of the armed forces nor a militia belonging to them. Indeed, between February and May 2025, there were reports of clashes between Wazalendo fighters and retreating FARDC troops. The clashes facilitated the escape of a reported 770 inmates from Uvira prison on 19 February, including some who had been sentenced for war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁴⁵ Individual civilians may be held to have committed war crimes even if they do not belong to a party to an armed conflict.

The UN Secretary-General’s Bulletin of 1999, ‘Observance by United Nations forces of international humanitarian law’, stipulates that the ‘fundamental principles and rules’ of IHL set forth in the Bulletin ‘are applicable to United Nations forces when in situations of armed conflict they are actively engaged therein as combatants, to the extent and for the duration of their engagement’.⁴⁶ In addition to the basic IHL rules of targeting, use of anti-personnel mines, booby-traps, and incendiary weapons is explicitly prohibited.⁴⁷ In certain respects, these prohibitions go beyond the dictates of customary IHL.

Finally, in their July 2025 report, the Group of Experts suggest – but do not definitively conclude – that Uganda, and specifically the Uganda People’s Defence Force (the UPDF), may have gone beyond the terms of consent from Kinshasa to use force on the territory of the DRC. If so, this would amount to an IAC between the DRC and Uganda. Notably, in February and March 2025, without the approval of the Government of the DRC, the UPDF deployed more than 1,000 troops and ‘considerable military materiel to Bunia, as well as Mahagi and Djugu territories’. The operation ‘fell outside the mandate and chain of command of Operation Shujaa’.⁴⁸ This military operation had been launched in 2021 with the consent of the DRC allowing for UPDF deployment to Ituri and North Kivu provinces, ostensibly to clear the area of the ADF. The IHL in Focus Project has not determined that an IAC exists between the DRC and Uganda, but only, as noted below, that the UPDF is engaged in a NIAC with CODECO on the territory of the DRC.

Non-International Armed Conflicts

There were also five NIACs on the territory of the DRC during the reporting period:

- DRC *v* Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)
- DRC *v* Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO)
- UPDF *v* CODECO
- FDLR *v* M23
- CODECO *v* Zaïre.

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL apply to these five NIACs. The DRC is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.⁴⁹ The Protocol, which requires sustained territorial control by an organized armed group, also applies to the NIACs in the east between the FARDC and the ADF, and the FARDC and M23.

The FDLR are fighting against M23 in a separate NIAC. In response to the 2025 OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission, the Congolese government stated that formal orders had been issued by the President and FARDC Chief of Staff to prohibit any collaboration with the FDLR.⁵⁰ The FDLR is believed to include in its ranks individuals responsible for the Rwandan genocide; indeed, Kigali describes the group as a ‘genocidal militia’, stating that its existence in eastern DRC threatens its own territory. In February 2025, a Rwandan government spokesperson claimed that the FDLR wanted to return to Rwanda to ‘finish the job’.⁵¹

The DRC is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which it ratified in 2002.⁵² The current regional focus of the ICC’s investigation is international crimes allegedly perpetrated in North and South Kivu since 1 January 2022.⁵³

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, there were consistent reports of attacks against civilians and civilian objects in the conduct of hostilities, as well as summary executions by many parties, both State and non-State. Violence by all armed groups in the DRC combined caused more than 2,500 reported fatalities (military as well as civilian) in the first three months of 2025, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED).⁵⁴ The Congolese prime minister, Judith Suminwa, claimed a far higher figure of 7,000 deaths for the first two months of 2025 alone.⁵⁵

Writing in July 2025, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect described a combination of indiscriminate use of heavy artillery, shelling, and bombings near civilian areas; alarming levels of conflict-related sexual violence, disproportionately impacting displaced women and girls; and the recruitment of children and their use by a myriad of armed actors as attaining ‘an unprecedented scale’. The security vacuum exacerbated by FARDC’s deployment to fight M23 and MONUSCO’s withdrawal from South Kivu had, the Global Centre said, ‘emboldened other armed groups to remobilize and target civilians’.⁵⁶

Indeed, as M23 took hold of the east, the ADF capitalized on the chaos, with a ‘surge’ in its targeting of civilians. Rather than replacing local authorities with their own administration as M23 has tended to do, the ADF ‘decimates’ local areas through mass killings, looting, hostage-taking, and the burning of homes.⁵⁷ On 9 January 2025, M23 and the RDF fought against the FARDC in Kaseghe, a town in Lubero territory in North Kivu. Two days later, the ADF took advantage of the FARDC’s resultant instability to mount an

attack in the same locality, reportedly killing eleven civilians. Operation Shujaa is said to have been effective in reducing overall levels of ADF violence, but it has ‘struggled to curb civilian targeting’.⁵⁸

CODECO is a small armed group that has also regularly attacked civilians, particularly ethnic Hemu.⁵⁹ In February 2025, its militia attacked a set of villages in Djaiba, in Ituri province, where an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp was located. Antoinette Nzale, the head of the camp, said that at least fifty-five civilians had been killed, although the final toll was expected to have been higher as bodies were still being recovered from burnt-out homes.⁶⁰ MONUSCO issued a statement calling for an accelerated process of disarmament and demobilization, and continues to urge dialogue between ethnic Lendu and Hemu.⁶¹

Civilian Objects under Attack

The ADF and M23 as well as CODECO have regularly attacked civilian objects, especially medical facilities and humanitarian aid warehouses, as well as people’s homes. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.⁶² Special protection is afforded to medical units, such as hospitals and other medical facilities.⁶³ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.⁶⁴ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁶⁵ Pillage – the looting of private property, including humanitarian and medical supplies – is prohibited under IHL.⁶⁶

Attacks against medical facilities

At least seventy-seven incidents of violence against, or obstruction of, healthcare occurred in eastern DRC in 2024, with most incidents recorded in Ituri and North and South Kivu. Health centres were set on fire, medical supplies were looted, and health workers were killed, kidnapped, or threatened. In Tanganyika province, where reported incidents doubled between 2023 and 2024, vaccination campaigns were repeatedly disrupted by threats and violence.⁶⁷

Looting of vital medical supplies from health facilities was reported on eleven occasions in eastern DRC in 2024, with the ADF, CODECO, and M23 as well as Mai-Mai militia and unidentified armed men cited as the perpetrators. Looters stole laboratory equipment, medicine, mattresses, and nutritional supplies from health centres, hospitals, and pharmacies, predominately across Ituri and North and South Kivu. In one incident, CODECO militia attacked Drodoro General Hospital in Ituri province’s Djugu territory, which was supported by Médecins Sans Frontières, pillaging the hospital and pharmacy, killing a patient, and forcing staff and patients to flee.⁶⁸

Physicians for Human Rights reported that during the takeover of Goma by M23 and their allies, health facilities were subjected to indiscriminate shooting and bombing, with shells falling on the Charité and Virunga hospitals. M23 forces opened fire on an ambulance on mission from Charité hospital and a trainee doctor was shot in the leg. Kyeshero hospital, as with other facilities supported by humanitarian agencies, was looted, as were the warehouses used for storing medical equipment and humanitarian supplies. These violations occurred amid a public health crisis that included outbreaks of mpox and cholera.⁶⁹

On 7 February 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that more than seventy (six per cent) of the health facilities in North Kivu had been affected by the

increased violence, with some completely destroyed and others struggling to restart operations. Some ambulances had also been damaged. A health clinic in North Kivu supported by WHO was temporarily occupied by armed groups. In some places health workers had to flee, while in others they were working round the clock for days on end, with limited resources and overwhelming demand.⁷⁰

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) conducted a study in April–May 2025 of 109 health centres in North and South Kivu where the organization operates. The study found that in the areas most exposed to the violence, part of the healthcare system risked total collapse. Three of every five facilities surveyed had been looted since the conflicts escalated. ‘Our health centre was looted. They took the equipment and the medicine. Without any medicine, we struggle to treat even everyday illnesses like malaria, respiratory infections and diarrhoea’, said a nurse at a health centre in Kalehe, in South Kivu. Other knock-on effects of these crimes can be similarly devastating. Etienne Penlap, the ICRC’s health coordinator for the DRC, said there had been a four-fold increase in the number of stillbirths in the facilities included in the study, particularly in North Kivu.

This illustrates how hard it is for mothers to access health centres for ante- and postnatal visits. We fear the worst in terms of vaccine coverage for newborns and for mothers and children in a region where there are many epidemics and endemic diseases.⁷¹

Attacks against humanitarian aid

In the east of the country, multiple warring parties, including M23, the ADF, and, to some extent, Wazalendo militia, have blocked the delivery of aid and provoked further displacement. After M23’s capture of Goma, fighters destroyed aid infrastructure in Goma, causing, among other things, a cholera outbreak. The destruction included more than US\$700,000-worth of water and sanitation infrastructure, such as pipelines, latrines, and tanks, forcing people to drink from contaminated streams and lakes.⁷² The United Nations reported that in Goma criminal activity surged as M23 took control, ‘with home invasions, kidnappings and vehicle hijackings targeting humanitarian agencies. Some incidents have resulted in deaths.’⁷³

More broadly, since March 2025 in North Kivu, a number of NGOs received letters from the de facto General Directorate of Finance requesting tax declarations and threatening enforcement measures. Similar demands emerged in South Kivu in the middle of April. These came on the back of government-related delays on granting access or administrative bottlenecks. A new notification and validation mechanism has also been introduced for the transportation of medical supplies, which require multiple levels of authorization – ‘triple validation’ – which has led to significant delays in the delivery of essential medicines, placing additional threats to safety.⁷⁴

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁷⁵ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁷⁶ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful military objectives. However, such attacks must not be

disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life and injury to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).⁷⁷

Despite these rules, violence directed against civilians became increasingly widespread in the DRC during the reporting period. While all armed actors have killed and injured civilians, the ADF have been responsible for more cases than any other armed group – and the problem is worsening. The ADF shares photos and videos of its brutality through its own media channels and via Islamic State ‘Central’. In exchange for the affiliation to Islamic State and the depiction in its media of violence typically framed against ‘Christians’, ‘crusaders’, or ‘infidels’, the ADF receives funding and training from the group’s East African hub.⁷⁸

The ADF camp in Lubero territory is under the leadership of Ahmad Mahmood Hassan, a Tanzanian national commonly known as Abwakasi who has been listed by the UN Security Council’s Sanctions Committee since 20 February 2024.⁷⁹ This camp was the most deadly toward civilians in the reporting period, with civilian killings by the ADF in Lubero accounting for more than forty per cent of the total caused by the group. Overall civilian fatalities rose by sixty-eight per cent in the first quarter of 2025 compared to the previous quarter – the second-deadliest three months of civilian targeting by the ADF since ACLED began recording data on the group in 1997.⁸⁰

Moreover, despite the relative success of Operation Shujaa in eliminating key ADF commanders and dismantling some camps, ADF attacks on civilians have intensified. The ADF has increasingly adopted a ‘survival-oriented approach, relying on opportunistic ambushes or attacks on roads, small villages and farmers for looting, kidnapping, revenge, and fulfilling the jihadist aim of killing “kafir” (non-Muslim infidels).’⁸¹ The violence has affected the broader Beni region, north-western Lubero in North Kivu, and southern Ituri, particularly in Mambasa and Irumu territories. June 2024 was the deadliest month on record for ADF-perpetrated civilian killings, with more than 200 deaths reported across Beni, Lubero, and southern Ituri.⁸²

OHCHR also received first-hand accounts indicating that at least 319 civilians were killed by M23 fighters, aided by the RDF, between 9 and 21 July in North Kivu. Most of the victims – including at least forty-eight women and nineteen children – were local farmers camping in their fields during the planting season.⁸³

Forced displacement

Of the more than 7 million IDPs in the DRC, 3.8 million are in North and South Kivu provinces. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), around ninety-three per cent of the 5.3 million displacements triggered by conflict and violence in 2024 took place in the east and notably in North Kivu.⁸⁴ Nearly 780,000 people were forced to flee their homes between November 2024 and January 2025 alone. One quarter of the population face food shortages, with movement restrictions in and around Goma significantly hindering the delivery of aid.

By the end of 2024, of the DRC’s total population of some 112 million, armed conflicts, rising food prices, and epidemics had pushed 25 million people into acute food insecurity. Looting of humanitarian warehouses further crippled relief efforts, with large quantities of food, medicine, and medical supplies lost in targeted attacks on humanitarian organizations.⁸⁵ IHL prohibits the forced displacement of civilians except for their security or for imperative military reasons.⁸⁶ All belligerent actors in eastern DRC have provoked displacement, but the specific action of M23 in unlawfully ordering tens of thousands of the displaced to leave

their camps around Goma in February 2025 was a serious violation of IHL and potentially a war crime.⁸⁷ On 9 February, M23 told camp leaders and residents of Bulengo and Lushagala IDP camps west of the city they had seventy-two hours to leave. After M23 gave the order, the Lushagala camp was looted and humanitarian organizations were prevented from working there. A camp resident who was at the meeting with M23 told Human Rights Watch:

We tried to explain why we are still here. The majority of us no longer have homes, some have disabilities and need support to travel, others have large families. We don't have food to sustain ourselves during the trip. But they responded to all of our concerns by saying, 'What is said is said. By Thursday, everyone should be gone.'⁸⁸

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

In addition to widespread war crimes, it has been alleged that M23 has committed crimes against humanity. In September 2025, the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission found reasonable grounds to believe that M23 members may have committed, in furtherance of a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population, the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape and sexual slavery, enslavement in 'training' camps serving to exact forced labour and military servitude, enforced disappearance, unlawful deprivation of liberty, and deportation or forcible transfer of population.⁸⁹

In parts of Rutshuru where the FDLR is present, M23 has mounted repeated offensives, with reports of mass killings of civilians and restrictions on access to farmland where the Hutu rebels are thought to be active. Prisoners held by M23 in Rutshuru describe appalling conditions of detention.⁹⁰ In July 2025, M23 fighters summarily executed more than one hundred mostly Hutu civilians in at least fourteen villages and farming communities in Rutshuru's Binza area. Witness accounts and military sources told Human Rights Watch that the Rwandan military participated in the operations.⁹¹ In addition to being responsible for its own actions, as mentioned above, since Rwanda exercises effective control over M23 it is also responsible under international law for the actions of M23.

Murder and abduction of civilians

The ADF is also alleged to have committed both war crimes and crimes against humanity. ACLED recorded at least 450 killings by the ADF in the first quarter of 2025, exclusively perpetrated against unarmed civilians. This included the abduction and mass killing of seventy people at a church in Lubero territory on 11 February, which followed simultaneous attacks on five localities in Lubero on 15 January that killed at least 112. Attacks by the group in 2024 had already resulted in the year being the deadliest on record for its targeting of civilians, with more than 1,600 reported deaths.⁹²

The OHCHR Fact Finding Mission documented deliberate killings of civilians by the FARDC after fighting with Wazalendo, often in retaliation for the victims' presumed support to the militia. From 15 to 17 February, soldiers from the FARDC's 'Guépard' and 'Satan II' units summarily executed at least twenty civilians in Kamanyola, South Kivu. The massacre occurred after hundreds of FARDC troops died during clashes with Wazalendo. Most of the victims – men and teenage boys suspected of belonging to or supporting Wazalendo – were shot in the street or in the course of door-to-door searches. Credible sources believe the death toll to be significantly higher, although the Mission said this required further investigation.⁹³

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

The various conflicts have seen an epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence – with the crimes committed by almost every party to the armed conflicts in the country. Victims ranged in age from one year to seventy-five years old.⁹⁴ Reports of summary executions of victims after rape persisted. While women and girls continued to constitute the vast majority of victims, men and boys were also affected. Denis Mukwege, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for his work against sexual violence in the DRC, said: ‘When you have people raping with complete immunity – and think they can go on and on without any consequence – nothing will change.’⁹⁵

The OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission concluded that M23 members perpetrated rape and other forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery, primarily (but not only) against women and girls. The acts, which involved senior M23 members directly, formed part of a widespread and systematic attack against civilians, occurred ‘daily across the entirety of the territory under M23’s control’. They followed ‘discernible, recurring patterns, indicating a high degree of organization, planning, and resource mobilization’.⁹⁶

The Fact-Finding Mission also examined whether repeated acts of rape, including gang rape, and other forms of sexual violence committed by specific FARDC units in January and February could similarly amount to crimes against humanity. In particular, the Mission identified a pattern of widespread use of sexual violence by members of FARDC and Wazalendo during their retreat from the frontlines in January and February 2025.⁹⁷ Civil society organizations reported more than 1,000 victims of sexual violence between January and June in South Kivu, mostly women and teenage girls,⁹⁸ while official sources reported 127 cases of sexual violence in South Kivu in the first two weeks of February alone.⁹⁹

Witnesses and victims described armed men forcing their way into homes, stealing valuables, raping women, girls, and, in some cases, men, and executing those who resisted. One man in South Kivu was stripped naked, severely beaten until he lost consciousness, and gang-raped by FARDC and Wazalendo members. In North Kivu, women and adolescent girls were subjected to gang rapes by retreating FARDC and Wazalendo. One woman was held hostage, tied to a tree and raped daily for two weeks by multiple perpetrators until her family paid a ransom.¹⁰⁰

Notwithstanding the consistent pattern across multiple locations and over a wide geographic area, the Mission was unable to conclude whether these acts occurred in course of an attack carried out pursuant to a State policy.¹⁰¹ Although required under the Rome Statute for material jurisdiction by the International Criminal Court,¹⁰² such a finding is not necessary under customary international criminal law.¹⁰³

Individuals who did not belong to M23 have also taken advantage of the chaos as the group seized Goma to commit war crimes, with hundreds of women raped and then burned alive having been attacked in their wing inside the city’s Munzenze prison during a mass jailbreak. The deputy head of MONUSCO, Vivian van de Perre, said that while several thousand men managed to escape from the prison, the area reserved for women was set on fire: ‘There was a major prison breakout of 4,000 escaped prisoners. A few hundred women were also in that prison. They were all raped and then they set fire to the women’s wing. They all died afterwards.’¹⁰⁴

The UN Secretary-General, in his report on conflict-related sexual violence for 2024, stated that the hostilities between the FARDC and armed groups ‘propelled mass displacement and exacerbated risks of trafficking for the purposes of sexual slavery and exploitation in and around displacement sites. The intensification of conflict in North

Kivu and its spillover in South Kivu, in the context of the withdrawal of MONUSCO from South Kivu in June, resulted in a dramatic surge in sexual violence. More than 17,000 victims were treated between January and May 2024 in North Kivu. Many survivors sought care after violent sexual attacks, including penetration with objects, perpetrated by multiple perpetrators.¹⁰⁵

The Secretary-General's report affirmed that armed groups 'continued to use sexual violence as a tactic to assert control over territory and natural resources'. The number of cases of sexual violence implicating M23 in North Kivu rose from 43 in 2022 to 152 in 2024. While no cases of conflict-related sexual violence have been attributed to the RDF, M23 'has continued to receive instructions and support from the Rwanda Defence Force, which exercises de facto control and direction over the group'.¹⁰⁶ In Ituri, more than fifty cases implicated members of CODECO, who perpetrated gang rape during village incursions. Members of the ADF abducted and sexually enslaved girls during village raids and forced them to marry fighters.¹⁰⁷

Attacks against journalists

DRC is an extremely dangerous place to be a journalist – and not only close to the front lines. As Reporters Without Borders has stated: 'Arrests, assaults, threats, forced disappearances, executions, media outlets suspended, looted, ransacked, and more — journalists in the DRC operate in a climate of great insecurity.' The group says the security forces are implicated in numerous violations, 'and enjoy total impunity'.

Due to the conflicts in the east, many journalists are forced to flee their place of work and are subjected to attacks and persecution. Between January 2024 and January 2025 in North Kivu, more than twenty-five community radio stations were looted or forced to shut down, and over fifty attacks on newsrooms and journalists were documented.¹⁰⁸ 'As soon as the rebels entered, we changed our programming schedules', a journalist told *The New Humanitarian*. 'News programmes, talk shows, and programmes dealing with security are no longer broadcast.' A local radio journalist from another village said his station suspended broadcasts after rebels looted their small studio – taking not just the mixer, computers, and microphones, but even plastic chairs and the mattress they slept on for night shifts. 'We don't want any martyrs', said the reporter. 'We've noticed that we journalists are the most targeted [by M23].'¹⁰⁹

Government ministers have regularly accused journalists of supporting terrorism for reporting on rebel advances, suspended Al Jazeera and withdrawn accreditation for the broadcaster's reporters, and threatened to suspend other media outlets.¹¹⁰ Discouraging the armed forces via the media in wartime is a criminal offence punishable by death.¹¹¹ This penalty is itself a violation of international law, which only allows the imposition of capital punishment for the 'most serious crimes',¹¹² defined as limited to those involving intentional killing.¹¹³

In a 7 January 2025 post on social media site X, Christian Bosembe, the president of the Higher Council for Audiovisual and Communication (CSAC), threatened to suspend French news outlets Radio France Internationale (RFI), France 24, and TV5 Monde's Africa programme for reporting the 'alleged advances of terrorists'.¹¹⁴ 'We respect freedom of expression and information', he claimed, 'but we firmly condemn any apology for terrorism. Terrorists have no right to speak in our country'. When government forces recaptured territory a few days later, the Minister of Justice, Constant Mutamba, congratulated them on X, while warning that anyone who 'reports the activities' of M23 and Rwandan forces 'will now suffer the full force of the law (DEATH PENALTY.)'¹¹⁵ The DRC ended a twenty-one-year moratorium on executions in 2024.¹¹⁶

Figure 6.1: UN Map of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

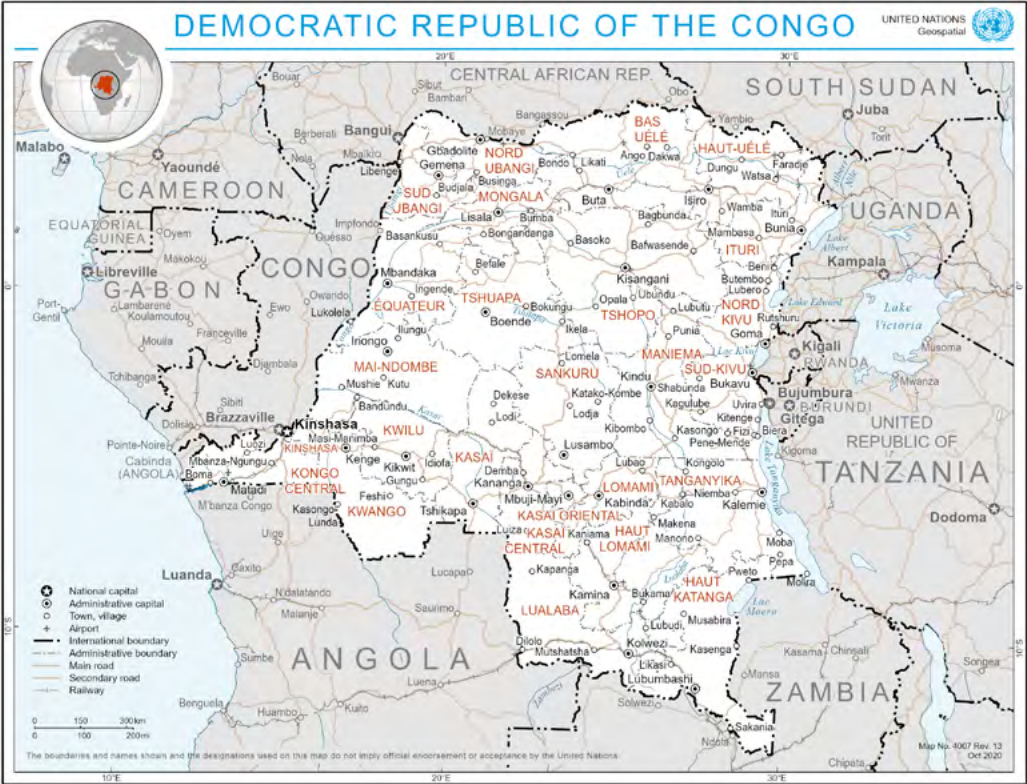


Figure 6.2: Displacement in eastern DRC at 12 August 2025 © UNHCR

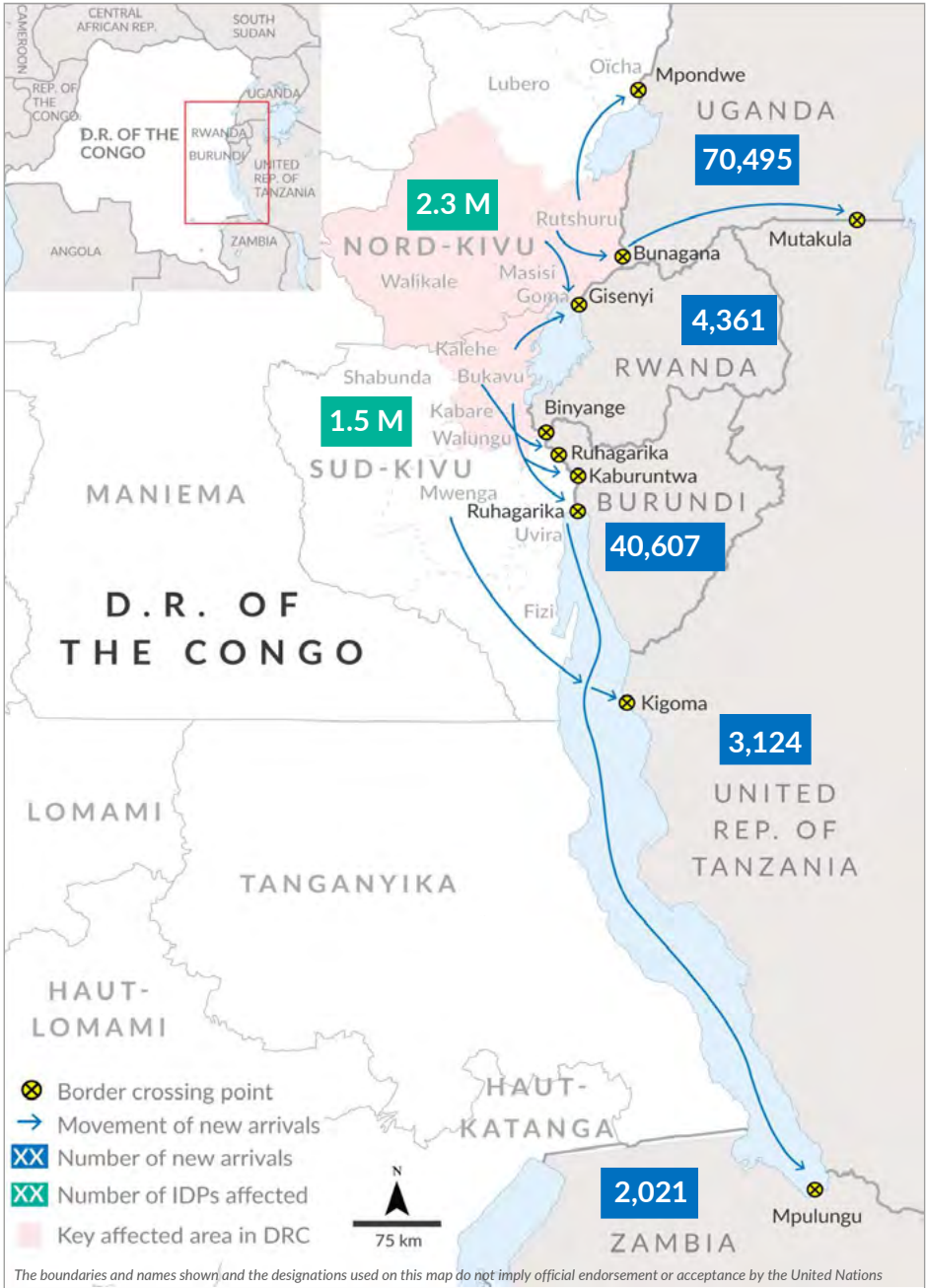
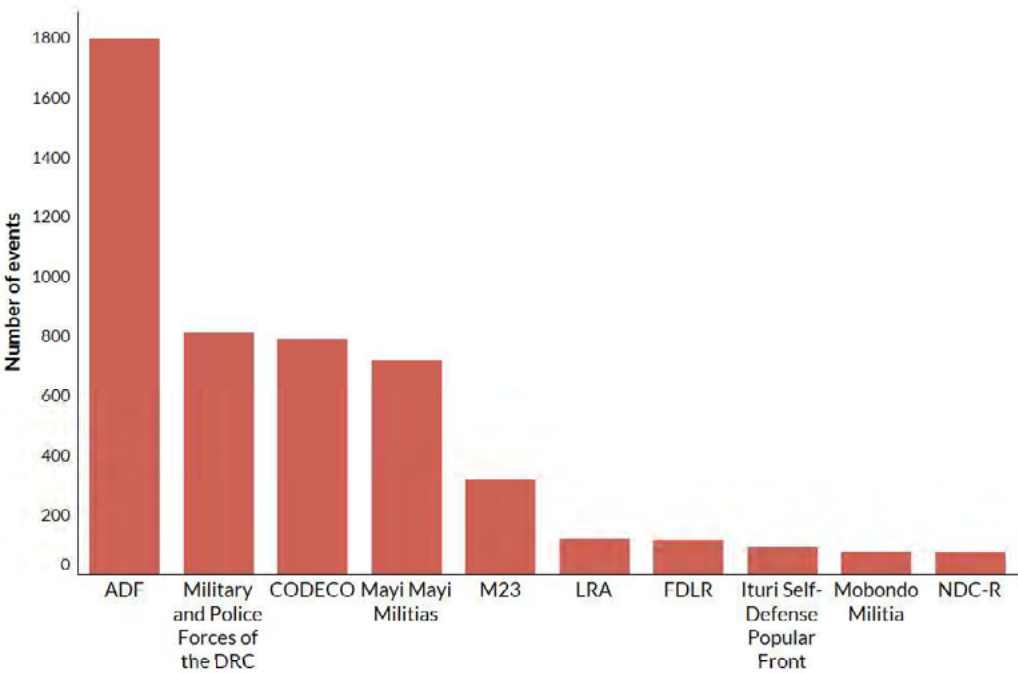


**Figure 6.3: Top Ten Perpetrators of Violence against Civilians
(January 2018 to March 2025) © ACLED**



ENDNOTES

1 Center for Preventive Action, 'Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo', Council for Foreign Relations, Updated 16 December 2025, <https://bit.ly/3KZqWk9>.

2 Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, UN Doc A/HRC/60/80, Geneva, 5 September 2025, <http://bit.ly/4nGC8Ae>, para 8. See also: Letter dated 10 June 2022 from the Group of Experts extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2582 (2021) addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc S/2022/479, 14 June 2022, <http://bit.ly/48gXE9V>, Annex 39.

3 See eg: Letter dated 3 July 2025 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc S/2025/446, 3 July 2025, <http://bit.ly/4mOJi40>, paras 44, 45. Shortly after its creation in 2012, M23 rapidly gained territory and seized Goma – acts that saw accusations of war crimes and human rights abuses. After being forced to withdraw from Goma, the group suffered a series of heavy defeats at the hands of the DRC army along with a UN force that saw it expelled from the country. M23 fighters agreed to be integrated into the army in return for promises that Tutsis would be protected. But in 2021, the group took up arms again, saying the promises had been broken. The group take its name from a peace agreement that was signed with a previous Tutsi-led rebel group on 23 March 2009. D. Zane and W. Chibelushi, 'DR Congo's M23 conflict: What is the fighting about and is Rwanda involved?', *BBC*, 27 January 2025 (Updated 1 July 2025), <http://bit.ly/3WxDOjk>.

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7. ETHIOPIA



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Two non-international armed conflicts persist in Ethiopia, in each case pitting State armed forces against an organized non-State armed group. One conflict involves the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) fighting the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), while the other concerns regular and intense combat between the ENDF and Fano militias in Amhara region. The OLA have also fought Fano militia, but the violence between the two groups has not reached the intensity necessary for a non-international armed conflict (NIAC).

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was formed in 1974 in response to government oppression of ethnic Oromo. The violence spread across the south, centre, and west of Ethiopia. After the OLF concluded a peace agreement with the government in 2018, several factions broke away from the OLF and continued to attack the ENDF, with major clashes in the southern part of Oromia region reported in 2021.¹ The following year, the violence intensified and the OLA made territorial advances against Ethiopian army units. In response, the ENDF launched airstrikes against the OLA, some through use of armed drones.²

In January 2023, the OLA released a manifesto according to which they were fighting for ‘the freedom of the Oromo people from political exclusion, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural marginalization’ and for ‘the right of our people to determine their political destiny and establish a responsive government through freely elected representatives’.³ Despite two rounds of peace talks in Tanzania later that year, the ENDF and the OLA have continued to confront each other militarily.⁴

Elsewhere in Ethiopia, tensions had mounted between the ENDF and Fano militia in the north-western Amhara region.⁵ An underlying cause was the exclusion of Fano forces from the 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement that ended the conflict in Tigray (commonly referred to as the Pretoria Peace Agreement), even though they had fought alongside the ENDF there. Fano were not permitted to participate in the negotiations, reportedly upon the insistence of Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed.⁶ Other contributing factors to the burgeoning violence included a perception that the federal government was ignoring the political demands of the Amhara people and allegations that it had turned a blind eye to atrocities perpetrated against ethnic Amharas by the OLA in neighbouring Oromia.⁷

But a pivotal event in the escalating violence was the government’s decision in April 2023 to disband regional special forces in Amhara and integrate them into the national army and federal police.⁸ Confrontations escalated swiftly in the aftermath and fanned out across the region. On 3 August, with regional security forces unable to contain the violence, the Amhara authorities requested the intervention of the federal government to restore law and order. The next day, the Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency in the region (and beyond).⁹

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Despite the efforts to restore peace to the region, fighting between the ENDF and Fano in Amhara became increasingly intense in 2024,¹⁰ with sustained combat between the two parties in and around Gondar, a city in the north that was once the seat of Ethiopian emperors. Fano fighters forced the ENDF out of five districts and the encroaching violence prompted local officials to relocate to the zonal capital, Debre Tabor.¹¹

After a major military campaign by the ENDF began in October 2024, fighting over the next four months involved summary killings of civilians and widespread damage and destruction of homes and crops. The ENDF attacked Fano forces with drones, with the strikes causing further civilian harm.¹² Fano fighters and the ENDF clashed again in January 2025, notably during a military operation in which Fano claimed to have killed around 200 government soldiers.¹³ Estimates of at least 7,700 conflict deaths in the region between April 2023 and April 2025 have been advanced.¹⁴ A report by African Narratives in February 2025 described the situation in Amhara as ‘no less dangerous than the Tigray conflict’, with the potential to cause Ethiopia to fragment in the future.¹⁵

On 1 December 2024, the Ethiopian government signed a peace agreement with an OLA splinter group.¹⁶ The group, which comprised several hundred fighters, was led by a former central zone commander, Jaal Sagni Negasa, who had broken away from the OLA in September.¹⁷ While fighters from his faction started coming into rehabilitation camps in January 2025,¹⁸ the rump OLA continued its struggle against the ENDF.¹⁹

In Somali region, which has long been restive, at least 294 incidents of inter-clan violence were recorded between 2018 and 2025.²⁰ This violence, which remains below the threshold for a NIAC, followed a long-standing armed conflict in the Ogaden that ended in 2018. Added to the risk of renewed armed conflict were the rising tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia in the second half of 2024. Following a memorandum between the Government of Ethiopia and Somaliland, Birhanu Julia, the ENDF general who oversaw the fighting in Tigray, described the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) – an erstwhile armed Somali independence movement which is now the leading political party in the region – as agents funded by Egypt and enemies of the Ethiopian State.²¹ In August, the ONLF had reiterated its call for a peaceful resolution to the security stand-off between federal and regional forces in the region. The ONLF ‘struggles for the right of self-determination of all Somalis under Ethiopian occupation’. The group said it was only a peaceful transition that could end the impasse, which it warned was turning into an inter-ethnic conflict between Somalis and Oromos, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia.²²

The Humanitarian Situation

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), most of the 387,000 recorded displacements were in Amhara and Oromia, particularly in the first half of 2024. In Amhara alone, fighting triggered 97,000 movements. The number of people in displacement countrywide as a result of conflict and violence also continued to fall, reaching 2.4 million at the end of 2024. The drop was linked to the 2022 peace agreement on Tigray, which allowed returns despite the violence and insecurity.²³

There is also regular armed violence in Gambella, a region in the south-west of Ethiopia bordering South Sudan, especially between the Anywaa and Nuer communities. These two ethnic groups have been fighting for decades, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. In recent years, the direct involvement of South Sudanese Nuer White Army militia in support of their Ethiopian Nuer and the mobilization of Anywaa youths has aggravated the situation. The dissolution of all regional special forces in April 2023 ‘created a security vacuum that further exacerbated existing local conflicts in the region’ and left populations ‘vulnerable to cross-border attacks and raids by armed militias from South Sudan’.²⁴ Gambella host more South Sudanese refugees than any other region in Ethiopia, with seven refugee camps, all of which are in Anywaa zone.²⁵ In November 2024, a nutrition

survey in four conflict and flood-affected woredas of the Gambella region revealed a Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) prevalence of 17.1 per cent, exceeding the World Health Organization's 'critical' threshold of 15 per cent.²⁶

In mid-June 2025, a two-day, high-level policy dialogue on forced displacement was convened in Addis Ababa. Organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Ethiopian Ministries of Justice and Women and Social Affairs, the event focused on enhancing reintegration of Ethiopian returnees displaced by conflict. IOM Ethiopia described the dialogue as marking 'a critical step in aligning national and regional efforts to ensure returnees are supported in rebuilding their lives with dignity'.²⁷

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

The armed conflicts between Ethiopia and the OLA in Oromia region and between Ethiopia and the Fano Amhara in the Amhara region are both of a non-international character. Ethiopia is a State Party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law (IHL) applies to both conflicts.

Ethiopia is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.²⁸ The Protocol applies to the NIAC with the OLA but not to the conflict with the Fano militia, reflecting the fact that the group did not exercise a level of territorial control that would enable it to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol (see further below). The Fano rebellion is characterized by a decentralized and fragmented structure, with several loosely aligned groups, most of which are small and operate autonomously.²⁹ But as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has noted, decentralized armed groups comprising fluid alliances of small armed groups that are led by commanders who retain considerable decision-making power can still be a party to a NIAC.³⁰

Fano groups have mounted attacks by joining forces effectively, enabling the militias to control several key roads as of July 2024 and, in early September, to encircle the city of Woldiya.³¹ By November, Fano claimed to control more than eighty per cent of the Amhara region.³² That said, Fano militias have only briefly controlled urban centres, and only controlled other areas on a temporary basis.³³ On 19 March 2025, four Fano militias – Amhara Fano in Gojam, Gondar, Shewa, and Wello – launched a coordinated operation called Andinet (translating from the Amharic term for 'unity'), targeting ENDF bases in Amhara region.³⁴

Ethiopia is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, there were consistent reports of attacks on civilians and civilian objects by the ENDF and the two non-State armed groups confronting it. The armed conflict between the Ethiopian military and Fano militia in Amhara region involved the widespread commission of war crimes in 2024, according to Human Rights Watch. Atrocities included summary execution of Amharan civilians.³⁵ The OLA has also frequently attacked civilians and civilian objects.³⁶

In its report on human rights in Ethiopia for 2024, the United States (US) Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor said that the government took only 'limited steps' to 'identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses'. The government claims to have prosecuted lower-level officers for abuses, but details of such prosecutions were 'scant'. The government is also said to have prosecuted members of some non-State armed groups.³⁷ The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council's decision in October 2023 not to renew the mandate of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia has limited international monitoring of the situation across the country, and independent journalists have been granted little access to the conflict-affected regions, including Amhara.³⁸

Civilian Objects under Attack

All three parties to armed conflict – the Ethiopian Arms Forces, the OLA, and Fano militia – have regularly attacked civilian objects in their conduct of hostilities. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.³⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.⁴⁰ Special protection is afforded to medical units such as hospitals and other medical facilities.⁴¹ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁴²

Attacks against medical facilities

Despite the special protection afforded to them by IHL, a particular feature of the conflict in Amhara has been attacks against medical facilities. Human Rights Watch has documented persistent attacks on the healthcare system in the region that amount to war crimes.⁴³ At least 969 medical facilities had been affected in the region as of October 2024, with many forced to stop operating, leaving millions without access to basic healthcare.⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch Africa described the violence against medical facilities and personnel as having an 'immediate' humanitarian impact. 'Employees are fleeing the region, supplies have a hard time making it to hospitals, and civilians are too scared to go for treatment.'⁴⁵ 'So long as the government feels no pressure to hold abusive forces to account, such atrocities are likely to continue.'⁴⁶

Attacks against humanitarian aid

Humanitarian workers have also been attacked in Amhara region, with six killed and eleven kidnapped by unidentified groups amid the growing chaos in 2024. The New Humanitarian noted in November 2024 that on UN access maps, 'virtually the whole of Amhara is deemed at-risk – undermining the aid response to drought and displacement'. The media outlet cited a spokesperson for the World Food Programme (WFP) who warned that the ongoing insecurity threatened the agency's ability to 'support almost half a million vulnerable people in the region'.⁴⁷

In research published in 2025, an Ethiopian academic, Alene Agegnehu Waga, reported on his study of compliance by the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the OLA with international human rights norms. He specifically noted the OLA's lack of cooperation with humanitarian agencies and its blockage of aid delivery, which exacerbated the suffering of affected populations.⁴⁸

In his global report on the six grave violations against children in 2024, the UN Secretary-General expressed his grave concern at incidents of the denial of humanitarian

access. He urged ‘all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access and to safeguard humanitarian personnel from attacks’. He called on the Government of Ethiopia to hold perpetrators accountable for grave violations against children ‘and to provide assistance to children, following an intersectional approach’.⁴⁹

Civilians under Attack

The parties to the two NIACs have both targeted civilians and launched indiscriminate attacks affecting the civilian population. The Ethiopian Armed Forces have conducted regular drone strikes, which have killed and maimed scores of civilians.

There has been a particular targeting of healthcare professionals. In a report of July 2024 entitled ‘If the Soldier Dies, It’s on You’, Human Rights Watch details the widespread attacks on medical professionals in the Amhara conflict. The report documents the devastation of the healthcare system in thirteen towns in the Awi, North Gojjam, West Gojjam, North Gonder, South Gonder, and South Wollo zones of Amhara since the onset of conflict in the region in August 2023. The organization found that the ENDF had committed serious violations of IHL that might amount to war crimes.⁵⁰ In one hospital, soldiers seized an ambulance, accusing doctors of having used it to provide treatment to injured Fano fighters (which IHL requires them to do). A doctor from South Gonder zone said: ‘People who have nothing to do with the war are dying. Health professionals are targeted, tortured, arrested, killed. We want to be free to give treatment to whoever needs it.’⁵¹

Use of armed drones

The government’s reliance on armed drones has seen significant loss of civilian life. That is so, even though, when used correctly, drones can target military objectives accurately and without incidental loss of life. But in the twelve months to November 2024, munitions launched from Ethiopia’s Turkish and Chinese-made drones were said to have killed more than 300 civilians in Amhara region alone (with some civil society groups claiming a far higher death toll). A New Humanitarian journalist who witnessed at first hand the consequences of a drone strike that hit the grounds of the local high school in the town of Afessa on 18 October 2024 wrote:

Dead livestock lay scattered around the impact crater, and flies and street dogs – tearing at the carcasses – seemed to have taken over the compound. Among the casualties were two Fano fighters, but also four children – the youngest just seven years old. At least eight other civilians were injured, some critically.⁵²

Two Fano units, consisting of dozens of fighters, had apparently been present in the school compound but had left before the drone arrived. If the strike did not violate the IHL principle of distinction, it could have breached the principle of proportionality in attack.⁵³ The survivors were treated in poor conditions in a mud-and-straw house as fear of another strike precluded their transport to the local health post. A doctor treating the injured said that one woman had a fractured back and skull and a man had lost too much blood. ‘They need to get to a real hospital, but the roads are bad, and ambulances are targeted by drones.’⁵⁴

On 5 November 2024, civilian casualties resulted from multiple drone strikes that hit a marketplace, an elementary school, and a health centre in Zibist town in Debub Achefer woreda, West Gojam zone, killing at least forty-three people. This marked the

deadliest single airstrike since the conflict in Amhara began. Thirteen children and several pregnant women, including health workers, were reportedly among those killed.⁵⁵

On 17 April 2025, the ENDF launched a drone strike in the town of Gedeb in the Enarj Enawga woreda of the East Gojam zone that is said to have killed more than 100. Following the strike, government forces moved into the town, which had been under the control of a Fano militia since August 2023.⁵⁶ Eyewitnesses claimed that the strike targeted civilians who were building a fence for a primary school, and that no Fano militia were on the move during the strike. The head of the woreda administration, however, claimed that the drone strike was aimed at Fano militia, not civilians.⁵⁷

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Violence against civilians was widespread during the reporting period. In the context of the NIAC between federal government forces and Fano militia in Amhara, the Ethiopia Human Rights Commission (EHRC) reported that at least 115 civilians were killed between September and December 2024 alone, while emphasizing the figures were probably an undercount due to the difficult working environment.⁵⁸ Non-State armed groups have regularly abducted civilians, including children, sometimes for ransom and sometimes to force their recruitment. The Ethiopian authorities have also arbitrarily arrested and detained thousands of civilians alleging their complicity in the acts of the two rebel groups.

Murder of civilians

A number of murders took place after the victims had been abducted during attacks on a locality. On 30 October 2024, owing to suspicions about the local population supporting the government, during its attacks the OLA are said to have killed thirty-eight civilians and burnt down homes in Bitisi, Dereba, and Kure, and other areas in Birbirs Gali kebele, eighteen kilometres east of the city of Meki in East Shewa. The attack was described as the deadliest in Oromia since November 2022.⁵⁹

The serious violations of IHL in Amhara region persisted in 2025. On 21 May, OLA fighters are said to have clashed with the ENDF after the militants attacked civilians in Anger Meti town in Kemashi zone, resulting in the deaths of at least eighteen civilians and injuries to at least ten others. The dead included twelve children aged between two and fourteen.⁶⁰ On 4 June, in Angodeche Hula Arboye kebele in the Arsi zone of Oromia, OLA fighters shot and killed three civilians, including an Orthodox Christian monk, and wounded two others.⁶¹

Abduction and hostage-taking

Hostage-taking is strictly prohibited under IHL,⁶² but has been a regular feature of the conduct of the OLA and Fano militia. While in control of Feres Bet town in the West Gojjam zone, Fano fighters held some thirty government officials and seventy ordinary civilians hostage for two months, demanding a ransom for their safe release. On 5 December, Fano fighters are said to have executed the hostages as the fighters withdrew after clashing with the ENDF.⁶³

The EHRC reported that, in the year from June 2024 to June 2025, the OLA continued kidnapping passengers traveling to Addis Ababa, demanding huge ransoms and killing those who were unable to pay.⁶⁴ On 7 August 2024, BBC Amharic reported kidnappers, whom the victims referred to as 'OLA fighters', tortured captives to force the payment of ransom. The abductors received ransom payments between 100,000 birr (€600)

and 500,000 birr (€3,000), while continuing to torture those who were not able to make the payments, threatening to kill them. Journalists talked to released victims who said the kidnappers killed two men and committed sexual assault against others.⁶⁵

Between 7 and 12 April 2025, ACLED recorded retaliatory attacks by the OLA in Haro Limu woreda in East Wollega zone that are said to have killed at least eighteen civilians. The attacks were linked with the killing of an OLA senior commander by the ENDF on 4 April, along with an unspecified number of OLA fighters in the woreda. The commander was a key senior figure in the OLA who had participated in the peace talks with the Ethiopian government in Tanzania in 2023.⁶⁶

Several days after he was killed, OLA affiliates began targeting the families of former group members, accusing them of helping the government to undertake the operation. On 7 April, OLA fighters removed a former member from his home along with five of his family members – four men and a twelve-year-old boy – and killed them in Dhiba forest, in Garba Gudina kebele of Haro Limu woreda. On 12 April, the OLA returned and abducted five more civilians, including the wife and two children of the same former affiliate, aged ten and seven, respectively, and killed them in Dhiba forest. A similar attack on 8 April in neighbouring Surge kebele saw OLA fighters attack and kill eight of the family of another former OLA member.⁶⁷

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Violations of IHL in the conflicts also have gender-specific elements. The New Humanitarian reported in November 2024 that more than 5,000 women in Amhara region had sought medical treatment after suffering sexual abuse.⁶⁸ This number, already shocking, represents only a fraction of the real toll according to the Forum for Higher Education Institutions in Amhara Region, a coalition of Ethiopian civil society bodies and universities.⁶⁹

Amnesty International noted a 'surge in reports of sexual violence against women and girls' in 2024. The rape and murder of seven-year-old Heaven Awot, whose body was also mutilated by her attacker, in the city of Bahir Dar in Amhara region in August 2024 provoked outrage around the country 'and became emblematic of the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls'.⁷⁰ Although the perpetrator was not affiliated to an armed force or group, its brutality against a child displaced from the Tigray conflict was particularly shocking. Heaven's aunt found her body at the entrance of her home, her body strangled and mutilated. Her genitalia was completely torn and damaged so badly that one could see her spinal cord through it. The *Addis Standard* newspaper published an editorial in which it declared that 'the rising tide of this gruesome violence is not just a tragic by-product' of the conflicts in Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray 'but a deliberate strategy of war emboldened by the government's failure to hold perpetrators accountable'.⁷¹

Subsequently, a report by Physicians for Human Rights and the Organisation for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa, published in July 2025, likewise claimed that the silence over crimes of grave sexual violence committed during the conflict in Tigray had enabled the spread of similar atrocities to other conflict zones. The report, 'You Will Never Be Able to Give Birth', documented the systematic abuse committed, predominantly, by Ethiopian soldiers and their Eritrean and militia allies during the 2020–22 conflict in Tigray, and how a lack of accountability led to revenge attacks in the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions. Survivors identified perpetrators from military groups who, when committing sexual and reproductive violence for the actions of Amhara and Afar forces in the Tigray conflict, expressed the desire for revenge.⁷²

What is more, sexual violence survivors are facing more than the physical and psychological trauma from what happened to them given the extremely limited access to healthcare to start a complicated path to recovery. This is, in part, the result of cuts in US foreign aid in 2025. A co-author of the report, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told *The New Humanitarian*: ‘With conflict currently escalating in Amhara and tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea rising, breaking this cycle is vital not only for survivors, but for the future of Ethiopia and sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa.’⁷³

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty

In January 2025, Amnesty International reported on a four-month-long campaign of mass arbitrary arrests of ethnic Amhara across the country for alleged affiliation with Fano militias. On 28 September 2024, the ENDF and Amhara regional security forces had rounded up thousands of people across Amhara region and brought them to four mass detention centres. Members of the judiciary, including judges, as well as prosecutors and academics were among the people targeted. Four judicial staff were released in October 2024 and in January 2025, authorities released hundreds of people, including three judges, women, older persons, and individuals suffering from chronic health problems, but thousands remained arbitrarily detained. Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East and Southern Africa, said:

The international silence over the mass and arbitrary detention of thousands of people in Amhara region is beyond shameful. Ethiopia’s development partners, as well as African and global human rights bodies, must use their influence to publicly call for the release of all arbitrarily detained people. The world must stop turning a blind eye to Ethiopia’s human rights crisis as the Ethiopian government continues to trample on the rule of law.⁷⁴

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty is prohibited under IHL as it is under international human rights law.⁷⁵ Moreover, as the US Department of State observed, the Constitution of Ethiopia and federal law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court (‘habeas corpus’). But, it said, the government ‘generally did not observe these requirements’.⁷⁶

Child recruitment

All parties to the armed conflicts in Ethiopia are believed to have recruited children. IHL prohibits the recruitment of children under fifteen years of age. In January 2025, the EHRC issued a press release accusing the authorities of having detained and forced children as young as eleven years of age into the security forces.⁷⁷ This is a serious violation of Ethiopia’s international legal obligations – specifically Additional Protocol II of 1977 (which sets the minimum age at fifteen years) and the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.⁷⁸ In adhering to the Optional Protocol, Ethiopia declared that ‘in accordance with Article 3(2)’, the Government of Ethiopia stated ‘that the minimum age at which it will permit voluntary recruitment into its national armed forces is 18 years old’.⁷⁹

The UN Secretary-General, reporting on the six grave violations against children worldwide in 2024, declared that the UN had verified the abduction in Ethiopia of 189 children (66 boys, 84 girls, and 39 whose sex was unknown). The majority of the perpetrators

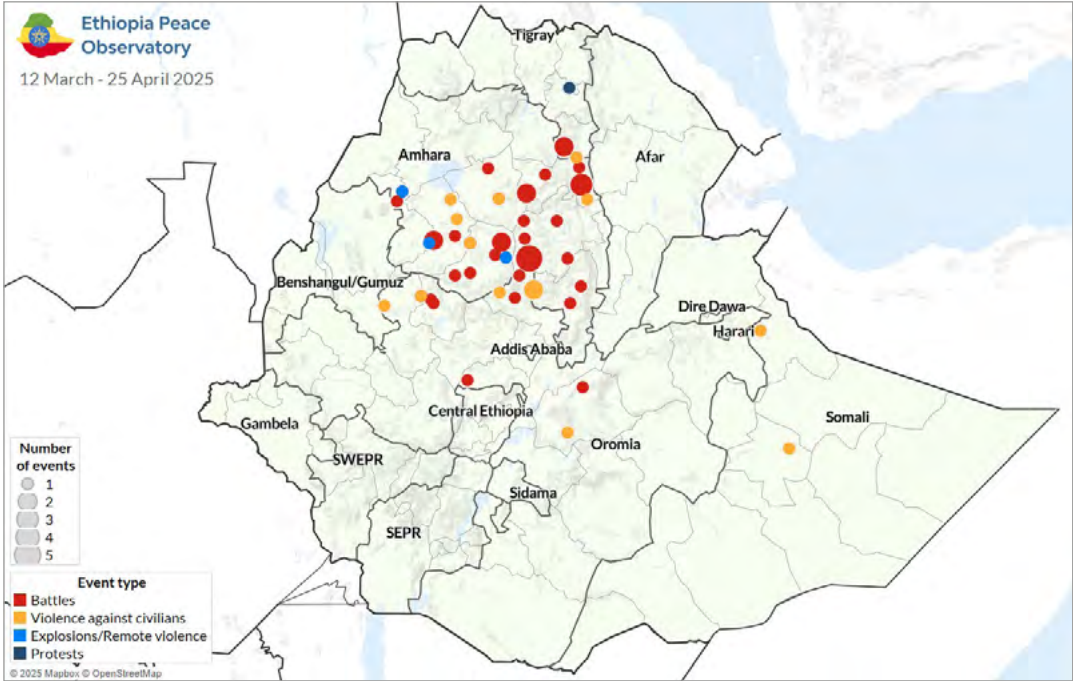
(107) were not identified, but 49 confirmed abductions were by the ENDF.⁸⁰ A fifteen-year-old boy told the EHRC: 'When we came back from school, an individual took us into a Bajaj [auto rickshaw], saying that he will give 25,000 Birr [equivalent to \$198] to those who join the defence force. [They] then took us to an auditorium. ... But after we entered, we could not leave.' Some parents say they were forced to pay for the return of their sons.⁸¹

Persons with disabilities

It is not known precisely how many people are living with disabilities in Ethiopia, although the National Survey on Persons with Disabilities presented in July 2025, which was based on data gathered from over 40,000 individuals in all major regions of the country, including Amhara and Oromia, calculated that 9.9 million people nationwide reported 'some difficulty' in at least two physical domains or 'a lot of difficulty' or 'cannot do at all' in any single domain. Regionally, Tigray had the highest household prevalence at 30.1 per cent, followed by Amhara at 25.8 per cent, and Gambella at 22 per cent. Dr Kaleab Kebede, senior researcher at the Policy Studies Institute that conducted the study, called for regional equity in disability policy implementation. Noting that Tigray and Amhara had the highest burden of disability prevalence, he urged the federal government to allocate additional, targeted resources to enhance inclusive service provision in those regions.⁸²

In 2024, the ICRC provided emergency and surgical care to more than 23,400 war wounded in Amhara, Oromia, and Somali regions. Of the almost 12,000 people who benefited from services at the physical rehabilitation centres supported by the organization, 2,089 had wounds caused by weapons and 207 were the victims of unexploded ordnance.⁸³ Humanity & Inclusion (HI), which has been working in Ethiopia since 1986, supported conflict-affected IDPs and host communities in the most affected woredas of Amhara (Guba Lafto and Habru),⁸⁴ and children with disabilities displaced from Oromia, providing school-based disability-responsive equipment and materials and assistive learning aids.⁸⁵

Figure 7.2: Violence against Civilians in Ethiopia in March–April 2025
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Note: Some events from this coverage period might be included in the data in subsequent weeks due to reporting delays.

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8. HAITI



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Haiti was born out of a slave revolt against France, gaining its independence from its colonial masters in 1804. France extorted huge reparations from Haiti, crippling the new nation economically for more than a century. The United States then occupied Haiti from 1915 until 1934. A series of dictatorships in the second half of the twentieth century further impoverished the country, with François ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier ruling from 1957 until his death in 1971. His government killed an estimated 30,000 Haitians and raped many thousands. Duvalier’s son, Jean-Claude, otherwise known as ‘Baby Doc’, took charge until 1986 when he was forced into exile by the army. Political turmoil in the 1990s led to a rebellion and a *coup d’état* in 2004 in which the United States was implicated.¹

A devastating earthquake on 12 January 2010 killed tens of thousands of Haitians – possibly even 200,000 or more – and caused catastrophic damage to Port-au-Prince. President Michel Martelly (2011–16) sought to rebuild the country, with his government putting emphasis on foreign investment. His successor, Jovenel Moïse, who had been accused of massive corruption was assassinated on 7 July 2021.² By then, gang violence had already taken hold of the capital. On 7 July 2022, clashes between two rival gangs in Cité Soleil, an impoverished and densely populated neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, killed dozens and closed an oil terminal in the area, which had a devastating effect on the economy. On 11 October 2022, Ariel Henry, the country’s acting prime minister at the time, requested the deployment of foreign troops to tackle the gangs.³

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Haiti experienced catastrophic levels of violence during the reporting period, marking one of the deadliest chapters in its recent history. At least 5,601 people were killed in 2024 as a result of gang violence according to the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).⁴ Between July 2024 and February 2025, OHCHR documented 4,239 killings and a further 1,356 serious injuries.⁵ Conflict further intensified in the first half of 2025, with at least 2,680 people killed between 1 January and 30 May.⁶

The situation under international law was transformed on 29 February 2024 with the formation of the Viv Ansanm coalition. The coalition, whose title means ‘Living Together’ in Haitian Creole, is a merger of two, previously rival organized gangs: the Revolutionary Forces of the G9 Family and Allies (‘an Fanmi e Alye’), led by Jimmy Chérizier (alias ‘Barbecue’); and the G-Pèp (G-People) alliance, led by Gabriel Jean-Pierre (alias ‘Ti Gabriel’).⁷ The UN Security Council put Viv Ansanm on its sanctions list in July 2025.⁸

The coalition reflects significant consolidation of power in Haiti, with its members already exerting control over eighty-five per cent of the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince as of October 2024 (as well as several zones just outside the capital).⁹ Between 2020 and 2025, Haiti’s gangs have evolved from ‘fragmented street violence into a structured system of territorial governance. The rise of G9 an Fanmi e Alye, the counter-formation of G-Pèp, and the consolidation of Viv Ansanm have entrenched criminal control over trade and movement, effectively redefining the boundaries between State and non-State authority.’¹⁰

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) noted the widespread ‘scepticism’ at the inception of Viv Ansanm, with many doubting its durability as a result of long-standing rivalries and differences among its members. But the coordinated Viv Ansanm attacks on State institutions on 29 February 2024, which sought to force Ariel

Henry's resignation, 'marked a turning point and demonstrated the coalition's ability to adapt, negotiate, and work cohesively toward shared goals.'¹¹ Indeed, despite tensions, the coalition has 'preserved its cohesion' and demonstrated an ability to manage internal disputes.¹² 'Tellingly', the International Crisis Group has said, 'no gang has left the coalition since its creation, and others that were not initially part of the alliance have enlisted.'¹³

The coalition operates through a multi-tiered leadership structure with sub-commanders who lead constituent gangs under the 'presidency' of Jimmy Chérizier,¹⁴ who also functions as the spokesperson for the coalition.¹⁵ In November 2024, the Haitian National Police (PNH) stepped up their attacks on Delmas 6, Mr Chérizier's personal stronghold in the capital. In an hours-long battle on 21 November, police in PNH armoured cars killed two of his soldiers and captured a Kalashnikov rifle. In a live broadcast, he declared that the PNH had 'bothered' the perimeter of his neighbourhoods, aggravating him to the point that he had taken up a weapon himself to start firing at the armoured vehicles. This 'impetuous act', he reported, had 'so alarmed' some of the other Viv Ansanm commanders that they had called him by phone to ask him to please 'be prudent, fall back, and not risk his life'.¹⁶

On 2 January 2025, Mr Chérizier declared that Viv Ansanm would transform into a political party.¹⁷ This did not happen. Between 26 and 29 January 2025, Viv Ansanm launched multiple attacks in Kenscoff, in the West department south of Port-au-Prince, aiming to secure access to the south-east of the country. Between 90 and 150 people were killed during the violence, which also resulted in the destruction of more than 100 homes and the displacement of more than 3,000 people.¹⁸ By October, gangs controlled about ninety per cent of the capital.¹⁹ Then on 15 November, Chérizier delivered a stark public warning:

Starting this Monday, 17 November 2025, if it's not necessary to go out, stay at home. All drivers unions, stay at home. All public transport drivers, stay at home. ... People who don't need to, don't go out into the street. Leave the streets to 'Viv Ansanm' and the police so we can confront them.²⁰

In late November 2025, Sunrise Airlines suspended all flights to and from the capital, while the National Port Authority issued a maximum alert due to multiple attacks on Port-au-Prince port facilities.²¹

In sum, the coalition's organized nature, its significant (and expanding) control of territory, and the continuing violence against the authorities – and civilians – have combined to create a non-international armed conflict under international humanitarian law (IHL).²²

The Humanitarian Situation

Haiti remains the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. What is more, Viv Ansanm attacks have left most of the population in the capital facing a humanitarian crisis. At the peak of violence between March and May 2024, hospitals, stores, and schools either closed or became largely inaccessible, while most people who lived in safer areas avoided leaving their homes. Moving around the capital became almost impossible, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Designated Expert on Haiti, William O'Neill, declaring: 'The fear is palpable in people's eyes and in their voices. The capital is almost entirely controlled and surrounded by gangs, making Port-au-Prince a large open-air prison'.²³ Between 3 March and 20 May 2024, gangs forced the closure of Toussaint Louverture International Airport, placing the country under almost total lockdown and preventing Ariel Henry from returning to the country.²⁴

Following the coalition's blockade of the capital's main shipping ports in 2024, prices of fuel, food, and other essentials soared. The World Food Programme (WFP) registered a twenty-seven per cent increase in the cost of a standard food basket in the course of 2024, leaving millions of Haitians unable to afford basic meals. As violence escalated and major infrastructure shut down, growing numbers of people turned to black markets, where fuel was selling for up to fifty per cent over official prices.²⁵

The humanitarian fallout has also been immense: the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – the UN's migration agency – reported that internal displacement rose sharply from 362,000 people in March to more than 578,000 in June 2024,²⁶ before climbing to almost 1.3 million for the country as a whole by June 2025 – almost one in ten of the total population. Gang violence had provoked a twenty-four per cent increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in only six months following December 2024.²⁷

Peacekeeping

A Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission started deployment in June 2024 following UN Security Council authorization the previous October.²⁸ The MSS, which had a mandate through to 2 October 2025, had reached 1,000 personnel by the beginning of the year. Troops came from the Bahamas, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Kenya, which led the mission. But the total was less than half of the 2,500 personnel that were planned.²⁹

In late September 2025, the UN Security Council authorized Member States to transition the MSS mission to a 'Gang Suppression Force' (GSF), for an initial period of twelve months.³⁰ The resolution authorized Member States participating in the GSF, 'in strict compliance with international law, including international human rights law' to 'neutralize, isolate, and deter gangs that continue to threaten the civilian population, abuse human rights and undermine Haitian institutions'. They were also tasked with providing security for critical infrastructure sites 'together and in coordination with' the PNH and the Haitian armed forces.³¹

The GSF was expected to become operational in the first half of 2026.³² It will rely on operational and logistical support from a UN Support Office in Haiti (UNSOH) that was still to be set up in Port-au-Prince as of December 2025. This will be support that the MSS did not receive. UNSOH will provide fuel, water, accommodation, and other necessary infrastructure for the GSF bases, as well as medical and mobility support.³³ The new force's approach will also be a major departure from that employed by the MSS. In the words of the International Crisis Group, 'It is designed to be a military-led offensive operation, not a police mission, and will be entitled to act independently from Haitian authorities.'³⁴

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There was one NIAC in Haiti during the review period:

- Haiti (supported by the MSS) *v* Viv Ansanm coalition.

This armed conflict is regulated by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL. Haiti is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.³⁵ The NIAC in Haiti meets the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II – in particular, that the organized armed group exercise a level of territorial control that would

enable it to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol – and thus the Protocol is directly applicable to the conflict.

According to the United Nations, twenty-three gangs operate in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area (other estimates go as high as 200 armed groups for the whole of Haiti).³⁶ Beyond the capital, gang violence has spread to provincial areas such as Arcahaie, Gonaïves, Petite Rivière de l'Artibonite, and Verrettes.³⁷ Provincial gangs such as '400 Mawozo', 'Chen Mechan', and 'Kokorat san ras' have established control over swathes of territory, engaging in widespread kidnapping and killing of civilians, and forcing population displacement.³⁸ The groups control strategic routes linking Port-au-Prince to ports and land borders, effectively fragmenting the country.

In certain instances outside the Viv Ansanm coalition, armed groups engaged in violence do not meet the IHL requirement of 'organization'. In other cases, it is the issue of intensity and regularity of violence that is at issue. In particular, while Gran Grif controls much of the northern Artibonite department of Haiti, it was not party to a separate NIAC with the authorities during the reporting period. Its multiple acts of deadly violence, which include an infamous massacre in Port-Sondé in October 2024, did not engage the application of IHL.

Haiti is a signatory but not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,³⁹ as it has still to ratify the treaty. Therefore, the acts described in this report do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Court, and will not do so unless either the situation is referred to the Court by the UN Security Council, or Haiti makes the requisite declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review saw serious violations by Viv Ansanm of the protection afforded by IHL to civilians and civilian infrastructure across Haiti, but especially in the capital. The civilian population continued to be regularly attacked by the coalition, with violence characterized by shootings and stabbings, systematic sexual violence, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and several instances of mass killings.

These are not only war crimes but may also amount to crimes against humanity – defined under international criminal law as a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.⁴⁰ In this regard, UN officials and experts reported the 'deliberate, systematic and pervasive use of sexual violence, including collective rape and mutilation, by gangs as a means of exerting territorial control and to punish communities.'⁴¹

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.⁴² Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives⁴³ and, as such, are protected against attack.⁴⁴ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁴⁵

Attacks against health facilities

The health infrastructure in Haiti, already fragile before the escalation of gang violence, suffered serious damage during the reporting period. By July 2025, only one third of health

facilities in Port-au-Prince remained fully functional. Criminal gangs ‘burned, ransacked and destroyed many hospitals and clinics, forcing many to close or suspend their operations’, Mr O’Neill told the UN Human Rights Council.⁴⁶ Medical personnel were not spared from violence: gangs ‘murdered and kidnapped physicians, nurses and healthcare workers, including humanitarian workers’.⁴⁷

Among many attacks, on 17 December 2024, Viv Ansanm attacked the Bernard Mevs General Hospital in Port-au-Prince.⁴⁸ The violence against health facilities reached a symbolic nadir a week later, when three journalists and a police officer were killed at the hospital during its official reopening ceremony.⁴⁹ Inevitably, the targeting of health facilities had cascading effects on access to medical care, with deep and persistent barriers to receiving emergency care, maternal health services, treatment for chronic conditions, and trauma care – the latter particularly critical given the scale of gunshot and knife wounds being inflicted on the population.⁵⁰

Attacks against transportation infrastructure

Transportation infrastructure became a primary target for attacks by Viv Ansanm, with devastating consequences for humanitarian access, economic activity, and civilian movement. The most significant attacks focused on Toussaint Louverture Airport, with gang members attempting to seize control of the facility on 4 March 2024, exchanging gunfire with police and the Haitian Armed Forces.⁵¹ The assault forced the airport to close for nearly three months, with all commercial flights suspended,⁵² part of the gangs’ broader strategy to block travel and isolate Haiti from international support.⁵³

The violence against aircraft escalated on 11 November 2024, when gang members opened fire on three commercial aircraft. Spirit Airlines Flight 951 from Fort Lauderdale was struck by gunfire several times while attempting to land.⁵⁴ A JetBlue Airways flight from Haiti to New York and an American Airlines plane were similarly targeted.⁵⁵ The attacks forced the immediate and indefinite closure of the airport, initially until 18 November, but with subsequent extensions. These coordinated attacks severely constrained humanitarian access at a critical moment.⁵⁶

In addition to its attacks on aircraft and the airport, Viv Ansanm also targeted maritime and road infrastructure. Beginning in March 2024 and continuing throughout the reporting period, the coalition blockaded Port-au-Prince’s main seaport, strangling the flow of goods into the capital and contributing directly to the dramatic increase in food and fuel prices.⁵⁷

Attacks against schools

The education system in Haiti suffered catastrophic damage during the reporting period, with profound implications for an entire generation of children. In January 2025 alone, armed groups struck 47 schools in Port-au-Prince, coming on top of the 284 they destroyed in 2024. Thus, according to UNICEF, a total of 331 educational facilities were devastated in a little over a year.⁵⁸ Viv Ansanm was identified as having vandalized and set fire to many educational buildings between February and May 2024, including university faculties and schools across Port-au-Prince.⁵⁹

The deliberate destruction of schools was a systematic assault on the education system. Its cumulative effects are such that 1.2 million children in Haiti have been deprived of education during the reporting period, primarily as a result of the attacks on students and schools.⁶⁰ Only one in five schools in Port-au-Prince remained open and was operating at normal capacity by October 2024.⁶¹

Attacks against media and communications infrastructure

Media outlets and journalists also faced systematic targeting during the reporting period, with gang attacks reaching a crescendo in March 2025 when three major media institutions were destroyed in the span of four days. The attacks appeared coordinated and were all attributed to Viv Ansanm.

On the night of 12–13 March 2025, armed individuals deliberately set fire to Radio Télévision Caraïbes (RTVC) in downtown Port-au-Prince.⁶² The station, Haiti's oldest radio broadcaster, had relocated to Pétiön-Ville the previous year for security reasons, but its historic headquarters – a symbol of Haitian media heritage – was destroyed. The following day, 13 March, the headquarters of Radio Mélodie FM was stormed by Viv Ansanm fighters and suffered major damage before being set ablaze.⁶³

On 15 March, heavily armed members of Viv Ansanm attacked Télé Pluriel, a privately owned television station in the Delmas 19 neighbourhood. The station was ransacked, with equipment stripped and looted, before the building was set on fire.⁶⁴ Gangs also attacked other businesses in the area, including the R&C Plaza.⁶⁵

These attacks on media infrastructure occurred in parallel with direct threats against individual journalists. In October 2024, Jimmy Chérizier released a video calling on his associate Vitelhomme Innocent to capture specific journalists and bring them before him for 'judgment'.⁶⁶ He named four by name: Johnny Ferdinand and Guerrier Dieu-seul of Radio Caraïbes; Luckner Désir (alias 'Lucko'); and Ésaïe César of Télé Éclair. He added that he was seeking other journalists whose names he had not yet revealed. The Association des Journalistes Haïtiens (AJH) and SOS Journalistes issued statements on 22 October condemning the threats and calling for immediate protective measures.⁶⁷ None was forthcoming.

Attacks against homes and residential areas

Viv Ansanm launched numerous large-scale attacks on residential areas during the reporting period, often involving arson, looting, and forced displacement. The attacks were characterized by their indiscriminate nature and apparent objective of terrorizing populations and establishing territorial control. Attacks aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population are strictly prohibited by IHL and can amount to war crimes.⁶⁸

The pattern of residential violence had already been escalating in the months immediately preceding the current reporting period. Between January and July 2024, the security situation in Carrefour and Gressier communes collapsed, with gang members operating openly in streets, markets, sports clubs, and bus stations, conducting sporadic raids, and engaging in widespread killing, rape, kidnapping, theft, and extortion.⁶⁹ In the Rivière Froide area of these communes, gangs broke into houses specifically searching for women and girls, whom they abducted and took away to abuse over the course of several days.⁷⁰

On 24 March 2024, Viv Ansanm launched a large-scale attack on blocks around the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. The assault, in which the 5 Segonn gang under Johnson 'Izo' André was identified as the main assailant, sought to empty the area of population and cause maximum damage, according to a UN Security Council sanctions listing for Viv Ansanm.⁷¹ Since then, the violence has intensified and spread. On 6 August 2024, two gangs that are part of Viv Ansanm – 5 Segonn and Canaan – killed at least ten people and burned numerous houses during attacks against the Archaïe and Cabaret communes in the northern areas of the capital. The assault was an attempt to extend coalition control along the Port-au-Prince bay area.⁷²

The situation in Carrefour and Gressier also worsened. Gangs occupied these communes, using ‘extreme brutality to bring residents under their control’.⁷³ The 103 Zombies and Ti Bois gang, operating along with the Grand Ravine – all members of the Viv Ansanm coalition – shot ‘wildly’ at civilians and ‘judged’ and executed those who refused to submit to their rule.⁷⁴ Between October and December 2024 alone, at least 163 people were killed or seriously injured by gang members in the neighbourhoods of Fontamara, La Colline, Mariani, Rivière Froide, and Thor.⁷⁵ One of the most serious incidents occurred on 29 November 2024 in the Ka Miyay neighbourhood of Carrefour commune. The 103 Zombies and Ti Bois gangs attacked the homes of relatives of a self-defence group from neighbouring Pedro in Léogâne commune in West department, killing at least fifty. Some were executed in the street in front of their homes, while others were murdered inside.⁷⁶

Between 11 and 19 November 2024, gangs belonging to Viv Ansanm attacked several locations in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, including Nazon, Pernier, and Vivy Mitchel, in an attempt to seize control of Delmas and Pétionville.⁷⁷ The resulting violence killed at least 220 people, injured 92, and displaced nearly 41,000.⁷⁸ In late January 2025, the coalition conducted a series of coordinated assaults on Kenscoff (West Department), located south of Port-au-Prince. The attacks sought to establish gang control over the area and gain access to routes leading to the south-east of the country. The violence killed up to 150 people, destroyed 100 homes, and caused 3,139 residents to flee.⁷⁹

The scale of residential attacks reached a new peak in late March 2025. On the night of 30–31 March, between 2 and 3 am, members of the 400 Mawozo and Talibans de Canaan gangs – both members of Viv Ansanm – attacked the city of Mirebalais in the Centre department, entering through Trianon in the 2nd communal section of Grand-Boucan.⁸⁰ They burnt many houses and several vehicles. Although local self-defence brigades (nicknamed ‘Bakòp Feray’), agents of the Brigade de Sécurité des Aires Protégées (BSAP), and PNH officers initially resisted, repeated calls for reinforcement went unanswered. Around 8 am their resistance weakened and the gangs penetrated the city. Police officers posted at the Mirebalais Commissariat and Civil Prison fled, allowing gang members to set fire to the police station and seize control of the prison, where they orchestrated the escape of all the inmates. The attackers then set fire to buildings, homes, and – also significant for the civilian population – the Mirebalais market.⁸¹

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁸² Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁸³ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful military objectives. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian objects.⁸⁴

Attacks directed against civilians

During the reporting period, multiple large-scale attacks resulted in high civilian death tolls. The most significant incident that took place in the context of and was associated with the NIAC with the Viv Ansanm coalition was the Wharf Jérémie massacre on 6–7 December 2024. A second massacre, which occurred in Port-Sondé in October 2024, did

not fall within the context of an armed conflict as other violent acts by the perpetrator, the Gran Grif gang,⁸⁵ did not reach the regularity and intensity required by IHL.

Wharf Jérémie is a neighbourhood of Cité Soleil in Port-au-Prince. Micanor Altès (also known as Wa Mikanò and Monel Felix), leads the Wharf Jérémie gang, which is a member of Viv Ansanm. In the course of the attack, the group murdered perhaps as many as 207 people (although the Haitian authorities later issued a revised figure of 184).⁸⁶ Victims included men, women, and children – the youngest only three months old. Many other victims were older persons between sixty and eighty years of age, with gang members targeting persons they suspected of practicing Vodou or witchcraft.⁸⁷ The bodies of many of the victims were mutilated and burned.⁸⁸ Micanor Altès is said to have ordered the massacre to punish those he suspected of having used witchcraft to harm his child.⁸⁹

The Pont-Sondé massacre, another deadly incident in Haiti's recent memory, was perpetrated by the Gran Grif gang.⁹⁰ Led by Luckson Elan, who has been listed by the UN Security Council sanctions committee on Haiti,⁹¹ the Gran Grif gang controls significant areas across the Artibonite department in central Haiti. During Saint-Michel festival celebrations of 3 October 2024, at least seventy civilians (and possibly more than twice as many) were killed. Most of the victims were asleep when they were attacked. Gang members used firearms and machetes to kill or wound, with some of the victims burned alive in their homes. Many women and girls were raped during the assault. Forty-five houses were said to have been set ablaze.⁹²

That massacre was not regulated by IHL. But another series of assaults at the end of November 2024 in the central department, which again involved the murder of men, women, and children, and the burning of homes, indicated that Gran Grif might become party to a NIAC with the Haitian authorities in the future. Indeed, the United Nations said that killings had risen dramatically in Artibonite in the course of 2025, with 1,303 victims reported in the central regions of Haiti between January and August, compared with 419 during the same period in 2024. 'I heard heavy shooting, so much shooting', one unnamed man told Associated Press. He criticized the lack of police, asking: 'Why don't they send any drones to Artibonite? They just use the drones in Port-au-Prince. I feel this gang is special. They don't want to destroy this gang.'⁹³ Under the law of law enforcement, drone strikes may only be lawful where strictly unavoidable to protect life.⁹⁴

Attacks on humanitarian aid

The systematic blockade of ports and attacks on transportation infrastructure by Viv Ansanm had far-reaching consequences for food security across Haiti. Beginning in March 2024, Viv Ansanm blockaded Port-au-Prince's main seaport, strangling the flow of goods into the capital and surrounding areas.⁹⁵ With ordinary supply chains disrupted, civilians increasingly turned to illegal markets, forced to pay significantly higher prices.⁹⁶

The economic warfare waged by the gangs through their control of national infrastructure extended beyond ports. As mentioned, Viv Ansanm's attacks on Toussaint Louverture Airport in March 2024 forced its closure, preventing the delivery of humanitarian aid.⁹⁷ Viv Ansanm members blocked roadways linking Port-au-Prince to ports and land borders, further restricting the transportation of vital supplies and the movement of humanitarian personnel.⁹⁸ Since late February 2024, Viv Ansanm members have attacked critical infrastructure, robbed containers carrying first-aid supplies, and looted hospitals and pharmacies, particularly in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area.⁹⁹

The combined effect of these restrictions has been to weaponize hunger and economic deprivation. Families who had already lost income due to insecurity and business closures increasingly struggled to afford to buy food. Markets became dangerous places with gang members routinely present and the threat of violence or extortion deterring both vendors and customers. The destruction of the Mirebalais market during the 30–31 March 2025 attack represented not merely property damage but elimination of a vital source of food for the local population. The impact on children was particularly severe. With educational establishments closed and displacement widespread, many families lost access to the feeding programmes in schools that had provided the children with critical nutrition.¹⁰⁰

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Customary and treaty IHL provides fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture or other ill-treatment, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and trials that did not meet minimum standards of fairness. Special protection is afforded to civilians who are at specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.¹⁰¹

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and constitute serious violations of IHL.¹⁰² Sexual violence reached epidemic proportions in Haiti during the reporting period, perpetrated systematically by gangs as a means of exerting territorial control and punishing communities.¹⁰³ The scale and deliberate nature of sexual violence represents another disturbing feature of the conflict, with UNICEF describing it as a ‘weapon of war’.¹⁰⁴

Grassroots and international organizations documented an alarming rise in reported rapes between April and June 2024, particularly in Carrefour, Cité Soleil, Croix-des-Bouquets, Delmas, Gressier, and Port-au-Prince. Some health facilities were receiving up to forty rape victims a day during peak periods.¹⁰⁵ In displacement sites too, sexual violence became endemic. During the first quarter of 2024 alone, at least 216 cases were documented in displacement sites in Port-au-Prince.¹⁰⁶ Contributory risk factors in displacement settings included lack of space, inadequate lighting, and the lack of separate latrines and bathing areas for men and women.¹⁰⁷ Women and children were the primary victims of sexual violence there.

In a statement on 7 February 2025, UNICEF spokesperson James Elder described a ‘staggering 1,000-per cent increase in sexual violence against children in Haiti’, declaring that it had ‘turned their bodies into battlegrounds’.¹⁰⁸ More than one quarter of reported cases involved gang rapes, according to the UN Secretary-General.¹⁰⁹ Elder stated that ‘armed groups inflict unimaginable horrors on children’, and noted that children were being used by the gangs. Testimonies from survivors confirm the systematic and calculated nature of the violence. ‘Rosaline’ (not her real name), a 16-year-old girl, was abducted by armed men and placed in a van with other young girls.¹¹⁰ She was taken to a warehouse where she was extensively beaten and drugged. Over a period that she believes lasted for about a month, she was persistently raped.¹¹¹ Only when the armed group realized no one could pay her ransom did they release her.¹¹²

Adult women also suffered horrific violence. ‘Ellie M’, a 29-year-old survivor, was abducted and gang-raped for five hours by armed members of G9. ‘Afterward, they shot me

in the foot', she told Human Rights Watch. She was infected with HIV and became pregnant as a result of the assault.¹¹³ Widespread sexual violence in the context of mass killings occurred on multiple occasions during the reporting period.

Child protection

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of fifteen years in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and forbid their participation in combat.¹¹⁴ Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees such as access to food, medical care, and education. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless they are with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.¹¹⁵

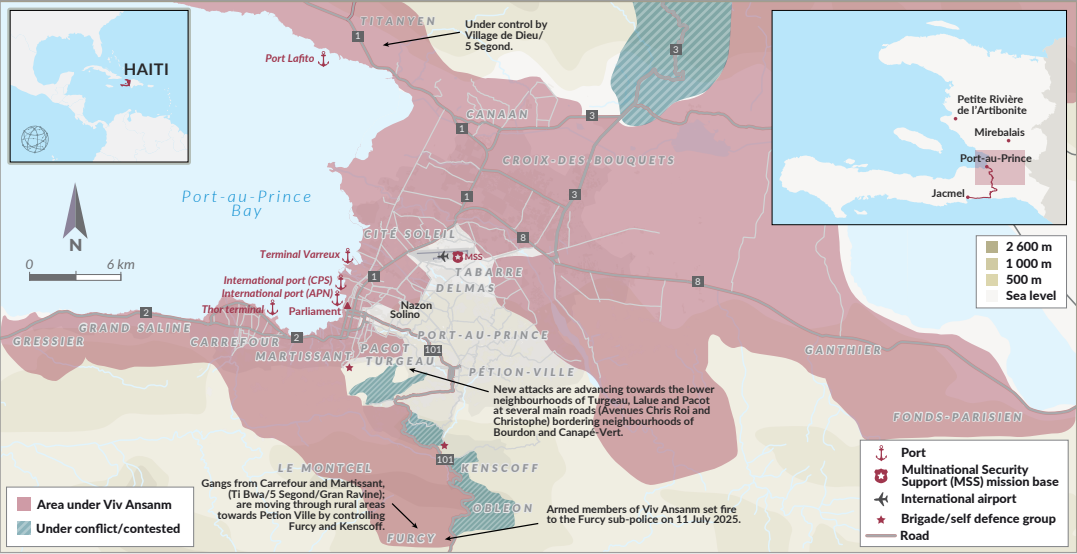
Yet, the UN Secretary-General has reported that, for 2024, the number of grave violations against children that the organization verified in Haiti (2,269) was among the world's highest. Moreover, in terms of the percentage increases in the number of violations compared to 2023, Haiti, at 490 per cent, was the third highest in the world.¹¹⁶ Within this broader context, the recruitment and use of children by the gangs has escalated sharply, with the UN reporting a seventy per cent surge in child recruitment in Haiti between the middle of 2023 and the middle of 2024.¹¹⁷ According to UNICEF, children now comprise as many as half of all armed group members, with some as young as eight years of age. Many are abducted or coerced, while others join in search of food, protection, or a sense of belonging amid widespread poverty and insecurity.

An estimated one million children now live in areas controlled or influenced by gangs, according to Amnesty International. In interviews with eleven boys and three girls, the organization documented how children are exploited for surveillance, deliveries, and domestic labour, and sometimes forced to participate in attacks. Girls are particularly vulnerable, often compelled to act as 'wives' for gang members and subjected to relentless sexual abuse.¹¹⁸ A UNICEF spokesperson described the situation as a 'lethal cycle', where children are drawn into the very violence that destroys their communities.¹¹⁹

Figure 8.1: UN Map of Haiti © United Nations



Figure 8.2: Criminal control in Ouest, Centre and Artibonite, August 2025
© Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime



ENDNOTES

1 See eg: J. D. Sachs, 'From His First Day in Office, Bush Was Ousting Aristide', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2004, <https://bit.ly/3YUabdf>.

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9. IRAN – ISRAEL / IRAN – UNITED STATES



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The armed conflicts between Israel and Iran represent a significant escalation in long-standing enmity between the two nations that dates back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Israel has long alleged that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, whereas Iran has argued that its nuclear programme is purely peaceful in nature.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded on 14 July 2015 by China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States, the High Representative of the European Union (the E3/EU+3), and Iran,¹ was endorsed by the United Nations (UN) Security Council a few days later as a peaceful alternative to the use of force.² The United States unilaterally repudiated the agreement in 2018.³

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

There were two international armed conflicts (IACs) between Iran and Israel in the reporting period – the first in October 2024 and then a second, more intense IAC between the two States from 13 to 24 June 2025 which is the focus of this entry. Hostilities between Iran and the United States in a separate IAC in June 2025 are then addressed.

On 1 October 2024, Iran launched more than 180 ballistic missiles at Israel in retaliation for Israel's assassination of Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon. On 27 October, Israel responded to that attack by striking a missile defence system in the Iranian region of Isfahan. Following these tit-for-tat attacks on each other's territory, tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear activities erupted into an intensive IAC in June 2025.

On 12 June 2025, the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) adopted a resolution on Iran's failure to comply with its nuclear safeguards obligations.⁴ This was the first time in twenty years that the Board of Governors had formally declared Iran to be in breach of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations. The same day, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) told people in Tehran's District 18, which includes both military facilities and residential neighbourhoods, to evacuate the area.

On 13 June, at about 3:30 am local time in Tehran, Iranian state television reported a first volley of strikes, with residential areas in the capital said to have been hit. The attacks on 13 June marked the beginning of the IAC between Iran and Israel that lasted for twelve days. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared the strikes 'a targeted military operation to roll back the Iranian threat to Israel's very survival'.⁵

On 24 June, a ceasefire was agreed between the two States (reportedly with support from the United States). Israel said that Iran had fired missiles after the ceasefire had taken effect, and that the Israeli military had retaliated by striking a radar system near Tehran. Iran's military denied violating the ceasefire, and a statement from Israel's prime minister indicated that Israel's retaliation was limited. Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, later issued a statement acknowledging the ceasefire with Israel, saying that the conflict had been 'imposed' on Iran by Israel's 'adventurism' and claiming that the 'people of Iran' had determined the end of the twelve-day war.

In August 2025, Mohammad Reza Aref, Iran's First Vice-President, said that war with Israel could resume: 'We are not even in a ceasefire; we are in a cessation of hostilities'.⁶ In November 2025, Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister, said that Tehran was willing to restart nuclear talks with Washington as long as it is treated with 'dignity and respect'. He claimed that Iran did not have any undeclared nuclear sites, but that IAEA inspectors could not yet visit bombed nuclear sites 'for security reasons'.⁷

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There was a short-lived international armed conflict between Iran and Israel in October 2024 and then another between the two States on 13–24 June 2025. The use of force by Israel in Operation Rising Lion, which began on 13 June 2025, involved attacks on nuclear and military sites in Iran. It could be argued that the IAC in June was a continuation of the hostilities between Iran and Israel in October 2024. No actual hostilities had, however, occurred for more than six months after those exchanges.⁸ The better view is that the hostilities in June 2025 constituted a distinct armed conflict.

Both Iran and Israel are party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, but neither is a State Party to Additional Protocol I of 1977 (though Iran has signed it). Customary international humanitarian law (IHL) on the conduct of hostilities applied in full to the IACs between the two States.

Neither Iran nor Israel is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Although both have signed the Statute, Israel subsequently notified the depositary (the UN Secretary-General) that it did not intend to ratify it.⁹

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Israeli officials claimed that Iran deliberately targeted civilians during the conflict.¹⁰ The deliberate targeting of civilians is a serious violation of IHL and a likely war crime.¹¹ It was reported that a total of twenty-eight Israelis, including children, were killed by Iranian attacks and a further 1,472 were injured (15 seriously).¹² In Iran, 436 civilians were killed and a further 2,071 injured, according to one report. In addition, 319 individuals whose civilian/military status was unknown were killed and 2,148 injured.¹³

Both parties to the IAC in June 2025 appear to have directed attacks against civilian objects. Such attacks constitute a serious violation of IHL.¹⁴ Israel's targeting of Evin prison, discussed below, was unquestionably an example of this. Israel also targeted Iran's nuclear facilities, which are civilian objects. 'Overall', an expert with the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) suggested, Israeli strikes 'remained targeted and precise', even though thousands of civilians were killed or injured in Iran. He observed that this was 'a stark reminder that even so-called precision warfare carries a heavy human toll'.¹⁵ Furthermore, Israeli use of precision-guided munitions means that strikes on civilians or civilian objects cannot be readily dismissed as innocent mistakes.

Iran launched indiscriminate attacks against multiple urban areas in Israel, particularly Tel Aviv. This included a strike that hit Soroka hospital in Beersheba in southern Israel and another that hit the Aleh School for Special Needs Children in Tel Aviv's Bnei Brak suburb. Each of these attacks constituted a serious violation of IHL.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁶ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives¹⁷ and, as such, are protected against attack.¹⁸ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.¹⁹

In Israel, military bases²⁰ as well as key population centres came under sustained missile attacks from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran mainly targeted Tel Aviv and areas around it. Targets included the Israeli Military Intelligence School, the Ministry of Interior in Haifa, the Weizmann Institute of Science, and an oil refinery and power plants.²¹ One of the most significant impacts was on the Soroka Medical Centre, with a strike injuring at least eighty people.²² ACLED recorded at least thirty-six direct hits (excluding those that landed in open areas) that killed at least twenty-eight people, all but one of whom were civilians.

It is suggested that hits in civilian areas might be the result of the 'limited accuracy' of Iran's ballistic missiles.²³ This raises significant concern about Iran's use of potentially indiscriminate weapons and its conduct of indiscriminate attacks. Indiscriminate attacks, which are prohibited under treaty and customary IHL,²⁴ are those which do not target a specific military objective or which use a weapon that cannot be targeted with sufficient accuracy.²⁵ Based on an amicus curiae brief by a number of leading international lawyers with annexed opinions by military experts, the IHL in Focus project considers any medium or long-range weapon that cannot reliably fire or drop its munitions within a 400-metre radius of its target to be indiscriminate.²⁶ Indiscriminate attacks are a serious violation of IHL and a possible war crime.²⁷

Attacks against medical facilities

Insecurity Insight identified twenty-seven strikes as having impacted healthcare facilities in Iran in some manner between 13 and 24 June 2025. In total, medical facilities were said to have been damaged on fourteen occasions, in the course of which sixteen health workers were killed and three others injured. Incidents were documented in towns and cities across western Iran, with most occurring in Tehran.

Hospitals, including a children's facility, health centres, and an emergency health building, were damaged by explosive weapons launched by Israeli forces. Damaged facilities included Farabi hospital in Kermanshah city, which was hit by a blast wave and explosive fragments from an airstrike on 15 June. Patients were said to have been injured, and specialized wards as well as the intensive care unit were damaged.²⁸ According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), during the conflict a total of six emergency medical bases and two maternal-child health centres in Iran were either destroyed or severely damaged.²⁹

On 19 June, amid a wave of missiles launched by Iran overnight, Soroka hospital in Beersheba in southern Israel was hit. Iranian State media said the strike had targeted a military site next to the hospital and not the facility itself. The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) said on Telegram that the 'main target' of the missile attack had been 'the large [Israeli army] Command and Intelligence (IDF C4I) headquarters and the military intelligence camp in the Gav-Yam Technology Park'. It said that this facility was located 'beside' Soroka hospital.

In a post on the social media site X, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs shared a map that purported to show two Israeli military targets right next to Soroka hospital. But an investigation by Euronews journalists concluded that the map was 'fake'. The street names and topography, they found, 'do not correspond to the area, and major sites, including the Gav-Yam Negev technology park, are misspelt'. Users of social media platform X 'have also misleadingly claimed that a video of an Iranian strike hitting the Israeli city of Tel Aviv on Thursday shows an impact on the Gav-Yam Negev park'.³⁰ The exact site of the

IDF C4I headquarters is classified information and cannot be verified. An IDF technology campus is at the Gav-Yam Technology Park, which is located around 1.5 kilometres to the north-east of the site of the strike.³¹

IRNA claimed that the hospital suffered only minor damage from the shockwave of the missile attack. 'The military infrastructure was a precise and direct target', it claimed. Reporting from the hospital, however, BBC correspondents described the damage as extensive, with debris and plumes of smoke floating through the air long after the blast. Several wards were completely destroyed as fire spread through one of the buildings, causing windows to smash and ceilings to collapse, hospital authorities said. Professor Shlomi Codish, the hospital's chief executive, said that around 200 patients would be transferred to other hospitals.³² The precise number of casualties was not publicly confirmed, although the hospital authorities said at the time that at least eighty people had been injured.³³ In condemning the attack, Prime Minister Netanyahu promised a response, saying: 'We will exact the full price from the tyrants in Tehran.'³⁴ Israel's Minister of Defence described the attack as a 'war crime'.³⁵

Despite the claims by Israeli leaders and the extensive damage inflicted on the hospital, there is insufficient information to conclude that the strike was targeted at the hospital. It is, however, likely to have been either an indiscriminate attack or, more likely, a disproportionate attack, both of which are war crimes under customary law.³⁶ The risk of hitting the hospital should have been considered in a proportionality assessment and appropriate precautions taken in the choice of munitions to minimize that risk.

Attacks against schools

On 16 June 2025, an Iranian missile hit the Aleh School for Special Needs Children in Tel Aviv's Bnei Brak suburb, killing one elderly man in a neighbouring building. The school is Israel's most advanced educational and therapeutic centre for children and teens with severe disabilities.³⁷ Dozens of people in the school narrowly escaped after fleeing moments before the building collapsed.³⁸ The target of the strike is not known, but there was no evidence of a nearby military objective and this appears to have been an indiscriminate attack.

Attacks against scientific research facilities

At dawn on 15 June 2025, an Iranian missile hit the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, south of Tel Aviv.³⁹ The Institute, said to be one of Israel's most prominent scientific centres, is known for its technological support to the Israeli military in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) for data analysis and combat guidance, drone technologies and autonomous systems, advanced electronic tracking and jamming tools, and alternative GPS navigation systems.⁴⁰ But unless it was producing weapons or otherwise qualified as a military objective under IHL, the Institute was a civilian object.⁴¹ The ICRC affirms in its 2009 *Interpretive Guidance on the notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law* that 'examples of indirect participation include scientific research and design'.⁴² No injuries were reported by the Institute as having resulted from the attack.⁴³

Many students at the facility were pursuing master's and doctoral programmes in mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, and computer science.⁴⁴ According to Milko van der Boom, Dean of the Faculty of Chemistry, around forty-five chemical laboratories sustained serious damage. More than 200 international students and postdoctoral fellows

who lived in housing at the university had been relocated off campus, while 70 had left Israel as of 20 June.⁴⁵ Initially, Israeli media did not show pictures or share details on the extent of the damage to the Institute facilities. This is in accordance with instructions from the IDF that prevent the disclosure of damage to sensitive facilities.⁴⁶ But other media sources provided photographs showing damage to parts of the University.⁴⁷

Strikes against nuclear facilities

A range of nuclear facilities in Iran were struck by Israeli bombs and missiles during the armed conflict in June. There was an underground uranium enrichment section at Natanz, the main enrichment facility, which was impacted. Following the first wave of attacks, the IDF said that it had damaged the site's underground structures, including a multi-storey enrichment hall with centrifuges, electrical rooms, and additional supporting infrastructure. It also stated that 'vital infrastructure at the site that allows for its continuous functioning and the continued advancement of the Iranian regime's project to obtain nuclear weapons was attacked'.⁴⁸ In the IAEA's assessment, prior to the US attacks on 22 June 2025, Israel did not damage Iran's other uranium enrichment plant at Fordow, which is buried inside a mountain and was similarly enriching uranium to sixty per cent purity.⁴⁹

On 13 June 2025, Rafael Grossi, Director-General of the IAEA, issued a statement on the situation in Iran in which he described the attacks by Israel on Iranian nuclear facilities as a 'deeply concerning' development. He said: 'I have repeatedly stated that nuclear facilities must never be attacked, regardless of the context or circumstances, as it could harm both people and the environment.'⁵⁰ The Director-General noted that the IAEA had 'consistently underlined that "armed attacks on nuclear facilities could result in radioactive releases with grave consequences within and beyond the boundaries of the State which has been attacked".'⁵¹ A number of UN human rights experts issued a statement in which they endorsed the IAEA's view that military action against or near nuclear facilities poses unacceptable risks to regional and international security, with the potential for catastrophic humanitarian and ecological impacts.⁵²

Under IHL, a treaty obligation specifically protects nuclear installations. Article 56 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 provides that 'works or installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, shall not be made the object of attack'. Although Israel is not a party to the Protocol, it is a customary rule that: 'Particular care must be taken if works and installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, and other installations located at or in their vicinity are attacked, in order to avoid the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population'.⁵³

The reference to 'nuclear electrical generating stations', however, indicates that other nuclear facilities that do not generate electrical power fall outside its scope of application. This is evidenced by the text of the provision, which uses the term 'namely' rather than 'such as'.⁵⁴ Hence, nuclear facilities other than nuclear power plants fall outside the scope of the rule.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, customary IHL rules of targeting – distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take all feasible precautions in attack – still applied to any attack by Israel, including on a nuclear site. For Iran's nuclear facilities to constitute a lawful military objective, it would need to be clear that they were being used to develop weapons – in this case a nuclear explosive device. That evidence is lacking, even though considerable suspicion surrounds Iran's nuclear programme, as the IAEA confirmed in its resolution of 12 June.

Even if the nuclear facilities targeted by Israel constituted legitimate military objectives, the principle of proportionality would be a significant constraint. As Marten Zwanenburg has argued: 'In terms of proportionality, it can be argued that neutralizing the construction of nuclear weapons offers a significant military advantage. On the other hand, the potential for serious civilian harm arising from radiological release must be considered in considering the expected civilian harm. It was reported that Israel did not strike Iran's Fordo nuclear site for fear of triggering radiological fallout.'⁵⁶ In fact, Israel did subsequently attack the Fordow (an alternative spelling) nuclear site, where uranium enrichment was being undertaken, but only after it had been hit by the United States. The US attack is discussed below.

Strikes against cultural and religious property

An Iranian strike in downtown Haifa on 20 June 2025 damaged at least two places of worship. An Iranian missile struck an abandoned building in the port city of Haifa, Israel's third-largest city. The blast damaged several surrounding buildings, including a mosque and a church. Clerics were present at the mosque at the time of the strike, Israel's Ministry of Interior said in a statement. The Church of Our Lady and the House of Grace, a halfway house associated with the church, were also damaged by the blast, according to Jamal Shehade, the director of the halfway house. Mr Shehade described the damage to the church building, which was erected in 1862, as not being severe, but said the coloured-glass windows had been shattered. A nearby government building that houses the Ministry of Interior was also partially damaged, according to photos and videos taken after the blast.⁵⁷

Strikes against media facilities

On 17 June, Israeli aircraft hit the headquarters of Iran's State broadcaster in Tehran, after the Israeli military told residents to evacuate the area of the capital where the headquarters is located. A live broadcast on IRINN, Iran Broadcasting's television news channel, was briefly interrupted after blasts were heard and the studio lights went out. Iranian media reported that one staff member at least was killed. The IDF said it had targeted a 'communications centre of the Iranian regime'. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the strike was a 'war crime'.⁵⁸

Attacking a TV station purely because it supports the regime in power and broadcasts propaganda is unlawful.⁵⁹ One of the incidents for which Dragomir Milošević, the commander of the Bosnian Serb forces above Sarajevo from August 1994, was convicted of war crimes, was an attack on a TV building in Sarajevo. Commander Milošević had written in a letter: 'Our artillery forces are responding with precision to the Muslim artillery attacks. In one such response on 28 June they hit the BH Radio and Television Centre, the centre of media lies against the just struggle of the Serbian people'.⁶⁰ Two days later, Colonel Meille, the acting sector commander of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Sarajevo, wrote to the accused to protest with about the shelling of civilian objects in Sarajevo, in particular, the shelling of the television building.⁶¹ According to the ICRC, indirect participation in hostilities, which does not lead to loss of civilian immunity from attack, encompasses war-sustaining actions, such as 'political propaganda'.⁶²

In contrast, when a broadcasting station is used for military command and control, it becomes a military objective. Journalists working as such, however, remain civilians protected from attack. In the case of the attack on the TV building in Tehran, the Israeli military spokesperson, Brigadier General Effie Defrin, said that the IDF had targeted

'a communications centre of the Iranian regime, which served Iran's armed forces'. He added: 'According to our intelligence, the centre was used by military forces to advance operational activity under the cover of civilian assets and infrastructure'. This would mean that the building was a lawful military objective. In contrast, Israel's Minister of Defence, Israel Katz, called the TV channel the 'propaganda and incitement broadcasting authority of the Iranian regime'.⁶³ If it were targeted on this basis, the attack would have been directed against a civilian object and a serious violation of IHL.

Strikes against detention centres

In one strike on 23 June, Israel hit Evin prison in Tehran, which holds many political detainees, damaging parts of the facility.⁶⁴ The strike hit the medical ward as well as other areas of the prison.⁶⁵ In total, the attack killed more than seventy people – staff, inmates, and visiting family members.⁶⁶ Minister of Defence Katz said it had hit 'regime targets and agencies of government repression' across Tehran, including Evin while the Iranian judiciary's Mizan news agency claimed that the attack violated international law.⁶⁷ The spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) told media that the prison was not a military objective according to the laws of war and that its targeting constituted 'a grave breach' of IHL.⁶⁸

Indeed, while the prison was a site where serious human rights violations were perpetrated by the Iranian regime,⁶⁹ it was not a lawful military objective under IHL. Its nature, location, purpose, or use did not make an effective contribution to military action. It was therefore a civilian object protected as such, and Israel's deliberate attack on it amounted to a serious violation of IHL. Michael Page, the deputy Middle East director of Human Rights Watch, declared: 'Israel's strikes on Evin prison on June 23 killed and injured scores of civilians without any evident military target in violation of the laws of war and is an apparent war crime'.⁷⁰

In a post on social media, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gideon Saar, suggested the attack was both retaliation for Iranian missile strikes on civilian structures and somehow an act of liberation.⁷¹ But as Saeedeh Fathi, a journalist and activist imprisoned in Evin during the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom protests (now living in exile) declared:

I had once hoped that the great iron gate of Evin would fall – not from an airstrike, but opened by the people. That light would pour through it, not smoke. That the fall of that gate would be a celebration, not a mourning.⁷²

Civilians under Attack

HRANA said that the Israeli airstrikes on Iranian soil that began on 13 June resulted in at least 5,665 casualties (1,190 killed and 4,475 injured), a figure that includes both military personnel and civilians. The attacks, which affected twenty-eight provinces across the country, caused severe damage to critical military, civilian, medical, and emergency infrastructure, and posed a serious threat to the safety of Iranians nationwide. During that period, 1,596 individuals were also arrested by the Iranian regime's security forces, according to HRANA's research. Their report further found that a total of 436 civilians were killed and a further 2,071 injured, while 435 military personnel were killed and 256 were injured. In addition, 319 individuals whose civilian/military status was unknown were killed and 2,148 were injured.⁷³

According to the report of *The New York Times* on the Israeli attack of 23 June 2025 on Evin prison, it appears – based on information from Iranian media, activists and rights

groups – that the dead and wounded included visiting family members of prisoners, social workers, a lawyer, physicians and nurses, a five-year-old child, teenage soldiers guarding the doors as part of mandatory military service, administrative staff, and residents of the area.⁷⁴ An unknown number of inmates – also protected civilians under IHL – were harmed. Only the soldiers present at the facility could have been lawful military objectives. Moreover, the timing of the attack, at noon during a working day, meant that the prison had been full of visitors, lawyers, and medical and administrative staff. This may also violate the duty to take all feasible precautions in attack.⁷⁵

Attacks against medical personnel

At least 16 health workers were killed in five incidents between 13 and 16 June 2025 in Iran. Nine victims worked for the Iranian Red Crescent Society and were killed while responding to victims of previous bombings. In one instance, two Iranian Red Crescent Society paramedics were killed when their ambulance was hit and destroyed by an Israeli airstrike in Tehran province on 16 June. Two health workers were killed in hospital bombings, including a doctor at Evin Prison who was killed when Israeli airstrikes hit and destroyed the infirmary. Two doctors and a dentist were killed in three separate incidents when their homes in Tehran were hit by Israel airstrikes. Patients' access to healthcare services was disrupted by the conflict, such as Ameneh Infant Care Centre in Tehran to where infants and children were evacuated after an Israeli warning to clear the district.⁷⁶

HRANA claimed that, over the course of the conflict, five doctors and four aid workers were killed and at least forty-nine others injured. Nine ambulances and seven hospitals were hit or damaged by shrapnel. Six ambulances and a Red Crescent Society helicopter were also impacted.⁷⁷ Not enough is known about the circumstances of these incidents to determine whether IHL was complied with in each instance.

Attacks against nuclear scientists

The extent to which Iranian nuclear scientists were lawfully targeted during the armed conflict is highly debatable. Israel stated that during the IDF strikes at the onset of Operation Rising Lion, 'nine senior scientists and experts who advanced the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons program, were eliminated. ... All of the eliminated scientists and experts served as significant knowledge centres in the Iranian nuclear project and possessed decades of accumulated experience in the development of nuclear weapons.'⁷⁸

It is clear that if the scientists were members of Iran's armed forces, they were combatants and could lawfully be targeted. But civilian scientists – as with other civilians – may not be targeted unless and for such time as they are directly participating in hostilities.⁷⁹ The ICRC's 2009 Interpretive Guidance on Direct Participation in Hostilities thus states that nuclear scientists generally do not lose their protection from attack as the requirement of 'direct causation' would not be met.⁸⁰

The issue was specifically addressed by a number of experts during one of the ICRC expert meetings that led to the ICRC's issuance of its guidance. During that meeting in 2006, one expert asked whether 'civilian specialists possessing expertise on decisive new means or method of warfare' could be considered to be directly participating in hostilities. In response, 'several experts insisted that there has been a consensus since the Second World War that neither armament industry employees, nor nuclear weapons experts, were considered to be directly participating in hostilities regardless of their value to the war effort'.⁸¹

During the same discussion, another expert agreed with the principle that a civilian weapons expert should not lose protection against direct attack, but doubted whether this assessment could be maintained in extreme situations where the expertise of a particular individual was of very exceptional and decisive value for the outcome of an armed conflict. For example, in the case of nuclear weapons experts during the Second World War, the enormous importance of the individual contribution to the war effort could perhaps have led to a conclusion deviating from the general rule.⁸²

As Zwanenburg observes, based on this exchange, it appears that the majority view of the legal experts consulted by the ICRC was that (civilian) nuclear scientists would not lose protection from attack. With regard to the statement of the expert who referred to the case of the Second World War, arguably, 'the contribution of individual scientists in the current day is not comparable to the contribution of, for example, Robert Oppenheimer some 80 years ago'.⁸³ In case of doubt, Additional Protocol I of 1977 states that a person's civilian status is to be presumed.⁸⁴ This rule has crystallized as customary IHL.

Use of unguided bombs and missiles

IHL does not generally prohibit the use of unguided bombs or missiles, nor does it require the use of precision-guided munitions.⁸⁵ That said, in its 2015 *Law of War Manual*, the US Department of Defense agreed that 'under certain circumstances, it may be advantageous to use ... precision-guided munitions to minimize the risk of incidental harm'. Furthermore, the German *Manual on the Law of Armed Conflict* has stated that: 'There may however be situations in which the obligation to discriminate between military targets and civilians/civilian objects or the obligation to avoid or minimise collateral damage cannot be fulfilled without the use of such weapons'.⁸⁶ The risk of harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects when munitions are used in populated areas is particularly acute.⁸⁷

Iran's use of unguided missiles likely involved a number of inherently indiscriminate weapons. At the very least, those incapable of consistently landing within 400 metres of the intended target may be deemed to be indiscriminate weapons. During the October 2024 attack on Israel, Iran's medium-range ballistic missiles 'demonstrated limited accuracy, restricting their value in counterforce roles'. The same missiles were reportedly used in the June 2025 conflict.⁸⁸ The Institute for the Study of War stated that Iran's inability to accurately strike military or energy infrastructure highlighted 'the limited accuracy of its ballistic missiles'. The stated and publicly known circular error probable (CEP) of Iranian medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) used in the conflict are between 20 and 500 metres.⁸⁹ Thus, 3 CEP of the missiles (the area within which ninety-five per cent of missiles fired at a single point would be expected to fall) would be as high as 1.5 kilometres, meaning that several missiles could miss by this much – a clear example of an indiscriminate attack.

Cluster munitions

On at least three occasions, Iran fired cluster munitions at urban centres.⁹⁰ Although these are not inherently indiscriminate weapons – and neither State is party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions that comprehensively prohibits them⁹¹ – cluster munitions are designed to spread over a wide area, significantly increasing the risk of harm to civilians when used in populated areas. The Appeals Chamber of the ICTY held in the *Martić* case that an attack on Zagreb in May 1995 using submunitions fired from an M-87 Orkan, and whose dispersion error was about 1,000 metres in each direction, was an indiscriminate attack.⁹² The nature and characteristics of the munitions fired by Iran are not known.

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

There were no reported detentions of combatants in the armed forces of either party to the conflict. That said, during and in the aftermath of the conflict, Iran detained hundreds of individuals on suspicion of spying for Israel, while Israel detained dozens of individuals on suspicion of spying for Iran.

Anyone detained in connection with an armed conflict must be treated humanely, in accordance with IHL and international human rights law, and accorded fundamental fair-trial guarantees.⁹³ The right to a fair trial in any death penalty case is a non-derogable right.⁹⁴ Both Iran and Israel are States Parties to the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁹⁵ The Covenant prohibits extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, torture and other ill-treatment, and arbitrary detention.⁹⁶ Enforced disappearances connected with an armed conflict are a war crime⁹⁷ as well as a violation of the right to life.⁹⁸

In Iran, there were reports of summary executions, enforced disappearances, and mass arrests, with at least six individuals, including three Kurdish men, reportedly executed for ‘espionage for Israel’. Hundreds of individuals, including social media users, journalists, human rights defenders, foreign nationals – particularly Afghans – and members of ethnic and religious minorities such as Baha’is, Kurds, Balouchis and Ahwazi Arabs, have been detained on accusations of ‘collaboration’ or ‘espionage’.⁹⁹ In early August 2025, Iran executed by hanging Rouzbeh Vadi, an alleged spy who was accused of helping Israel to assassinate one of Iran’s nuclear scientists.¹⁰⁰

UN experts had earlier expressed alarm at official statements announcing expedited trials on accusations of espionage, putting individuals at heightened risk of summary execution or punishment without adequate due process. Furthermore, Iran’s Parliament was considering new legislation that would classify intelligence or espionage activities conducted for ‘hostile Governments’ as ‘corruption on earth’ – an offence punishable by death.¹⁰¹

Israel also detained individuals suspected of spying for Iran. Among those charged with espionage are Russian-Israeli soldiers from the Haifa suburbs, a Haredi man from Bnei Brak, a West Bank settler, and an Arab Israeli college student. The growing number of alleged Iranian agents even prompted Israel to open up a new wing for them in Haifa’s Damon prison.¹⁰² There were no details at the time of writing of their treatment in detention.

Figure 9.1: UN Map of Iran © United Nations



Figure 9.2: UN Map of Israel © United Nations



Figure 9.3: Israeli strikes on Iranian missile infrastructure © ACLED



IRAN V UNITED STATES

CONFLICT OVERVIEW

There was a short-lived but intense IAC between Iran and the United States in June 2025. Following attacks by Iran and Israel on each other's territory in October 2024, tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear activities erupted once again into an IAC between the two States in June 2025. On 21 June, the United States initiated an overnight bombing campaign on Iranian nuclear facilities. The bombing involved more than 125 US aircraft and 75 precision-guided munitions.¹⁰³ That this amounted to an act of aggression under the rules governing inter-State use of force (*jus ad bellum*) does not affect the legal analysis under IHL.

Twelve GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOPs) – known colloquially as 'bunker-buster bombs' – were dropped by six B-2 bombers on the Fordo site, a facility buried deep below a mountain. Navy submarines fired thirty cruise missiles against the sites at Natanz and Isfahan while a B-2 bomber dropped two bunker-busting bombs on Natanz.¹⁰⁴ The US attacks during the night of 21 to 22 June 2025, codenamed Operation Midnight Hammer,¹⁰⁵ inflicted significant damage on the facilities at Fordo, Isfahan, and Natanz.¹⁰⁶ They were followed by a riposte by Iran on a US military base in Qatar on 23 June 2025.

In the immediate aftermath of the strikes, a spokesperson for the US Department of Defense claimed that all three sites had sustained 'extremely severe damage', although the extent of the damage to Iran's nuclear programme appeared more limited. The conflict marked the first time that the United States had struck Iranian territory directly, and the first real-world use of the US GBU-57 bombs. These were said to be the only munitions that could reach Iran's deeply buried nuclear sites.¹⁰⁷ The Iranian Atomic Energy Organization described the bombing of the three nuclear sites as a 'barbaric violation' of international law.¹⁰⁸

The IAC was related to, but was also distinct from, the IAC between Iran and Israel on 13–24 June 2025 discussed above. The conflict between Iran and the United States represents a significant escalation of the long-standing enmity between the two nations that dates back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the so-called 'Iran hostages crisis'.¹⁰⁹

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

Both Iran and the United States are party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, but neither is a State Party to Additional Protocol I of 1977, although Iran has signed it. Customary IHL on the conduct of hostilities applies to the IAC between the two States.

The initiation of Operation Midnight Hammer on 21 June by the United States was the start of the IAC with Iran. Even though it was a short-lived armed conflict, the use of force employed by the United States clearly meets the test set out in the decision by the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the *Tadić* case on the criteria for the existence of an IAC.¹¹⁰

The IAC in June 2025 was not a continuation of the hostilities between Iran and the United States five years earlier. In 2020, during Donald Trump's first presidential term, the

United States killed General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the elite Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in a drone strike in Baghdad. In 2019, under US domestic law the US administration had declared the Quds Force to be a foreign terrorist organisation. Iran responded to the assassination of General Soleimani with strikes on US assets in Iraq.¹¹¹

On 23 June 2025, in an apparently managed retaliation for the US strikes on its nuclear facilities,¹¹² Iran launched missiles against Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. The attack, codenamed Operation Glad Tidings of Victory (Operation Bashayer Al-Fath in Farsi), did not cause any casualties.¹¹³ Iran had reportedly coordinated the attacks on the air base with Qatari officials and gave advance notice that attacks were coming in order to minimize casualties. As *The New York Times* reported, officials had also said that Iran needed to strike back at the United States for symbolic reasons, but at the same time proceed in a way that allowed all sides an exit ramp. They described it as a similar strategy to that in 2020, when Iran gave Iraq advance warning before firing ballistic missiles at an American base in Iraq after the assassination of General Suleimani.¹¹⁴

Although there was no formal ceasefire between Iran and the United States, an IAC is deemed to have ended with the general close of military operations. According to the commentary on Common Article 2 of the Geneva Conventions by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): 'Even in the absence of active hostilities, such military operations having a continuing nexus with the international armed conflict will justify maintaining the classification of the situation as an international armed conflict.'¹¹⁵ At the time of writing, however, no further military action had been conducted by either party since 23 June. The IHL in Focus project therefore treats the IAC as having ended.

Neither Iran nor the United States is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Although both have signed the Statute, the United States subsequently notified the depositary (the UN Secretary-General) that it did not intend to ratify it.¹¹⁶

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The United States directed attacks against civilian objects, specifically the three Iranian nuclear research facilities. Each of these attacks constitutes a serious violation of IHL.¹¹⁷ There were no reports of casualties resulting from the US attacks.¹¹⁸ The Iranian response – the missiles fired at US military base in Qatar – targeted a military objective under IHL. There were no reports of casualties resulting from the Iranian attack.¹¹⁹

Civilian Objects under Attack

Attacks against nuclear facilities

Although the United States is not a party to Additional Protocol I, it is a customary rule that: 'Particular care must be taken if works and installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, and other installations located at or in their vicinity are attacked, in order to avoid the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population'.¹²⁰ But as discussed above, nuclear facilities other than nuclear power plants fall outside the scope of the rule.¹²¹

Under the customary IHL rules of targeting, for Iran's nuclear facilities to constitute a lawful military objective, it would need to be clear that they were being used to

develop weapons – in this case a nuclear explosive device – a factually controversial issue. The US targeting of the three nuclear facilities in Iran apparently caused significant material damage. The underground uranium enrichment section at Natanz, Iran's main enrichment facility, was impacted, as was the Isfahan facility, but it was claimed that the greatest damage was inflicted on the Fordo underground facility.¹²² Whether or not this is true is uncertain. As noted, the US attack on the facility employed its GBU-57/B munitions, which are designed to attack hardened and deeply buried targets.¹²³ The following day, Israel hit access routes to the facility.¹²⁴

Even if the nuclear facilities targeted by the United States constituted legitimate military objectives, the principle of proportionality would be a significant constraint. As Zwanenburg has argued, the potential for serious civilian harm arising from radiological release must be considered in considering the expected civilian harm in a proportionality assessment. There was no evidence that radiological fallout resulted from the attacks. The IAEA said in a post on social media site X that it had not detected any increase in radiation levels at key nuclear sites in Iran in the aftermath of the US airstrikes: 'Following attacks on three nuclear sites in Iran ... the IAEA can confirm that no increase in off-site radiation levels has been reported as of this time.'¹²⁵

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10. IRAQ



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The illegal invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003 was followed by years of insurgency and widespread armed violence that persists to this day. The rise of Islamic State¹ from the demise of the Baathist government saw the group come to occupy significant territory in both Iraq and Syria, but international intervention had largely defeated Islamic State by 2017. Nevertheless, remnants of the group have continued to fight sporadically in Iraq.

Following the renewed hostilities between Israel and Hamas from 7 October 2023, a growing number of violent confrontations occurred between the United States and a decentralized network of Shia militias operating under the banner of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI). Combat between October 2023 and February 2024 was of such intensity, and the IRI was sufficiently organized, such that a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) existed under international humanitarian law (IHL). The violence subsequently subsided, with the conflict ending before the start of the current reporting period.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The extent of violence in the multiple armed conflicts in Iraq remained relatively low during the reporting period. The NIAC between Iraq – supported by the Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) – and Islamic State continued to lessen in intensity, largely as a result of sustained counterterrorism operations.² Islamic State mounted small-scale attacks, mostly in remote and rural areas. At the same time, the United States has conducted regular airstrikes targeting factions of the IRI without the consent of the Iraqi government, signalling the existence of an international armed conflict (IAC).

In the broader context of the cross-border conflict between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Türkiye has conducted frequent airstrikes and ground operations targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq, notably in the Sinjar region, impacting on the Yazidi community who had been displaced by Islamic State in 2014. These operations continued despite the PKK's announcement on 12 May 2025 that it was ending its armed struggle against Türkiye.³ Despite growing diplomatic ties between Iraq and Türkiye, including through the signing of agreements to cooperate on defence and security matters, the military operations against the PKK on Iraqi territory occur without Iraq's consent and therefore amount also to an IAC between the two States.⁴

The Humanitarian Situation

In part owing to the ongoing violence, the humanitarian situation in Iraq remains fragile. As of December 2024, more than one million people were internally displaced within Iraq. Most were in private accommodation in urban areas or informal settings, but an estimated 107,000 individuals were in twenty camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the north.⁵ Many have been displaced for more than seven years and continued to live in very poor conditions; these worsened due to funding shortfalls.⁶ As the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in 2025: 'Iraq is navigating a complex recovery phase marked by protracted displacement, fragile returns, and ongoing protection needs rooted in decades of conflict and instability'.⁷

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

During the reporting period, there were thus two international armed conflicts (IACs) involving Iraq:

- Iraq *v* Türkiye.
- Iraq *v* United States.

These IACs both occur because the two foreign States in question are using force on the territory of Iraq without Iraq's consent.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL apply to these two IACs. Additional Protocol I of 1977⁸ does not apply as neither Türkiye nor the United States is a State Party. Iraq adhered to the Protocol in 2010.

There were also two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in Iraq:

- Iraq (supported by the CJTF-OIR) *v* Islamic State.
- Türkiye *v* PKK.

These two conflicts are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary IHL. Iraq is not a party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,⁹ meaning this treaty does not apply to the hostilities with Islamic State. In any event, although the requirement for a level of territorial control that would enable it to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol could be met by the PKK in its conflict with Türkiye, for the Protocol to apply, one of the parties must be the armed forces of the territorial State.¹⁰

Iraq, Türkiye, and the United States are all States not party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹¹ Although the United States has signed the Statute, it subsequently notified the depositary (the UN Secretary-General) that it did not intend to become a party to it.¹²

The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD) ended its work on 17 September 2024.¹³ UNITAD's closure raises concerns about accountability for past violations, the management and preservation of evidence (in particular in light of the existence of multiple mass graves), and the future of proposed incorporation of international crimes into Iraqi domestic criminal law.¹⁴

On this issue, Iraq has still to enact penal legislation to punish war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, despite regular pledges to do so. Conflict-related incidents continue to be prosecuted under the anti-terrorism law,¹⁵ which has been criticized for its broad and ambiguous wording. The law does not recognize conflict-related sexual violence as a form of terrorism, leaving a major gap in the capacity to prosecute Islamic State affiliates for such acts.¹⁶ Moreover, in January 2025, the Iraqi parliament passed a law providing for an amnesty for certain prisoners convicted under the terrorism law. This is said to have had a further detrimental impact on parts of the Iraqi population, particularly women and girls, as well as the minority communities who were targeted by Islamic State.¹⁷

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Hundreds of civilian casualties occurred during the reporting period. Civilian objects were regularly attacked, in particular by parties to the armed conflicts that took place in areas under the control of the Turkish Armed Forces. The targets of Turkish attacks included objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population and cultural property. There were also claims of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks by Islamic State, Iraqi armed forces, and Türkiye. Available evidence does not indicate that any of the US attacks violated IHL.

There were reports of forcible displacement of civilians by the Turkish Armed Forces without lawful justification. A range of protection concerns persist for those in the power of the various parties to armed conflict. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq and Syria, including those displaced in earlier conflicts, continue to face serious obstacles to return and reintegration, owing to a lack of official documentation, socio-economic exclusion, and lack of housing. Landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) continue to endanger civilian lives, obstruct safe movement and access to services, and impede agriculture and livestock farming.

There were continued reports of arbitrary detention of individuals by Iraqi authorities in connection with the conflict with Islamic State. Evidence also suggests violations of fundamental fair-trial guarantees, arbitrary application of death sentences, and unlawful mass executions. Finally, the existence of multiple mass graves across the territory invokes the Iraqi government's obligation under international law to investigate possible war crimes occurring on its territory.¹⁸

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives²⁰ and, as such, are protected against attack.²¹ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²² Additionally, certain civilian objects are afforded special protection due to their importance to the survival of the civilian population.²³ Indiscriminate attacks are unlawful.²⁴

Attacks against objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population

Türkiye's continued air and ground campaign against the PKK in northern Iraq has resulted in significant destruction of agricultural and grazing areas – often the primary source of income for civilians living in the area.²⁵ By September 2024, attacks were reported to have destroyed at least 6,500 hectares of farmland and forest in the north.²⁶

In June 2025, in Duhok province, heavy bombardments by Turkish Armed Forces sparked destruction of thousands of dunams of land²⁷ used to cultivate grapes, walnuts, almonds, and sumac.²⁸ As one local resident, Ahmad Saadullah, who lives in the village of Guharze, recalled: 'We used to live off our farming, livestock, and agriculture.' But in recent years, the local population has been dependent on government aid and 'unstable, seasonal jobs'. These days, he said, 'we live with warplanes, drones, and bombings'.²⁹ The widespread destruction of agricultural land prompted many civilians to leave their homes.³⁰ Adil Tahir Qadir, for instance, could not return to his village of Barchi. 'Because of Turkish bombing', he said, 'all of our farmlands and trees were burned'.³¹

Attacks directed against civilian objects

Evidence points to the deliberate targeting of civilian property by Turkish Armed Forces in the KRI during the reporting period. On 17 April 2025, for example, a residential home in the village of Spindare was bombed, reportedly by the Turkish Air Force.³² Turkish authorities have alleged that the village was being used as a logistical or supply point by PKK fighters. No evidence, however, has been proffered to support the allegation. In the absence of evidence that targeted homes were military objectives, the strikes would breach the fundamental IHL principle of distinction.

Other attacks may also have been unlawful. Between 10 and 16 September 2024, Makhmour refugee camp was struck twice by Turkish drones, reportedly while UN and Iraqi authorities were visiting the area. Türkiye sought to justify the strikes by alleging the presence of PKK operatives and training sites within the camp. However, no public evidence substantiates the claim that the camps constituted military objectives under IHL.³³ This pattern continued with another strike on 1 July 2025 against an IDP camp in Duhok governorate, which houses many Yazidi civilians. The United Nations in Iraq publicly condemned the attack and urged the Iraqi government to investigate and take preventive measures to prevent a recurrence.³⁴

Between 15 and 18 April 2025, Turkish Armed Forces are reported to have launched more than 600 strikes using fighter jets, drones, and artillery.³⁵ The cumulative impact of these operations has been to inflict extensive damage to civilian property that has rendered large areas uninhabitable. The scale and intensity of the violence, combined with the apparent targeting of areas known to be populated or previously inhabited by civilians, suggest either indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks. Even in circumstances where military objectives may be present in the locations being attacked, the failure to take all feasible precautions to verify targets, minimize civilian deaths and injuries, and avoid damage to civilian property would breach IHL.

Attacks against cultural property

The reporting period also saw persistent allegations of destruction of objects of significant cultural and spiritual importance to minority groups in Iraq, particularly Kurdish communities. On 22 February 2025, for example, the Turkish Armed Forces bombed the Shekhy cave in Amedi, a historically significant site associated with an important Kurdish revolutionary figure.³⁶ Incidents such as these seem to be part of Türkiye's wider military effort to neutralize the PKK's operations from the network of tunnels the group has built in the region.³⁷ There is, however, no evidence to suggest that cultural sites effectively contributed to PKK's military activities – that the PKK used those sites for military activities against Türkiye or that it was about to do so.³⁸ In the absence of such evidence, destruction of such sites violates the principle of distinction as well as the special protection to be accorded to cultural property under IHL.³⁹

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy protection against attack, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁴⁰ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians. In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁴¹ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must be proportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautionary

measures to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians.

Attacks against journalists

Under IHL, journalists are protected against attack, unless and for such times as they directly participate in hostilities.⁴² Yet, the reporting period revealed several instances of journalists being attacked by the Turkish Armed Forces, seemingly on the basis that they were considered members of the PKK. On 8 July 2024, for instance, a Turkish drone struck a vehicle belonging to a Yazidi-focused media outlet, injuring six people. While some sources indicate the passengers were civilians, Türkiye asserted they were affiliated with the PKK.⁴³ Similarly, on 11 August 2024, a drone strike hit a vehicle carrying staff from a media outlet reportedly funded by the PKK, killing two people and injuring six others. Most independent reports described the victims as civilians although regional authorities later claimed that one was a PKK official.⁴⁴

These assaults occur within a context in which journalists reporting on Turkish operations in northern Iraq express growing concern about being targeted. Claims of increased intimidation and violence against media professionals are widely circulating.⁴⁵ In July 2024, a court in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok province sentenced Suleiman Ahmed, the editor-in-chief of *Rojnews'* Arabic section, to three years for espionage and alleged membership of a Kurdish party close to the PKK.⁴⁶ In light of these events, Jonathan Dagher, the head of Reporters Without Borders' Middle East desk, warned that Iraqi Kurdistan 'is becoming one of the most dangerous places in the world for reporters'.⁴⁷

Absent clear evidence that the individuals were directly participating in hostilities at the time, these attacks raise serious concerns about Turkish compliance with the principle of distinction and the duty to take feasible precautions in attack. The recurrent attacks against journalists also violates the obligation to respect and protect them when they work.⁴⁸

Forced displacement

During the reporting period, serious concerns emerged about conflict-related displacement of Kurdish minority communities as a result of Turkish military operations in Iraq. Under customary IHL, parties to a NIAC are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless required for their security or for imperative military reasons.⁴⁹ Breaches of these prohibitions are serious violations of IHL and may amount to war crimes.⁵⁰ Such displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁵¹ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁵²

Military operations by the Turkish Armed Forces in the affected regions appear to have again displaced many hundreds of civilians, in particular from Kurdish minority communities.⁵³ The destruction of civilian property and agricultural land noted earlier has further provoked a widespread sense of insecurity among the local population, compelling many to abandon their homes and livelihoods in search of safety.

Reports indicate that civilians attempting to return to their places of habitual residence, such as villagers of Bermiza in the Sidakan district, also met with obstruction and intimidation. On 2 and 7 April 2025, Turkish forces established military checkpoints and

restricted access to local land, reportedly accompanied by warnings that returnees would only be permitted to return to areas within imposed boundaries. When villagers attempted to re-enter the area on 7 April, they were forcibly turned back.⁵⁴ Türkiye is said to be seeking to establish a security corridor across the Turkish-Iraq-Syrian border, while cooperating with Iraq in a road construction project that will directly connect the two States.⁵⁵ Residents have described an environment of fear and coercion, with one claiming: ‘They will shoot you if you stay. ... All they want is for us to leave these areas.’⁵⁶

In sum, displacement of Kurdish civilians has often occurred under duress, threats, and a generalized fear of violence. The cumulative effect of the destruction of property, the establishment of military installations, and the presence of Turkish troops, as well as direct threats against returnees, is that Türkiye is responsible for forced displacement under IHL.

Additional concerns arise from credible claims that the Iraqi Armed Forces may also have violated IHL. Kurdish farmers have on several occasions been prevented by Iraqi security forces from accessing their lands, despite a property restitution law that the Iraqi Parliament passed in early 2025.⁵⁷ This conduct has affected the Kurds in the KRI for several years and undermined access to their land.⁵⁸ Certain incidents have been subject to an investigation ordered by the Iraqi government.⁵⁹ But either they have not concluded or else the results of the investigations have not been made public.

Use of landmines

The continued presence of landmines in Iraq, in particular in areas previously controlled by Islamic State, constitutes a serious and ongoing threat to civilian life. The failure to direct landmines at specific military objectives violates the principle of distinction. When deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, the munitions often have indiscriminate effects. Where they are employed without feasible precautions to limit their impact on civilians, they may also violate the principle of precautions in attack. As reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), landmines continue to kill and maim indiscriminately in Iraq, obstructing civilian movement, limiting access to essential services, and impeding agricultural and pastoral livelihoods.⁶⁰

The impact is particularly severe in areas previously contested between the Iraqi Armed Forces and Islamic State, where explosive contamination has compounded the humanitarian toll of armed conflict. Recorded incidents show that children are often among the victims. Between December 2024 and March 2025, explosive ordnance (defined broadly, and without disaggregation by type of explosive device) killed fourteen children of between two and seventeen years of age and seriously injured a further twelve.⁶¹ Iraq recorded forty-four landmine casualties in 2024, down from fifty-six the year before.⁶²

New use by Islamic State, which had earlier made massive use of anti-personnel mines of an improvised nature, was not, though, clearly in evidence during the reporting period. Iraq is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its armed forces from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as a munition that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind Islamic State directly under international law, but the group is subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians.

Moreover, Iraq is also party to Amended Protocol II of 1996 to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which does bind all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁶³ Although the protocol does not ban all use of anti-personnel

mines, it specifically prohibits their indiscriminate use and requires that a party to an armed conflict take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from their effects.⁶⁴ Likewise, customary law requires that 'when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects'.⁶⁵ While not an inherently indiscriminate weapon, the effects of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature as Islamic State employed very widely in the past in Iraq, are all too often felt by civilians. Iraq is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory as soon as possible.⁶⁶

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Under customary IHL, special protection is afforded to several categories of civilians that face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and the displaced. The law guarantees humane treatment for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting torture or other ill-treatment, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and trials that do not meet fundamental standards of fairness.

Arbitrary detention, torture, and unfair trials

Allegations of torture, extortion, and forced confessions by Iraqi security forces continue to raise serious concerns about Iraq's obligations to comply with the absolute prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment.⁶⁷ Further concerns persist as to Iraq's compliance with the right of individuals to a fair trial.⁶⁸ Many of those detained were arrested based on alleged affiliation with Islamic State, often without sufficient evidence or through 'guilt by association'. Testimonies underscore the ongoing risks of false accusation, coerced confessions, collective punishment, and prolonged detention without due process, including of women and children.⁶⁹

The absence of judicial guarantees is all the more concerning given that many individuals – most of whom are charged with terrorism offences⁷⁰ – have been sentenced to death upon conviction and further that mass executions were performed during the reporting period. In September 2024 alone, the death penalty was imposed on twenty-one individuals.⁷¹ These sentences, which followed flawed judicial procedures and using potentially coerced confessions to secure a conviction, are serious violations of IHL and may amount to war crimes.⁷²

Moreover, the conditions of detention of those accused of affiliation with Islamic State continue to raise significant IHL concerns. Detention facilities in Iraq are severely overcrowded, typically with more than double the intended capacity. As a result, conditions are often dire, with inmates lacking access to adequate food, water, sanitation, and medical care.⁷³ Such conditions violate the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment under IHL, regardless of the conflict classification,⁷⁴ and of international human rights law, which continues to apply in armed conflict.⁷⁵

In response to growing domestic and international concern over wrongful detentions and the deteriorating conditions of incarceration, the Iraqi government has introduced a new amnesty law allowing certain prisoners convicted of terrorism offences to seek release or a retrial, or even to have their cases dismissed.⁷⁶ Ostensibly, this legislative measure aims to reduce prison overcrowding and address instances of false accusation.⁷⁷ While the law's introduction could address arbitrary or wrongful detentions and alleviate systematic overcrowding, its vague drafting and lack of procedural safeguards may also lead to impunity for perpetrators of grave crimes.⁷⁸

Murder of civilians

Islamic State also continued to abduct and murder civilians during the reporting period, albeit at a lower level than previously. For instance, on or around 1 September 2024, they abducted an individual in front of his house before killing him.⁷⁹ During the week of 14 May 2025, members of Islamic State attacked shepherds, seizing all their mobile phones, and kidnapping one whom they later murdered.⁸⁰

Protection of IDPs

As of 30 May 2025, more than one million Iraqis were internally displaced, with over 107,000 IDPs living in twenty camps in the KRI. Many Iraqi families and children with alleged connections to Islamic State are still in camps over the border in Syria.⁸¹ Under customary IHL, applicable in all armed conflicts, displaced persons 'have a right to voluntary return in safety to their homes or places of habitual residence as soon as the reasons for their displacement cease to exist.'⁸²

Although Iraq is making efforts to repatriate its citizen from Syria and to ensure the safe return of IDPs to their homes, the displaced continue to face significant barriers, including limited access to documentation, a lack of opportunities for income generation, and social stigma and discrimination. Climatic factors, especially more frequent extremes of heat, along with funding shortfalls, have worsened the living conditions of those still in camps, reducing at the same time their prospects for return.⁸³ The precarious conditions often come with heightened protection risks for women, girls, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups.⁸⁴ In line with Iraq's obligations under customary law, efforts to facilitate the safe return of the many people displaced due to conflict need to be significantly strengthened.

As mentioned, the reporting period evidences incidents of Kurdish communities being forcibly displaced by Turkish military operations on Iraqi territory, in circumstances constituting a serious violation of IHL. While the Iraqi government publicly condemns the military operations by the Turkish Armed Forces in Kurdish areas on its territory, it also pursues closer collaboration with Türkiye, including for counterterrorism. As part of the improved relationship between the two States, Iraq issued a joint statement with Türkiye labelling the PKK a 'banned' organization and a 'security threat'. It has also agreed to cooperate with Türkiye in the construction of roads that will connect the two nations.⁸⁵

Insofar as these occur on the territory and under the authority of Iraq, Iraq bears heightened obligations under IHL to ensure respect for the law and a duty to investigate alleged war crimes on its territory, including unlawful forced displacement of civilians.⁸⁶ The lack of efforts to halt and investigate alleged incidents of serious violations of IHL committed by Turkish Armed Forces also violates Iraq's obligations in this regard.

Protection of persons with disabilities

It is not known how many people are living with disabilities in Iraq, but the number is expected to be extremely high given the multiple armed conflicts over the past two decades. The widespread use of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature, has caused thousands of traumatic amputations of lower limbs. Persons with disabilities across the country, especially in the centre and north, whether their disability resulted from the conflicts or other causes, face an especially difficult future. In June 2025, in the context of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, it was reported that Iraq had registered 34,249 mine victims. Iraq reported that rehabilitation centres exist in several

governorates providing prosthetics, physiotherapy and psychological support, some of which are assisted by the ICRC and Humanity & Inclusion (HI).⁸⁷

In 2024, the ICRC supported persons with physical disabilities to have effective access to physical rehabilitation services and assistive devices. The ICRC also supported civil society organizations in promoting the social and economic inclusion of people with physical disabilities within their communities. As part of its social inclusion programme, the ICRC organized and supported the second Iraqi amputee football tournament in Baghdad, featuring five teams with a total of eighty-five players from across the country.⁸⁸

Protection of women and children

Women and children continue to face limited protection from and accountability for earlier conflict-related sexual violence. Many face severe difficulties when it comes to reintegration into their communities, due to cultural and societal norms, as well as stigma associated with sexual violence and fear of those with perceived ties to Islamic State.⁸⁹ Yazidi women and girls who have children born of rape perpetrated during their captivity by Islamic State are particularly vulnerable, as are their children. Ostracized by the Yazidi communities, they live in NGO-run safe houses, without a clear path to a secure future.⁹⁰

The Iraqi government has shown little appetite to tackle these issues.⁹¹ In the context of Iraq, child marriage is frequently portrayed as a means to escape poverty.⁹² Such marriages increase the risk for girls of experiencing sexual and physical violence, along with adverse health implications, both physical and mental, and often result in the deprivation of access to education and employment opportunities.⁹³

Furthermore, as noted above, conflict-related incidents continue to be prosecuted under Iraq's anti-terrorism law, but this legislation does not acknowledge conflict-related sexual violence as a form of terrorism, thereby creating a considerable gap in the legal capacity to prosecute Islamic State affiliates for such acts. In January 2025, the Iraqi Parliament enacted legislation granting amnesty to specific prisoners convicted under the terrorism law.⁹⁴ This development has reportedly adversely affected segments of the Iraqi population, particularly women and girls, as well as minority groups targeted by the Islamic State.⁹⁵

Further concerns regarding the protection of women and girls have emerged following the termination of the mandate of the UN Protection Cluster in Iraq, which UN-HCR had led. The areas of responsibility included gender-based violence, child protection, mine action, and housing, land, and property. All these functions were deactivated in December 2022.⁹⁶

Treatment of the dead

The reporting period attests to the discovery and continued presence of mass graves across Iraq. Recent estimates suggest that these graves contain the remains of as many as 400,000 people.⁹⁷ Many sites are believed to contain the bodies of victims from earlier armed conflicts and that their deaths resulted from serious violations of IHL.⁹⁸ In any event, there is a duty to investigate conduct that may amount to a war crime.⁹⁹ IHL obligates Iraq to uncover the truth, prosecute those responsible, and ensure justice and reparations for the victims.

Figure 10.1: UN Map of Iraq © United Nations



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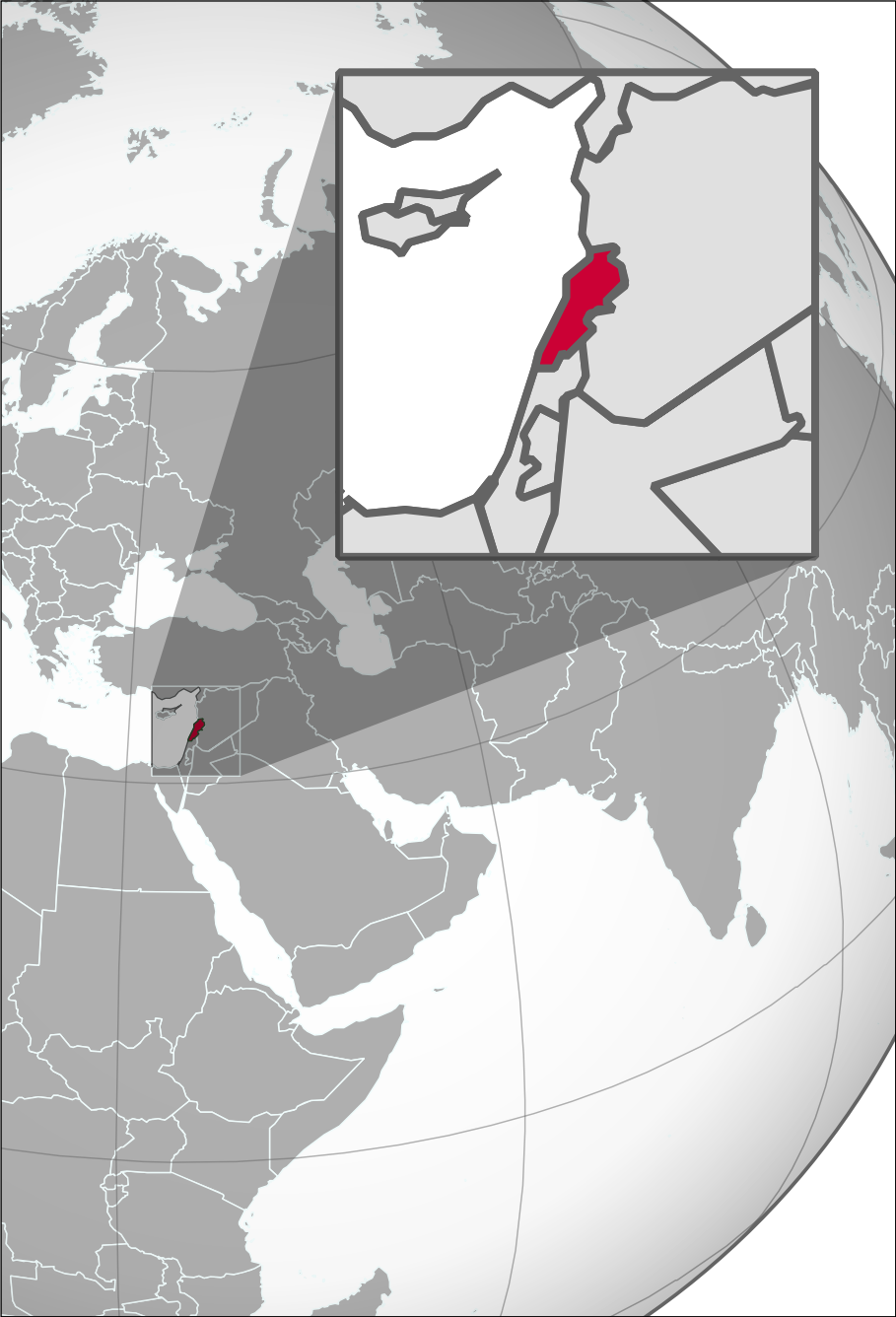
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11. ISRAEL – LEBANON



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Since Lebanon's independence in 1943 after two decades under French rule, the country has been marked by armed conflict. Since the Six-Day War of 1967, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have occupied the Shebaa Farms – a small portion of territory that Israel considers part of the Golan Heights, but which is also claimed by Lebanon. The Lebanese Civil War of 1975–90 was another watershed moment in the nation's history. The Civil War also led to the establishment of the United Nations (UN) Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 1978 – a peacekeeping mission whose mandate has evolved over time to reflect the volatile situation in southern Lebanon.

Syrian forces, which were deployed in Lebanon in 1976, withdrew in 2005. Military intervention by Israel on two occasions (briefly in 1978 and again in 1982) led to the occupation of a security zone in southern Lebanon which lasted until 2000 – a period during which Hezbollah came into being and launched guerrilla warfare against the IDF. In the summer of 2006, an armed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel led to a further ground invasion of southern Lebanon by the IDF as well as to an aerial and maritime blockade of Lebanon. Israel withdrew from south Lebanon following a ceasefire brokered by the UN, but armed clashes ensued in the following years between Israel and Hezbollah.

In the 2010s, Lebanon was plagued by instability due to a mix of political crises and the risk of spill-over of the armed conflicts in Syria. Renewed hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah that followed the outbreak of the current Gaza conflict in October 2023 led to an increase in military operations on the border between Lebanon and Israel. Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israel, which responded with air and artillery strikes in southern Lebanon before expanding its operations. The conflict led to significant internal displacement, with tens of thousands of civilians from both Israel and Lebanon forced to flee their homes due to sustained rocket, missile, and drone strikes. By June 2024, approximately 60,000 residents from the northern border in Israel and more than 90,000 Lebanese had fled their homes in the south of Lebanon.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah intensified significantly during the reporting period, with the two parties attacking and riposting, firing many thousands of munitions against the other. On 30 July 2024, an Israeli airstrike killed Fuad Shukr, Hezbollah's most senior military commander.¹ Hezbollah retaliated by launching volleys of rockets and drones at Israel, some of which hit Tel Aviv.² On 17 and 18 September, thousands of explosive-filled electronic paggers intended for use by Hezbollah members and affiliates, but which appear to have been remotely controlled by Mossad, were detonated by Israel, killing at least 32 people and injuring a further 3,250, 200 of them critically.³

On 27 September 2024, Israel killed Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, in an airstrike on the group's command centre in Beirut.⁴ Three days later, the IDF launched a ground invasion of southern Lebanon.⁵ Over the course of the following weeks, Israel intensified its air campaign, killing other senior Hezbollah figures including Mr Nasrallah's presumed successor, Hashem Safieddine, and the deputy commander of the group's elite Radwan forces. Hezbollah continued firing rockets and mortar shells at Israeli territory. One strike in the north-central town of Caesarea hit the home of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁶

A ceasefire agreement on 26 November 2024 sought to end the non-international armed conflict (NIAC) between Israel and Hezbollah that had begun in November 2023. The agreement required Hezbollah to withdraw north of the Litani River and the Lebanese Armed Forces to deploy in the area between the river and the Blue Line – the demarcation line dividing Lebanon from Israel and the Golan Heights drawn by the United Nations on 7 June 2000. In turn, Israel undertook to withdraw from all Lebanese territory within 60 days of the agreement coming into force.⁷

Hostilities continued, however, albeit at a reduced level. On 17 February 2025, the IDF announced it was ‘temporarily’ deploying in five locations across the border in southern Lebanon, claiming that Hezbollah had not complied with its obligations under the ceasefire agreement.⁸ The IDF were still present in these five locations as of August 2025.⁹ In March 2025, the IDF resumed airstrikes on both Beirut and southern Lebanon.¹⁰ By early June 2025, Lebanese authorities claimed that Israeli attacks had killed about 4,000 people, many of whom were civilians, and displaced over 1.2 million. Israel claimed that ‘more than 80’ of its soldiers and 47 Israeli civilians had been killed in the hostilities, with 60,000 Israelis displaced from the north of Israel.¹¹

By the end of June, the situation had reached stalemate, with Israel vowing to strike Lebanon until Hezbollah disarms, and Hezbollah refusing to disarm until Israel ends its air raids and withdraws from southern Lebanon.¹² In August 2025, however, Lebanon’s government approved a proposal by the United States that combined disarmament of Hezbollah with a complete Israeli military withdrawal from southern Lebanon.¹³ The same month, the UN Security Council decided that UNIFIL would conduct an ‘orderly and safe withdrawal’ of its 10,800 peacekeepers from Lebanon. The withdrawal was set to begin in December 2026 and take one year to complete.¹⁴

A year on from the ceasefire agreement between Lebanon and Israel in November 2024, drone flights by the IDF continued to occur over Lebanese territory in violation of Israeli undertakings.¹⁵ More seriously still, the IDF was continuing to bomb Lebanon using armed drones and combat aircraft. In October 2025, UN experts urged all parties ‘to fully adhere to the cessation of hostilities agreement’ and called for independent investigations and accountability for all violations of international law.¹⁶

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There is an ongoing NIAC between Israel and Hezbollah and an international armed conflict (IAC) between Israel and Lebanon by virtue of Israel’s use of force on Lebanese territory against Hezbollah. In addition, Israel is occupying part of Lebanese territory, which is another form of IAC.

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is of a non-international character. Hezbollah (meaning the ‘party of God’ in Arabic) emerged in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a fighting force during the Lebanese civil war of 1975 and 1990 to resist Israeli attacks. It is a Shi’ite Muslim political party and armed group that has been heavily backed by Iran.¹⁷ It is well organized and was once one of the world’s most heavily armed non-State armed groups, although its military capabilities have been significantly weakened by Israeli military operations since November 2023.¹⁸

Common Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international humanitarian law (IHL) apply to this NIAC. Since 1997, Lebanon has been a party to

Additional Protocol II of 1977,¹⁹ but Israel has neither signed nor acceded to it. Most if not all of the Protocol's provisions are, however, reflected in customary law.

Israel's use of force against Hezbollah in Lebanon since 8 October 2023 also amounts to an IAC between Israel and Lebanon. There is a long-standing IAC between Israel and Lebanon by virtue of Israel's belligerent occupation of Lebanese territory. As noted above, Israel is occupying five positions along the Lebanese border – Labouna Hill in Tyre district; Jabal Balat in Bint Jbeil district; Jal al-Deir in Bin Jbeil; a position along the Markaba-Houla road in Marjayoun district; and the Hamames Hill in Marjayoun.²⁰

In addition to the IDF's presence in southern Lebanon, Israel is also occupying the Shebaa Farms, a narrow strip of land adjacent to the Golan Heights in Syria. Israel purported to annex the Shebaa Farms in 1981 (as part of its annexation of the Golan Heights), but this claim is invalid under international law as accretion of territory by force is not lawful.²¹

The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL governing the conduct of hostilities and belligerent occupation apply. Since 1997, Lebanon has been a party to Additional Protocol I of 1977,²² but Israel has neither signed nor acceded to it. Many of the Protocol's provisions are, however, reflected in customary law.

Neither Israel nor Lebanon is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.²³ Although Israel has signed the Statute, it subsequently notified the depositary (the UN Secretary-General) that it did not intend to become a party to it.²⁴

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Both Hezbollah and Israel have breached customary rules of IHL governing the conduct of hostilities in the targets of their attack and/or the means of warfare they chose to employ. Both have targeted civilians and civilian objects in their attacks. Hezbollah consistently conducted indiscriminate attacks over populated areas in Israel using highly inaccurate rockets, while Israel attacked medical facilities and ambulances as well as financial institutions, all of which are civilian objects, protected as such. On multiple occasions, Israel conducted indiscriminate attacks in densely populated areas in Lebanon, including through use of white phosphorus munitions.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Both Hezbollah and Israel regularly attacked civilian objects during the period under review. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.²⁵ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.²⁶ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁷ Special protection is afforded to medical facilities, including hospitals and mobile medical units as well as ambulances.²⁸ Indiscriminate attacks are unlawful.²⁹

Attacks against health facilities

Medical facilities in Lebanon, including hospitals, were targeted or struck by numerous attacks by the IDF. A report from the World Health Organization (WHO) covering 17 September to 16 October 2024 verified twenty-three attacks on healthcare facilities that killed seventy-two health workers and patients and injured a further forty-three.³⁰

Amnesty International investigated four Israeli attacks between 3 and 9 October 2024 that damaged healthcare facilities and medical vehicles. With respect to all four attacks – which, combined, killed nineteen healthcare workers and wounded another eleven – the organization found no evidence that Hezbollah was using the medical units for military purposes. The attacks were therefore unlawful under IHL, with Amnesty International calling for an investigation into possible war crimes.³¹ Human Rights Watch documented three attacks over the same period in which the IDF struck or damaged medical facilities, killing and injuring personnel and patients. It found no evidence that the three facilities were being used for military purposes.³² Human Rights Watch similarly believed that, in their attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel, Israeli forces may have committed war crimes.

One occasion documented by Human Rights Watch concerns an IDF artillery attack on the Martyr Salah Ghandour Hospital in Bint Jbeil on 4 October 2024. In the aftermath, the hospital issued a statement declaring that: ‘This bombardment resulted in the injury of nine medical and nursing staff members, most of whom sustained serious and critical injuries. Following the attack, the hospital evacuated most of its medical and nursing staff and retained a number of workers to safeguard the hospital’s property.’³³ The IDF claimed on social media platform X that Hezbollah had established a command centre inside a mosque ‘near’ the hospital.³⁴ Human Rights Watch found no evidence that Hezbollah was using the hospital for military purposes.³⁵

If the hospital was not the primary target of the IDF strikes, the principle of proportionality in attack may have been violated, along with the duty to take all feasible precautions in attack to minimize the incidental harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects.³⁶ Martyr Salah Ghandour Hospital serves the district of Bint Jbeil, which has a population of more than 30,000, as well as a portion of the population of the villages and towns of Tyre and Marjayoun districts.

Another attack documented by both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, which also took place on 4 October 2024, concerned an IDF airstrike on ambulances belonging to the Islamic Health Organization. In this incident, which occurred in front of the Marjayoun government hospital, seven paramedics were killed.³⁷ No Israeli claims were made on the specific attack, but a general claim that Hezbollah was using ambulances to transport troops and military material had been made earlier in the day.³⁸ According to the hospital director, however, the ambulances were bringing in wounded at the time.³⁹ It is immaterial from the perspective of IHL whether these were wounded civilians or wounded Hezbollah fighters – IHL dictates that the ‘wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for’.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International found no evidence that Hezbollah was using the vehicles for military purposes.

The Islamic Health Organization has been accused of being a civilian branch of Hezbollah.⁴¹ As such, personnel and transports of this organization, assigned exclusively to medical duties and transportation, respectively, must be respected and protected in all circumstances, and must not be attacked.⁴² This is so, irrespective of whether health workers from the Islamic Health Organization may have, in the past, held positions in Hezbollah’s military wing. Only if, and for such time as, personnel participate directly in hostilities may they be attacked.

Attacks against water infrastructure

Between October 2023 and November 2024, water infrastructure in Lebanon was repeatedly struck, damaged, and frequently rendered inoperable for months by Israeli attacks

using air-launched munitions. In a small number of incidents, use of bulldozers was also reported. Attacks against or impacting upon water infrastructure were most frequent in southern communities along the Israeli border in Nabatieh and South governorates, where repeated incidents occurred between October 2023 and November 2024. In these governorates, at least twenty-six water pumping facilities associated with public networks and twenty-eight water pipeline networks were at least moderately damaged after October 2023. Incidents were also reported in Bekaa and Baalbek-Hermel governorates, especially between September and November 2024, although the damage was of a lesser extent.⁴³

According to a World Bank report published in March 2025, approximately 64 per cent of community water supply distribution reservoirs, 46 per cent of water reservoirs, 58 per cent of water pumping stations, and 23 per cent of water treatment plants were either destroyed or partially damaged across the country.⁴⁴ Under customary IHL, drinking water installations and supplies are among the objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. They may not, in principle, be attacked unless they qualify as military objectives. If they do, attacks must respect the principle of proportionality and in no case may such attacks cause the starvation of the civilian population.⁴⁵ Using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival is a war crime under customary law.⁴⁶

Attacks against financial institutions

Other Israeli attacks involving alleged violations of IHL include those mounted on the night of 20 October 2024 against around thirty offices of the al-Qard al-Hassan charitable foundation, a banking institution reportedly linked to Hezbollah.⁴⁷ The IDF justified its attacks on the basis both that al-Qard al-Hassan functioned as 'a type of Hezbollah's financial system', and that it 'receives funds from Iran, provides loans, and ultimately finances Hezbollah's terrorism'.⁴⁸ The attacks, which were preceded by a forty-minute warning to evacuate surrounding areas, affected residential buildings in the middle of densely populated residential areas.⁴⁹ In one instance, an entire building in a southern suburb of Beirut collapsed following an Israeli strike.⁵⁰

The attacks appear to be a serious violation of IHL since financial institutions are ordinarily protected under IHL as civilian objects. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism declared that bombing banks 'opens the door to "total war" against civilian populations, where fighting is no longer limited to attacking militarily dangerous targets. Such attacks jeopardise the right to life.'⁵¹ Human Rights Watch described the attacks as war crimes. As noted, 'Designating a civilian institution as a military target because of its affiliation rather than its effective contribution to military action puts all commercial operations at risk during wartime.'⁵²

Attacks against cultural property

Several attacks are reported to have damaged important cultural property. For example, on 6 October 2024, the IDF targeted a neighbourhood in Baalbek, reportedly damaging a wall of the Roman ruins of the city.⁵³ On 9 October 2024, the IDF conducted an airstrike on Saint George church in the town of Derdghaya, destroying the building and killing eight people.⁵⁴ Although the IDF claimed the attack on the church was targeting 'militiamen',⁵⁵ there are indications the church was being used as a shelter for internally displaced persons.⁵⁶ On 13 October 2024, the IDF conducted airstrikes in Kfar Tebnit,⁵⁷ damaging the Ottoman-era mosque of the town.⁵⁸

Given the risk to cultural property from the fighting, the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflicts placed several sites in Lebanon under the enhanced protection regime established for certain cultural properties by the Second Protocol of 1999 to the 1954 Hague Convention.⁵⁹ Since Israel is not a party to the Second Protocol of 1999, however, this treaty does not directly apply to this conflict. To the extent that it is not a military objective, however, cultural property also enjoys specific protection under customary IHL. Property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people must not be the object of attack unless imperatively required by military necessity; furthermore, each party to the conflict must take special care during military operations to avoid damage to historic monuments (unless they are military objectives).⁶⁰

Civilians under Attack

The armed conflicts in Lebanon have resulted in significant casualties among the civilian population. By early July 2025, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Health (whose figures do not distinguish civilians and fighters), Israeli operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon had killed around 4,000 people. Many of the dead were thought to be civilians.⁶¹ Of the total victims, 250 were killed in the months following the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah while a further 600 were wounded.⁶² Israeli authorities reported the death of forty-seven civilians from Hezbollah attacks on its territory.⁶³

In a statement released on 30 September 2024, UN legal experts accused both parties of having launched indiscriminate attacks, declaring that Israeli airstrikes in densely populated areas, ‘where residential buildings are being levelled to the ground and people are given unrealistically short evacuation orders before homes are bombed, fail the tests of distinction, proportionality, precaution and necessity under international humanitarian law’.⁶⁴

In multiple instances, Hezbollah’s use of inaccurate rockets amounted to indiscriminate attacks – a serious violation of IHL. In one such case on 27 July 2024, an attack seemingly launched by the group hit the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The strike hit a football pitch in the village, killing twelve children and youths between ten and twenty years of age.⁶⁵ A medic with the Magen David Adom ambulance service, said: ‘We witnessed great destruction when we arrived at the soccer field, as well as items that were on fire. There were casualties on the grass and the scene was gruesome.’ Ziv Medical Center in Safed said later it had admitted thirty-two wounded from the attack.⁶⁶ Israel accused Hezbollah of conducting the attack.⁶⁷

Israeli experts maintained in the media that Hezbollah ‘was most likely aiming at a nearby army base on Mount Hermon and did not intentionally target the village’, but that the civilian harm was due to the use of inaccurate rockets.⁶⁸ This indicates that an indiscriminate weapon may have been used.⁶⁹ It was later claimed that the missile in question was an Iranian-made Falaq-1 rocket with a fifty kilogram high-explosive warhead.⁷⁰ Hezbollah denied any involvement in the strike on the village, but had earlier reported launching a volley rockets, including a Falaq-1, at Israeli positions.⁷¹ The Falaq-1 is an unguided rocket developed in the 1990s, one of a series of weapons said to be ‘not accurate’ with a ‘margin of error of up to three kilometres’.⁷²

Attacks against journalists

Continuing a trend in the previous reporting period, numerous casualties among journalists were recorded as a result of Israeli aerial bombings and artillery strikes. In a particularly serious incident on 25 October 2024, three journalists were killed and four others

injured in an attack on a complex of guesthouses housing eighteen reporters in the southern Lebanese town of Hasbaya.⁷³ The attack was described as the deadliest on journalists since the conflict in Lebanon began.⁷⁴ Following the strike, Lebanon filed a complaint before the UN Security Council, denouncing the 'repeated Israeli targeting of media crews'.⁷⁵ Senior UN officials in Lebanon expressed alarm at the attacks, recalling that journalists are protected under IHL and calling on all parties in armed conflict to 'uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law'.⁷⁶

In another significant incident on 26 November 2024, Lebanon's National News Agency reported that the IDF 'opened fire on a group of journalists covering the return of southern Lebanese residents and the Israeli withdrawal from the southern town of Khiam'.⁷⁷ The attack wounded one journalist working for the Associated Press and another employed by Sputnik.⁷⁸ According to testimonies by the journalists themselves: 'It was clear that we were journalists', and 'a drone [was seen] hovering above Khiam just before the gunfire began'.⁷⁹

These attacks raise serious concerns in relation to compliance with the rules on targeting and the specific protection afforded to journalists under customary IHL.⁸⁰ This is particularly the case for the incident in Hasbaya, which has been thoroughly documented. The IDF declared that, on that night, 'following intelligence information', they struck 'a Hezbollah military structure in Hasbaya' at a time when 'terrorists were located inside'. They said that a review was being conducted after reports emerged that journalists had been hit.⁸¹ An investigation by Human Rights Watch found 'no evidence of fighting, military forces, or military activity in the immediate area at the time of the attack'.⁸²

The journalists at the compound worked in at least seven different media outlets, including Al Jazeera and Sky News Arabia. Two of the journalists killed in the attack worked for Al Mayadeen TV, which is described as being 'politically allied with Hezbollah' or 'a pro-Hezbollah outlet'. A third journalist worked for Al Manar TV, which is owned by Hezbollah.⁸³

The Beirut office of Al Mayadeen TV had been targeted in an Israeli strike a few days earlier in which one person had been killed and another five injured.⁸⁴ Israel does not appear to have attempted to justify the strike on the basis of the affiliation of the media outlet – but even if that were the case, this would not represent a valid justification for the attack. As the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has made clear, under customary IHL: 'Civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities'.⁸⁵ There is no evidence indicating that the journalists killed in the strike had forfeited their protection as civilians under IHL. That they were working for media outlets affiliated with, or endorsing, an armed group that is fighting Israel does not meet the criteria for 'direct participation in hostilities'.⁸⁶

Attacks against UN peacekeepers

UNIFIL is not a party to any of the armed conflicts in Lebanon. Between July 2024 and June 2025, however, UNIFIL peacekeepers were attacked by Israel on numerous occasions.⁸⁷ Hezbollah also conducted indiscriminate attacks affecting UNIFIL. Deliberate attacks against peacekeepers violate IHL and are likely to be war crimes.⁸⁸

Most of the attacks against the UN peacekeepers occurred in October and November 2024.⁸⁹ At the beginning of its invasion of Lebanon in October, the IDF established positions close to UNIFIL missions, despite regular warnings by UNIFIL not to do so, as

the force feared it would compromise the safety of their personnel and buildings.⁹⁰ On 9 October, the IDF fired on UNIFIL's Ras Naqoura and Labbounneh bases, disabling the security cameras in the Labbounneh base.⁹¹ The next day, the IDF again targeted the Labbounneh base, damaging vehicles and communication systems.⁹² The IDF hit UNIFIL's Naqoura headquarters with a shell fired from a Merkava tank that struck an observation tower, causing two UNIFIL observers to fall and suffer injury.⁹³

On 13 October 2024, IDF tanks destroyed the gates of UNIFIL's position in Ramyah to force their way into the base, which was followed by a demand that the base turn off their lights.⁹⁴ Later that day, the nearby firing of munitions, including of white phosphorus, led to the injury of 15 peacekeepers.⁹⁵ On 13 May 2025, months after the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah entered into force, UNIFIL accused the IDF of directing fire at the perimeter of one of its peacekeeping positions in south Lebanon.⁹⁶

Israel has put forward different arguments to justify several of these incidents. In relation to the events at Ramyah, the IDF explained that it encroached on the UNIFIL base to evacuate soldiers who had been seriously wounded by an anti-tank missile, and that the operation had been conducted while it was in 'continuous contact' with UNIFIL.⁹⁷ On certain occasions, Israel has criticized Hezbollah for placing its forces and installations near UNIFIL bases. For instance, in November 2024, the IDF claimed it had found a Hezbollah training centre equipped with missile launchers 200 metres away from a UNIFIL base.⁹⁸ After the ceasefire came into effect, Israel's ambassador to the UN maintained that 'Hezbollah's ongoing military build-up was at times close to UN peacekeeping bases and patrols in southern Lebanon'.⁹⁹

Since the beginning of the armed conflict, Israel has repeatedly called on UNIFIL to vacate their positions on the Blue Line.¹⁰⁰ Such demands do not, however, justify the targeting of UNIFIL personnel and objects, nor do they exempt the IDF from taking constant care to spare peacekeepers in their military operations. Under customary IHL, peacekeeping forces are protected from attack, unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities. Furthermore, UNIFIL may use necessary and proportionate force to defend its forces against unlawful attacks without this amounting to such direct participation.¹⁰¹ Strikes against military objectives located close to UNIFIL bases must in all instances comply with the rule of proportionality in attack, and all feasible precautions must be taken to minimize incidental harm to peacekeepers.

Serious concerns have been raised about Hezbollah's use of indiscriminate rockets and Israel's use of white phosphorus as well as the Israeli attacks conducted remotely through paggers destined for Hezbollah members. These issues are discussed below.

Use of indiscriminate rockets by Hezbollah

During the reporting period, Hezbollah consistently used indiscriminate rockets that could not be accurately directed against a military objective against Israel. On 1 November 2024, for instance, two separate Hezbollah rocket attacks killed seven people in northern Israel. An Israeli farmer and four Thai agricultural workers were killed when rockets landed near Metula, a town on the border with Lebanon. Later in the day, an Israeli woman and her adult son were killed in an olive grove near Kibbutz Afek, on the outskirts of Haifa. Hezbollah said it had fired barrages of rockets towards the Krayot area north of Haifa and at Israeli forces south of the Lebanese town of Khiam, which is across the border from Metula.¹⁰²

On 30 October 2024, Lieutenant-General Sean Clancy, the head of the Irish military contingent in UNIFIL, said one of the force's bases in southern Lebanon that houses Irish

troops was hit by a rocket fired by Hezbollah towards Israel. The rocket landed inside an unoccupied area of Camp Shamrock, which is seven kilometres from the Israeli border. Although the attack caused minimal damage on the ground and no casualties, it had indiscriminate effects. The Irish Prime Minister, Simon Harris, said: 'Thankfully everyone is safe but it is completely unacceptable that this happened. Peacekeepers are protected under international law and the onus is on all sides to ensure that protection.'¹⁰³

Use of white phosphorus by Israel

White phosphorus (sometimes called yellow phosphorus) is a white to yellow waxy solid that produces dense white smoke containing mixed phosphorus oxides.¹⁰⁴ It ignites spontaneously in air at temperatures above 30°C, continuing to burn until it is either fully oxidized or it is deprived of oxygen.¹⁰⁵ As WHO has stated, white phosphorus can cause 'deep and severe burns, penetrating through bone, reignite during or after initial treatment due to the contact with oxygen and affect medical personnel through secondary exposure'. In severe cases of exposure, 'delayed systemic effects can include cardiovascular effects and collapse, as well as renal and hepatic damage and depressed consciousness and coma. Death may occur from shock, hepatic or renal failure, central nervous system or myocardial damage.'¹⁰⁶

There are increasing calls for the formal prohibition of use of white phosphorus against combatants, at least in areas with a concentration of civilians.¹⁰⁷ Its anti-personnel use against civilians or its use against a civilian object, including an area of land, is already unlawful and may amount to a war crime.

Since 1 July 2024, Israel has used white phosphorus munitions in Lebanon on several hundred occasions.¹⁰⁸ After an almost daily firing of white phosphorus in July, August, September, and November 2024, Israel ceased using these munitions in December 2024 following the entry into force of the ceasefire agreement.¹⁰⁹ Israel, which has admitted to using white phosphorus, claims that it does so in compliance with IHL.¹¹⁰ It considers use of white phosphorus in urban areas to be lawful under 'special circumstances', but has not revealed what it believes those circumstances to be.¹¹¹

Although it did not do so frequently, Israel did use white phosphorus over densely populated areas on several occasions, leading to the death and injury of civilians. For example, on 2 October 2024, Israel attacked an office of the Islamic Health Organization in Bachoura, a populated neighbourhood of Beirut. The weapons used included, among others, white phosphorus. The attack killed nine people – seven of whom were paramedics – and injured fourteen others.¹¹² It is unclear whether any of the victims were Hezbollah fighters. If Israel were using white phosphorus in densely populated areas without directing it at specific military objectives, as seems to have occurred on a number of occasions, each such attack would be indiscriminate.¹¹³

The pager-bomb attacks

Between 17 and 18 September 2024, a coordinated series of explosions targeted Hezbollah members through explosives hidden in hundreds of pagers and a number of walkie-talkies.¹¹⁴ The attacks, later acknowledged by Israel to have been the work of Mossad,¹¹⁵ killed at least 37 people, including at least two children,¹¹⁶ and wounded more than 3,000.¹¹⁷ The victims, many of whom were seriously injured, included an unknown number of civilians.¹¹⁸ The pagers reportedly exploded in streets, shops, and supermarkets, and even close by a funeral (for victims of earlier attacks, including a child), causing panic among the civilian population.¹¹⁹

The explosions took place across different parts of Lebanon, including Beirut, along with towns in the central Beqaa Valley.¹²⁰ A small number of detonations from the communication devices also occurred in Syria.¹²¹ An ophthalmologist at Mount Lebanon University Hospital in Beirut told the media that between sixty and seventy per cent of the patients he treated had to have at least one eye removed. 'Some of the patients, we had to remove both eyes. It kills me.'¹²²

The operation raises serious concerns about compliance with IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities, in particular on targeting. The pagers and walkie-talkies were given mainly to individuals associated with Hezbollah, some of whom were military members while others were civilians.¹²³ Thus, reports indicate that those killed in the attacks were not only fighters but also medical and administrative personnel affiliated with Hezbollah along with other civilians.¹²⁴ Association with Hezbollah does not per se render a person a lawful target under IHL. Only members of an armed group who take a direct part in hostilities may be lawfully targeted.¹²⁵

The foreseeable consequences of the pager bombs suggests the attacks may have been indiscriminate. Moreover, as the attackers could not control who would be nearby those holding the devices at the time of detonation, even where the attacks were lawfully directed against a military member of the group, they may have been expected to cause excessive incidental civilian harm and thus disproportionate.¹²⁶

It has been suggested that the operation contravened obligations binding on Israel under the Amended Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices of 1996, annexed to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. The Protocol, to which both Israel and Lebanon are party, explicitly applies to non-international armed conflicts.¹²⁷ It is asserted that the weapons used in the attack fall under the definitions of 'booby-traps' or 'other devices' in the Protocol.¹²⁸ Article 7(2) of the Protocol prohibits the use of 'booby-traps or other devices in the form of apparently harmless portable objects which are specifically designed and constructed to contain explosive material'.¹²⁹

However, the Protocol primarily governs explosive munitions that are activated by the victim. Its definition of a booby-trap – in Article 2(4) – reflects this: 'any device or material which is designed, constructed, or adapted to kill or injure, and which functions unexpectedly when a person disturbs or approaches an apparently harmless object or performs an apparently safe act'. Article 2(5) defines 'other devices' as 'manually-emplaced munitions and devices including improvised explosive devices designed to kill, injure or damage and which are activated manually, by remote control or automatically after a lapse of time.' If it was a decision by Israeli agents and not the actions of the victims (or a time delay) that caused the bombs to detonate, the pager devices were not, as a matter of law, booby-traps falling within the scope of Amended Protocol II of 1996.¹³⁰

Forced displacement

By June 2025, more than 1.2 million individuals were said to have been displaced across Lebanon, most within and from the south.¹³¹ The intensification of hostilities between the IDF and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon played a significant role in this displacement. In some areas, entire communities evacuated in the face of frequent airstrikes, artillery shelling and drone attacks. Local authorities and humanitarian responders reported the destruction of homes, schools, and healthcare infrastructure, which rendered entire areas uninhabitable.¹³²

Between October 2024 and February 2025, residents of towns such as Aitaroun, Alma Shaab, Rmeish, and Yarine fled following repeated airstrikes and shelling that reportedly destroyed homes, schools, and healthcare facilities.¹³³ Agricultural livelihoods were among the hardest hit: in the districts of Bent Jbeil, Marjayoun, Nabatieh and Tyre, approximately ninety-five per cent of agricultural households were forced to abandon their land and means of subsistence.¹³⁴ In Sidon, continued bombardments led to chaotic evacuations, compounded by the lack of safe exit routes.¹³⁵ Displacement has also placed additional strain on host communities and relief efforts, with overcrowded shelters facing shortages of food, water, and medical services.¹³⁶

In September 2024, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations said that Hezbollah had fired more than 8,000 rockets toward Israel since 8 October 2023, with more than 70,000 Israelis 'forced to flee their homes, becoming refugees in their own land'.¹³⁷

The pattern and scale of these displacements raise serious concerns as to compliance with IHL. Both Israel and Hezbollah have a duty to prevent displacement resulting from their use of unlawful means or methods of warfare – such as the targeting of civilian persons and objects or indiscriminate attacks, including those using inherently indiscriminate weapons.¹³⁸ Moreover, IHL prohibits forced displacement of the civilian population unless the security of the civilians concerned or for imperative military necessity demand it.¹³⁹ The prohibition is especially stringent in occupied territories, where deportation or forcible transfer of civilians by the Occupying Power is generally prohibited.¹⁴⁰ Thus, forced displacement from areas in Lebanon under the control of Israel (the Occupying Power) also requires careful scrutiny under the law of belligerent occupation.

The nature and extent of forced displacement in Lebanon during the reporting period may, in certain instances, also have amounted to crimes against humanity.¹⁴¹ Crimes against humanity are certain unlawful acts conducted as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population. One such predicate offence, as defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and reflecting customary international criminal law, is 'forcible transfer of population'.¹⁴² The Statute explains that this means 'forced displacement of the persons concerned by expulsion or other coercive acts from the area in which they are lawfully present, without grounds permitted under international law'.¹⁴³

Figure 11.1: UN Map of Israel © United Nations



Figure 11.2: UN Map of Lebanon © United Nations



Figure 11.3: Mural painted in central Beirut © Pablo Allison



ENDNOTES

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12. ISRAEL - PALESTINE



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Key Events in Gaza Since 1 July 2024

The armed conflict between Israel and Hamas, as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and Israel, continued at a very high intensity during the reporting period. All parties continued to perpetrate war crimes and crimes against humanity. On 21 November 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant for the war crimes of directing an attack against the civilian population and starvation as a method of warfare; and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts.¹ The senior Hamas officials whose indictment the ICC Prosecutor had also sought were all killed before they could face justice.²

On 16 September 2025, the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel issued a report stating that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The Commission concluded 'on reasonable grounds' that Israel was committing genocide by killing and by causing serious bodily and mental harm to the Palestinians as a group, and by inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction and imposing measures intended to prevent births in the group.³ It identified statements by Israeli authorities as direct evidence of genocidal intent and concluded that Israel's pattern of conduct was circumstantial evidence of genocidal intent – 'the only reasonable inference that could be drawn from the totality of the evidence'.⁴

The case brought by South Africa against Israel before the International Court of Justice under the 1948 Genocide Convention has not yet been decided on the merits, but in an Order of 24 May 2024, the Court directed Israel, in conformity with its obligations under the Convention, to: 'Immediately halt its military offensive, ... which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part'.⁵ On 22 October 2025, the International Court of Justice issued an Advisory Opinion in which it declared that Israel, as Occupying Power, was required to fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), including 'to ensure that the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory has the essential supplies of daily life, including food, water, clothing, bedding, shelter, fuel, medical supplies and services' and to respect the prohibition on starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.⁶

Between July and October 2024, Israel killed senior Hamas members in Gaza and abroad responsible for the 7 October 2023 attacks, including Mohammed Deif (Hamas's military commander), Rafa Salama (the Khan Yunis brigade commander), Ismail Haniyeh (the group's political leader), and Yahya Sinwar (Hamas' chief in Gaza since 2017 and overall leader of the movement after Mr Haniyeh's death).⁷ On 15 January 2025, Israel and Hamas agreed upon a ceasefire and hostage-exchange deal, to be implemented in three phases.⁸ After the first phase, however, the ceasefire collapsed, with Israel halting the supply of humanitarian aid and fuel to Gaza in March 2025,⁹ and then resuming its airstrikes and military ground operations.¹⁰ On 18 May, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) announced the launch of Operation Gideon's Chariots – a large-scale offensive involving extensive ground operations across northern and southern Gaza.¹¹

On 9 October 2025, a ceasefire was agreed upon between Israel and Hamas which, it was hoped, would end the conflict in the Gaza Strip. The agreement involved a series of phases beginning with an IDF withdrawal to an agreed point – the 'yellow line' – and the release of all forty-eight remaining Israeli hostages in Gaza (of whom twenty were

still alive). Israel published a list of 250 Palestinian prisoners it would release. It was also required to allow unconditional aid to enter Gaza.¹²

All twenty living Israeli hostages were released soon after the ceasefire took effect on 10 October in exchange for 250 Palestinian prisoners and 1,718 detainees from Gaza. By late October 2025, Hamas had returned sixteen of the twenty-eight bodies of Israelis and foreigners it was holding before the ceasefire.¹³ As the year ended, one body remained to be returned.¹⁴

The Humanitarian Situation in Gaza

The level of physical destruction in Gaza was staggering, with eighty-three per cent of all buildings destroyed as of October 2025.¹⁵ Israel has systematically attacked health-care facilities, often claiming that they were being used by Hamas for military purposes. In addition to the massive damage from Israeli bombings, data from the UN Satellite Centre (UNOSAT) show that the IDF conducted extensive demolitions of civilian infrastructure in these areas, damaging or destroying more than ninety per cent of all structures in the Netzarim and Philadelphi corridors in the Gaza Strip as well as in an Israeli buffer zone.¹⁶

As of the end of July 2024, only 203 health facilities from a reported pre-war total of 572 had remained functional.¹⁷ The establishment of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) coupled with the total blockade between March and May 2025 had a profound impact on food security for Gazans. By late December 2025, only seventy-four intensive care beds remained functioning in the Gaza Strip. At least 1,722 health-care workers are believed to have been killed during the war – about one in ten of the workforce. About eighty who were arrested are thought to remain in Israeli jails.¹⁸

The Situation in the West Bank

In the West Bank, the period following the attacks on Israel of 7 October 2023 was marked by increased movement restrictions for Palestinians and a surge in counterterrorism operations.¹⁹ Between August and September 2024, the IDF conducted a security operation in Jenin and other cities in the northern West Bank codenamed 'Operation Summer Camps'. The operation, which targeted Palestinian armed groups, ostensibly involved cutting water and electricity services and digging up roads, but it also killed an unknown number of civilians, including children, and damaged civilian objects.²⁰

In early January 2025, the IDF conducted another counterterrorism operation in Jenin that lasted for several days.²¹ On 23 February 2025, after a series of bus explosions near Tel Aviv, the IDF deployed tanks in Jenin for the first time since 2002. Israel's Minister of Defence declared that operations in the West Bank were expanding and that troops would remain 'for the coming year'.²²

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There were three armed conflicts involving Palestine and Israel during the reporting period. An international armed conflict between Israel and Palestine involved active hostilities between the two parties and the belligerent occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel. A second major armed conflict was non-international in character (a NIAC) between Israel and Hamas, in particular its Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the group's armed wing.

A separate NIAC of lesser intensity occurred between Israel and the al-Quds Brigades – the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.²³

Palestine – both Gaza and the West Bank – remains under Israeli occupation – a form of IAC. An active IAC between Israel and Palestine involved Israeli attacks on the territory of Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank). In its 2024 Advisory Opinion on the legal consequences arising from Israel's policies and practices in Palestine, the International Court of Justice reaffirmed that the West Bank was under belligerent occupation by Israel, and that Israel's obligations remained 'commensurate with the degree of its effective control over the Gaza Strip'.²⁴ By July 2025, Israel had taken physical control of three quarters of the Strip.²⁵ In its Advisory Opinion of October 2025, the Court reaffirmed that Israel's obligations resulting from this greater extent of effective control 'include the obligations under the law of occupation'.²⁶

The IAC between Israel and Palestine is governed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary IHL, including the rules on military occupation from the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. Palestine, but not Israel, is a State Party to Additional Protocol I of 1977,²⁷ meaning that this instrument is not directly applicable to the armed conflict between the two States.

The two NIACs were governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary IHL.

Palestine but not Israel is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Although Israel has signed the Statute, it subsequently notified the depositary – the UN Secretary-General – that it did not intend to become a party to it.²⁸

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, serious violations of IHL continued to be committed on a massive scale in the course of the multiple armed conflicts. Figures from a classified IDF database named 8,900 Palestinian fighters as dead or probably dead as of May 2025, when the overall death toll among Palestinians in Gaza had reached 53,000.²⁹ By the time the ceasefire came into effect in late October 2025, 68,500 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza Strip, according to the Gazan Ministry of Health managed by Hamas.³⁰

Civilian Objects under Attack

A wide range of civilian objects were attacked by Israel during the reporting period, including medical facilities, religious and cultural property, and schools and universities. Civilian objects were also struck in indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad continued to fire rockets into Israel that appeared to be indiscriminate weapons or attacks. At the beginning of October 2025, for instance, on Yom Kippur, Hamas fired five rockets from Gaza, triggering sirens in Ashdod, the sixth-largest city in Israel, located on the Mediterranean coast 32 kilometres south of Tel Aviv.³¹

Attacks against medical facilities

All parties to armed conflicts are obligated to respect and protect medical personnel and units in all circumstances.³² By mid-August 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) had documented 772 Israeli attacks against healthcare facilities since the beginning of military

operations in the Gaza Strip in October 2023. Of these, 115 occurred between 1 January and 10 August 2025 (with the highest number recorded in May). The attacks killed fifty people and injured a further 119.³³ WHO's Health Cluster also listed 210 attacks impacting medical vehicles since the beginning of hostilities in the Gaza Strip through to the middle of August 2025.³⁴

On multiple occasions, Israel has accused Hamas of placing command-and-control centres, weapons, and tunnels in and beneath hospitals and other medical facilities, and of using those structures to hide hostages.³⁵ On 15 February 2024, the IDF claimed that 'over 85% of major medical facilities in Gaza have been used by Hamas for terror operations', that the latter were 'likely hiding behind injured civilians', and that they were keeping hostages in the Nasser Hospital (as per hostages' testimony).³⁶ A month earlier, the IDF had released the interrogation video of an individual (a janitor, but also allegedly a member of Hamas's elite Nukhba force) who had been captured during the raid on Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Gaza in December 2024. He testified that Hamas was using the facility as a shelter and a distribution point for weapons. It was unclear if the statement was made under duress and if it was confirmed by other detainees.³⁷

In June 2025, the IDF claimed to have retrieved the bodies of Mohammed Sinwar and Mohammad Sabaneh, the commander of Hamas's Rafah Brigade, in a tunnel directly beneath the emergency department of the European Hospital in the southern Gazan city of Khan Yunis. They denounced this as 'another example of the cynical use by Hamas, using civilians as human shields, using civilian infrastructure, hospitals, again and again'.³⁸ In its earlier reporting, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel called upon the Government of Palestine and Hamas to 'ensure that civilians are not used as human shields, in strict compliance with international humanitarian law'.³⁹

In December 2024, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) described Israeli evidence on use by Palestinian armed groups of hospitals and medical centres for military purposes as 'vague'.⁴⁰ In January 2025, however, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, told the UN Security Council that 'Hamas and other armed groups continue to reportedly operate behind civilian infrastructure, including health facilities, exposing them to attacks'.⁴¹ If the Israeli claims are accurate, this would be a serious violation by Palestinian armed groups of the duty to respect medical facilities and not to make them military objectives.⁴²

Nevertheless, numerous Israeli attacks on health facilities in the Gaza Strip would still have violated IHL.⁴³ The alleged behaviour of Hamas would not automatically end a hospital's protection against attack even if it were used for acts harmful to the enemy. For instance, on 13 May 2025, an IDF drone struck the burns unit of the Nasser Medical Complex, killing two patients and injuring twelve others, and destroying part of the hospital.⁴⁴ The attack killed Hassan Eslayeh,⁴⁵ a Palestinian photo-journalist and patient in the hospital. The attack was a violation of the IHL rules protecting hospitals and civilian objects. Mr Eslayeh had been targeted by the IDF a month earlier during an attack in Khan Yunis on a tent with ten journalists inside that was disproportionate in character. He was accused by Israel of being 'a terrorist operative' in Hamas' Khan Yunis Brigade and of having taken part in the 7 October 2023 attacks 'during which he documented and published acts of looting, arson, and killing on social networks'.⁴⁶ But taking photographs – if this is what he did – does not amount to direct participation in hostilities under IHL as it does not meet the threshold of harm necessary.

Several months earlier, the IDF had carried out an airstrike on the same Nasser hospital in an operation on 23 March 2025 that targeted and killed Ismail Barhoum,

a member of Hamas's political office who was being treated for wounds he had sustained in a previous attack.⁴⁷ Despite Israel's claim that the strike had involved precision-guided munitions to minimize harm, a number of other patients were reportedly killed and injured.⁴⁸ Leaving aside the question as to whether Mr Barhoum was a lawful target under IHL, individuals can never be lawfully attacked while *hors de combat*.⁴⁹ Moreover, treating wounded fighters is not an act harmful to the enemy that threatens the special protection provided to hospitals under IHL.⁵⁰

In mid-May 2025, the IDF targeted the European Gaza Hospital with a series of airstrikes, killing a reported nineteen people, including five women and girls, and injuring more than forty.⁵¹ The strikes closed the hospital, cutting off vital services 'including neurosurgery, cardiac care, and cancer treatment – all unavailable elsewhere in Gaza'.⁵² While media reports indicated that the strikes had targeted Mohammed Sinwar, the IDF initially said it had targeted a Hamas command-and-control centre they said was located beneath the hospital.⁵³ However, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel, which reviewed the aerial footage released by the IDF to ground its claim and subjected it to geolocation analysis, concluded that the European Gaza hospital was misidentified in the video.⁵⁴ The IDF acknowledged the error a few days after the strike.⁵⁵

An attack on 21 March 2025 destroyed central Gaza's Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital, the only facility in Gaza offering specialized cancer treatment. The attack was conducted on the basis of an alleged Hamas presence.⁵⁶ But when they are used to commit acts harmful to the enemy, the special protection afforded to hospitals by IHL may only be discontinued 'after due warning has been given, naming, in all appropriate cases, a reasonable time limit, and after such warning has remained unheeded'.⁵⁷ In addition, should the hospital also exceptionally become a military objective due to its use and effective contribution to military action, along with the fact that its destruction would offer a definite military advantage in the circumstances ruling at the time, the attack must comply with the rule of proportionality in attack.⁵⁸

Under customary law, there is a specific duty to take all feasible precautions in the choice of weapons with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental civilian harm.⁵⁹ As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights told the UN Security Council in January 2025, use of heavy weapons against hospitals 'is difficult to reconcile' with the principle that military operations must always distinguish between military targets and civilians.⁶⁰

Hospitals and health facilities in the Gaza Strip have also been affected in ways that go beyond being attacked. On several occasions, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) expressed alarm over the consequences on the healthcare system of the intensification of hostilities in the Gaza Strip. Repeated, widespread evacuation orders by the IDF 'affect the ability of patients and medical staff to access healthcare facilities and severely compromise these facilities' abilities to function properly, while overwhelming the already overstretched healthcare centres located outside of evacuation areas'.⁶¹ Stray bullets regularly wounded medical personnel and disrupted medical treatment.⁶² Moreover, predictably, certain categories of civilians have borne the consequences of these attacks more than others – notably children, women in labour, and people with chronic ailments.

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁶³ Accordingly, parties

to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁶⁴ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful military objectives. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life and injury to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).⁶⁵

In April 2025, the UN Secretary-General described the Gaza Strip as ‘a killing field’ with civilians ‘in an endless death loop’.⁶⁶ The Gazan Ministry of Health (which lists only people whose bodies have been recovered) reported that at least 56,156 Palestinians were killed and 132,239 injured between 7 October 2023 and 25 June 2025. Of this total, 5,833 were killed and 20,198 injured following the re-escalation of hostilities on 18 March 2025.⁶⁷

Of the total reported Palestinian fatalities as of mid-June 2025 (55,202), the Ministry of Health recorded the deaths of 17,121 children (31 per cent), 24,818 men (45 per cent), 9,126 women (17 per cent), and 4,137 older persons (7 per cent).⁶⁸ Although the data from the Ministry do not distinguish between fighters and civilians, other calculations suggest even higher numbers of casualties,⁶⁹ and in any case exceptionally high ratios of civilian casualties (reaching as high as 83 per cent).⁷⁰

Israeli officials consistently denied claims that its troops were targeting civilians,⁷¹ highlighting instead IDF efforts to minimize civilian harm during military operations in Gaza. These measures included warnings to civilians of impending attacks by means of messages, calls, leaflets, and, at least in the early stages of the conflicts, so-called ‘roof-knocking’ (where small- or no-yield munitions were dropped before a far larger attack).⁷² At a press conference in September 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu claimed that despite the challenges of operating in a densely populated urban environment, the IDF had achieved the ‘lowest ratio of civilian to combatant deaths in the history of modern urban warfare — it’s 1 to 1’.⁷³ This claim is not credible given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Attacks directed against civilians

Testimonies by numerous Israeli soldiers attest to the fact that Palestinian civilians were deliberately targeted during operations in the Gaza Strip. IDF soldiers disclosed to the media instances where their units were ordered to shoot at anyone entering areas bound by ‘imaginary lines’, irrespective of whether the targets posed a threat.⁷⁴ In April 2025, OHCHR stated that in 36 strikes about which it had corroborated information, ‘the fatalities recorded so far were only women and children’.⁷⁵ The UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel documented in its reports multiple occasions where the IDF targeted civilians ‘along evacuation routes and in safe zones’.⁷⁶

Israel also killed and injured Palestinian civilians as they sought to reach food distribution sites managed by the GHF.⁷⁷ In early July 2025, the ICRC reported that, following the launch of the new food distribution system, its field hospital in Rafah had recorded an unprecedented influx of weapon-wounded patients; these included toddlers, teenagers, elderly, mothers, but also ‘and overwhelmingly, young men and boys [who] were simply trying to get food or aid for their families’.⁷⁸

As of end-July 2025, OHCHR found that ‘since 27 May, at least 1,373 Palestinians have been killed while seeking food; 859 in the vicinity of the GHF sites and 514 along the routes of food convoys’.⁷⁹ OHCHR reported that most of the victims appeared to be young men and boys, but that there was ‘no information that these Palestinians were directly

participating in hostilities or posed any threat for Israeli security forces or other individuals'.⁸⁰ OHCHR attributed most of the killings to the Israeli military.⁸¹

According to newspaper reports, Israeli soldiers received orders to shoot at unarmed Gazans if they were waiting at distribution sites outside opening hours.⁸² Israeli officials denied these accounts,⁸³ but the IDF subsequently acknowledged 'incidents in which harm to civilians who arrived at distribution facilities was reported'.⁸⁴ The IDF also admitted to at least three 'tragic' incidents in which it fired 'inaccurate' artillery rounds towards areas near the aid sites, causing up to forty casualties, several of whom were killed.⁸⁵ Also regularly attacked by the IDF were journalists,⁸⁶ healthcare professionals, and humanitarian workers.⁸⁷

Attacks against journalists

The UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory verified the killing of 227 Palestinian journalists in Gaza between 7 October 2023 and early June 2025 – 197 men and 30 women.⁸⁸ In June 2024, an investigation by journalists working for *The Guardian* found that one in three of the journalists killed had been working for media outlets affiliated with or closely tied to Hamas. IDF officials were reported to have argued privately that there was 'no difference' between working for the media outlet 'and belonging to Hamas's armed wing'.⁸⁹ The IDF denied the reports, saying 'the IDF does not see Hamas' media networks, or journalists, as such, as members of Hamas military wing'. It further stated that the targeting of 'certain Al-Aqsa network employees, including some who work or describe themselves as journalists', had been conducted on the basis of identification as members of Hamas' military wing or as directly participating in hostilities.⁹⁰

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, and the international NGO Reporters Without Borders criticized Israel for the targeted killing in July 2024 of *Al Jazeera* journalists Ismail al-Ghoul and Rami al-Rifi.⁹¹ In accepting responsibility for the attack, the IDF claimed to have targeted Mr al-Ghoul as an Hamas military operative and member of the Nukhba Unit who 'instructed other operatives on how to record operations and was actively involved in recording and publicizing attacks against IDF troops'.⁹² Reporters Without Borders contested the strength and reliability of the IDF's evidence underpinning its allegations.⁹³ In July 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression noted 'growing evidence that journalists in Gaza have been targeted and killed by the Israeli army on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that they were Hamas terrorists'.⁹⁴

Attacks against medical personnel

The Gaza Ministry of Health has reported that 'at least' 1,581 healthcare workers were killed in Gaza between 7 October 2023 and the middle of July 2025.⁹⁵ In September 2024, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel reported its documenting of 'direct attacks on medical convoys operated by the ICRC, the United Nations, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and non-governmental organizations'.⁹⁶ In a subsequent report, the Commission investigated in detail two incidents on 23 March 2025 in Tal as-Sultan in the Rafah area of the Gaza Strip, which involved the killing of fifteen emergency and aid workers – eight from the Palestinian Red Cross Society, six from the Palestinian Civil Defence, and a UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) employee.⁹⁷

The IDF initially claimed the operation had targeted operatives from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and that the vehicles were advancing suspiciously without

headlights or emergency signals.⁹⁸ This claim was refuted by video evidence retrieved from the scene and published by the Palestinian Red Cross Society, which also showed that ‘there were no shots fired from the convoy before they were attacked, and throughout the ordeal’.⁹⁹ Later, an IDF investigation determined that ‘a number of professional errors and deviations from the orders were discovered, along with a failure to fully report the incident’.¹⁰⁰ The UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel found that the Israeli response was ‘lacking, erroneous and misrepresentative’, noting that the medical units were clearly identifiable and that the soldiers’ conduct was consistent with instructions from commanders.¹⁰¹

Other incidents raise further serious concerns about Israel’s respect for the special protection afforded to medical personnel by IHL.¹⁰² This is the case for ‘double-tap’ attacks, ie, those directed at the site of an earlier attack. These would breach IHL if the second attack were directed at anyone who was *hors de combat*, such as a person already seriously wounded,¹⁰³ or at medical personnel responding to reports of injured persons (a claim denied by the IDF).¹⁰⁴

In the aftermath of the airstrike that killed Mohammed Deif and Rafa Salama in July 2024, as emergency service workers were responding, a second missile ‘exploded directly in front of two vehicles clearly marked as belonging to Gaza Civil Defence, an emergency services agency, spraying them with shrapnel and apparently killing and injuring first responders’.¹⁰⁵ According to the testimony of a rescuer from Gaza Civil Defence at the scene, ‘a missile fired by an [Israeli] Air Force drone hit the ambulance behind him, killing four rescue personnel’.¹⁰⁶

Disproportionate attacks

Other incidents and practices raise serious concerns regarding compliance with the fundamental IHL rule on proportionality in attack. It has been claimed that, in the initial phases of the Gaza campaign, the IDF loosened its rules of engagement, allowing for a greater ratio of civilian victims compared to a military target (twenty for each strike, and even one hundred in case of Hamas leaders).¹⁰⁷ Although the rules of engagement were tightened by November 2023, they were reportedly ‘still far looser than they were before October 7’.¹⁰⁸ The IDF offered detailed answers and rectifications to the claims.¹⁰⁹

The Israeli airstrike that killed Mohammed Deif and Rafa Salama reportedly killed another ninety people and injured three hundred.¹¹⁰ While the status and activity of these other casualties is not clear, the fact that around half of those killed were reportedly women and children is a strong indicator they were civilians.¹¹¹ Although the two targets played a fundamental role in Hamas’s military structure,¹¹² the level of civilian harm is exceptionally high.

The strike on Al-Baqa cafeteria on the seafront of Gaza City on 30 June 2025¹¹³ also raises significant concerns about compliance with the IHL rule of proportionality in attack. The IDF claimed to have hit at least three Hamas operatives, including a man it identified as the commander of Hamas’ naval forces in northern Gaza and two members of the group’s mortar unit. It did not provide evidence of their affiliation.¹¹⁴ The IDF claimed that prior to the strike, steps were taken to mitigate the risk of harming civilians using aerial surveillance,¹¹⁵ and it was later confirmed that the strike took place outside the café’s busiest hours and hit a section of the café where staff said few people were at the time.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, the attack is said to have killed more than forty people and injured more than seventy, including many women, children, and older persons, as well as café staff.¹¹⁷

Moreover, the weapon used to conduct the strike was reported as being a 230 kilogram bomb, which generates a huge blast wave 'and scatters shrapnel over a wide area'.¹¹⁸

Starvation as a method of warfare

Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip have resulted in massive destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. Satellite imagery published in early August 2025 by UNOSAT calculated that more than 192,000 structures in the Gaza Strip (around seventy-eight per cent of the total), and including an estimated 282,000 homes, had been destroyed or damaged since October 2023.¹¹⁹

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that, as of July 2025, more than eighty-six per cent of all the cropland in Gaza had been damaged, and that only 1.5 per cent was accessible.¹²⁰ As of April 2025, 83 per cent of agricultural wells and 71 per cent of greenhouses in Gaza had been damaged.¹²¹ Furthermore, as a result of repeated targeting of water facilities, wells, pipelines, desalination units, and sewage systems, 89 per cent of Gaza's water and sanitation infrastructure had been destroyed or damaged, leaving more than nine in ten households 'water insecure'.¹²²

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel has repeatedly stressed that 'the Israeli security forces have deliberately deprived Palestinians in Gaza of resources indispensable for their survival, including food, agricultural lands and fisheries, sewage pumping and wastewater treatment'.¹²³ In the corridors and buffer zones alone, the Commission also noted a significant increase in damage to agricultural land crucial for local food production, and that wells, sewage pumping stations and wastewater treatment plants had been razed.¹²⁴

By the end of July 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Famine Review Committee found for the first time that famine (IPC Phase 5) was already occurring in Gaza Governorate, and projected that famine thresholds would be crossed in Deir al-Balah and Khan Yunis governorates 'in the coming weeks'.¹²⁵ Critical infrastructure essential to sustain life, including health, water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, was 'largely damaged, destroyed or otherwise inoperable or inaccessible'. The Committee declared that the food system had 'collapsed as assets required for food production, such as croplands, greenhouses, and fishing' had been dismantled, while 'logistical infrastructure, including roads and warehouses are heavily damaged'.¹²⁶

Under customary IHL, it is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. This notion includes (but is not limited to) foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies, and irrigation works.¹²⁷ This rule is a key element of the prohibition on using starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare.¹²⁸

Israel's attacks on water resources have also been well documented. In July 2024, alone, the IDF blew up more than 30 water wells in Gaza, bringing to 700 the toll of wells and desalination plants destroyed since hostilities began in October 2023.¹²⁹ In July 2024, a desalination plant in the Al-Zaytoun neighbourhood, south of Gaza City, which provided services to at least 50,000 people in nearby residential neighbourhoods, was badly damaged after being hit by an IDF missile.¹³⁰ In April 2025, Israel struck the Ghabayen water desalination plant in Al-Tuffah neighbourhood, east of Gaza City,¹³¹ and in July, an airstrike struck a water desalination plant in the al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City, killing at least five and wounding several others.¹³²

The special protection IHL affords to objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population may only be lost when they are being used as sustenance solely for military personnel.¹³³ Even in such a case, military action cannot be lawful when – as is the case here – it is likely to cause starvation among the civilian population.¹³⁴ A study by academics at Harvard University published in April 2024 involved spatial statistical analysis that suggested widespread damage to critical civilian infrastructure that was protected under IHL.¹³⁵ The lead author declared that, based on the data they gathered, ‘health, education, and water facilities in Gaza were not damaged in a random pattern, but rather that damage was highly clustered on these facilities’.¹³⁶ The authors of the study concluded that the findings ‘raise serious allegations of Israeli military violations of IHL’.¹³⁷

Forced displacement

The risk of starvation was enhanced by the relentless forced displacement of the civilian population of the Gaza Strip. According to UN data, by the end of June 2025, at least 1.9 million people across the Strip – about ninety per cent of the population – had been displaced during the conflicts, and many had been repeatedly displaced, some ten times or even more.¹³⁸ On 20 July 2025, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) regretted that, with the latest ‘evacuation order’ issued by the IDF that day, ‘the area of Gaza under displacement orders or within Israeli-militarized zones has risen to 87.8 per cent, leaving 2.1 million civilians squeezed into a fragmented 12 per cent of the Strip’.¹³⁹ OCHA also reported that between 18 March and early July 2025 only, the IDF issued 50 ‘displacement’ orders, causing more than 714,000 Palestinians in Gaza to be displaced.¹⁴⁰

The IDF considers such measures as part of the precautions that it takes before launching attacks, as a way to ‘temporarily evacuate areas where more intense hostilities were expected’.¹⁴¹ IHL does allow parties to an armed conflict to order partial or total evacuation of a given area if the security of the civilian population or imperative military reasons so demand.¹⁴² But it also demands guarantees which Israel wilfully failed to provide. In particular, Israel did not take all possible measures to ensure the displaced received shelter, food and water, hygiene, health, and protection.¹⁴³ Indeed, as OHCHR observed, the ‘evacuation’ orders led Gazans into ‘ever shrinking spaces where they have little or no access to life-saving services, including water, food and shelter’.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, those who do not heed such an evacuation order remain protected as civilians under IHL.

Second, the property rights of displaced persons must be respected.¹⁴⁵ Evacuating an area cannot be a first step that leads to an unlawful attack on, or (other than in case of imperative military necessity) destruction of, a civilian object. Third, evacuations must be temporary measures – evacuees have the right to choose to return as soon as the reasons for their displacement cease to exist.¹⁴⁶ Instead, the nature and scope of Israel’s evacuation orders raised serious concerns that it intended, in the words of the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘permanently to remove the civilian population from these areas in order to create a “buffer zone”’.¹⁴⁷

Humanitarian aid

Added to the impediments to basic food security, Israel placed huge obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip. Between 2 March and 18 May 2025, Israel even prevented the entry into the Gaza Strip of all humanitarian goods and supplies, including food, medicine, fuel and shelter equipment.¹⁴⁸ A few days later, a directive from Israel’s

Minister for Energy instructed the Israel Electric Corporation to stop the transfer of electricity to Gaza.¹⁴⁹ These decisions, which caused the longest period of total siege on Gaza since hostilities began, had huge consequences for the civilian population.¹⁵⁰

By early April 2025, the twenty-five bakeries supported by the World Food Programme (WFP) had all closed due to lack of flour and the unavailability of cooking gas,¹⁵¹ and WFP food parcels distributed to families containing two weeks of food rations were exhausted.¹⁵² By the end of the month, WFP delivered its last remaining food stocks to hot-meal kitchens in Gaza, which for weeks had been the only consistent source of food assistance for people in the Strip.¹⁵³ On 2 May, the ICRC, which had previously described the situation in Gaza as ‘hell on earth’,¹⁵⁴ warned that without an ‘immediate’ resumption of aid deliveries, it could not sustain many of its humanitarian programmes there.¹⁵⁵

The humanitarian situation improved slightly later that month. On 18 May, the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office announced that, ‘on the recommendation of the IDF ... Israel will allow a basic quantity of food to be brought in for the population in order to make certain that no starvation crisis develops in the Gaza Strip’.¹⁵⁶ The United Nations welcomed the move but stressed that the scale of the aid admitted was ‘a drop in the ocean of what is urgently needed’,¹⁵⁷ recalling that many more supplies were ready to be delivered.¹⁵⁸ On 26 May, however, Israel launched a new food distribution system, sidelining the United Nations on the grounds that its aid was being diverted to Hamas. Instead, it entrusted operations to the US-led Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.¹⁵⁹ The initiative was boycotted by the UN,¹⁶⁰ and heavily criticized by leading aid groups and dozens of States worldwide.¹⁶¹

Israel wilfully failed to comply with the rules in IHL governing humanitarian relief. As Occupying Power, Israel was obligated, to ‘the fullest extent of the means available to it’ to ensure ‘the food and medical supplies of the population’.¹⁶² In particular, when the resources of occupied territory are inadequate, it has the duty to ‘bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles’.¹⁶³ If the civilian population remains inadequately supplied, the Occupying Power has the obligation to ‘agree to relief schemes on behalf of the said population, and ... facilitate them by all the means at its disposal’, subject to its right of searching and controlling the relief consignments and of controlling their distribution.¹⁶⁴ The International Court of Justice reaffirmed these obligations in its 2024 Advisory Opinion and in its orders for provisional measures in the genocide case brought by South Africa.¹⁶⁵

Attacks against civilians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem

Military operations by Israeli security forces in the West Bank have also caused significant numbers of civilian casualties. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel, Israeli forces killed seventy-four Palestinians, including twelve children and three women, during ‘Operation Iron Wall’ in Jenin, Tulkarm and Nur Shams camps, principally during the first forty days of the operation.¹⁶⁶ The human rights NGO, B’Tselem, documented a marked increase in Israeli airstrikes in the West Bank – and resultant casualties – after 7 October 2023.¹⁶⁷ In an attack on 3 October 2024, Israel bombed a residential building in Tulkarm refugee camp. Three missiles destroyed a café and home on the ground floor, killing everyone inside.¹⁶⁸ The IDF claimed the operation had targeted a Hamas commander who was planning to execute an attack as well as another eleven members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹⁶⁹ The strike also killed six unarmed civilians, three of whom were children.¹⁷⁰

The escalating hostilities in the West Bank in the first three months of 2025 provoked the greatest displacement of civilians in that region since 1967.¹⁷¹ At the time of

writing, more than 30,000 people were believed to be still internally displaced in Jenin, Tubas, and Tulkarm. OCHA stated that October 2025 saw the highest recorded monthly number of Israeli settler attacks since it began documenting such incidents in 2006, with more than 260 attacks resulting in casualties or property damage or both. One in every five Palestinians killed by Israeli forces in 2025 until the end of October across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was a child.¹⁷²

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Hostage-taking and torture and ill-treatment by Palestinian armed groups

As of the end of July 2025, Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip (principally Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) were believed to be still holding fifty hostages.¹⁷³ Twenty hostages were believed to be still alive and the other thirty were dead.¹⁷⁴ Civilians and members of Israeli security forces were abducted on 7 October 2023 and taken to Gaza in order to be used as hostages.¹⁷⁵ This is prohibited by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions irrespective of the status of the person abducted, and is a war crime.¹⁷⁶

Once in Gaza, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel found that hostages ‘were intentionally mistreated in order to inflict physical pain and severe mental suffering’, including through ‘physical violence, abuse, sexual violence, forced isolation, limited access to hygiene facilities, water and food, threats and humiliation’, as well as through forced participation in videos ‘with the intent of inflicting psychological torture on the families of hostages in order to achieve political aims’.¹⁷⁷ These actions are violations of the IHL rules demanding humane treatment of persons taking no active part in the hostilities and also amount to war crimes.¹⁷⁸

Arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment of Palestinian detainees

Palestinian detainees held in Israel were also widely mistreated. Israel subjected Palestinians to ‘consistently harsh conditions of detention’, including severe food restrictions causing hunger and malnutrition, poor hygiene and health conditions, and exposure to cold temperatures.¹⁷⁹ Conditions in military-run detention facilities were worse, with ‘widespread ill-treatment’ and ‘physical assaults and beatings’ of detainees.¹⁸⁰ In September 2024, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel determined that detention of Palestinians in Israel was characterized by ‘widespread and systematic abuse, physical and psychological violence, sexual and gender-based violence, and death in detention’ whose frequency and severity had increased since 7 October 2023.¹⁸¹

A report in August 2025 by B’Tselem revealed ‘frequent acts of severe, arbitrary violence; sexual assault; humiliation and degradation; deliberate starvation; forced unhygienic conditions; sleep deprivation; prohibition on, and punitive measures for, religious worship; confiscation of all communal and personal belongings; and denial of adequate medical treatment’.¹⁸² Sometimes the mistreatment had a fatal outcome. According to data published by the UN Human Rights Office in Palestine, at least seventy-five Palestinians (forty-nine from Gaza, twenty-four from the West Bank, and two Palestinian citizens of Israel) died during detention between 7 October 2023 and 31 August 2025.¹⁸³

The ICRC was not allowed to visit any Palestinian detainees held in Israeli detention facilities after 7 October 2023¹⁸⁴ and the detainees were prevented from having any contact with their families.¹⁸⁵ Although Israel sought to justify these actions as a response

to Hamas's refusal to allow ICRC visits to its hostages,¹⁸⁶ reprisals against persons protected by Geneva Convention IV are prohibited.¹⁸⁷

Violations of IHL against detainees are confirmed by the few investigations mounted by Israel. In February 2025, a military court sentenced an IDF soldier who had admitted to 'aggravated abuse' of Palestinian detainees from Gaza at the Sde Teiman military detention centre to seven months in prison. He had punched detainees and used his weapon 'while they were handcuffed and blindfolded'.¹⁸⁸ This was said to be the first conviction of an IDF soldier for abusing Gazan detainees since military operations against Hamas began in October 2023.¹⁸⁹ Israeli military prosecutors later indicted five members of a Military Police reserve unit on charges of causing severe injury to and aggravated assault of a Palestinian detainee, again at Sde Teiman detention facility.¹⁹⁰

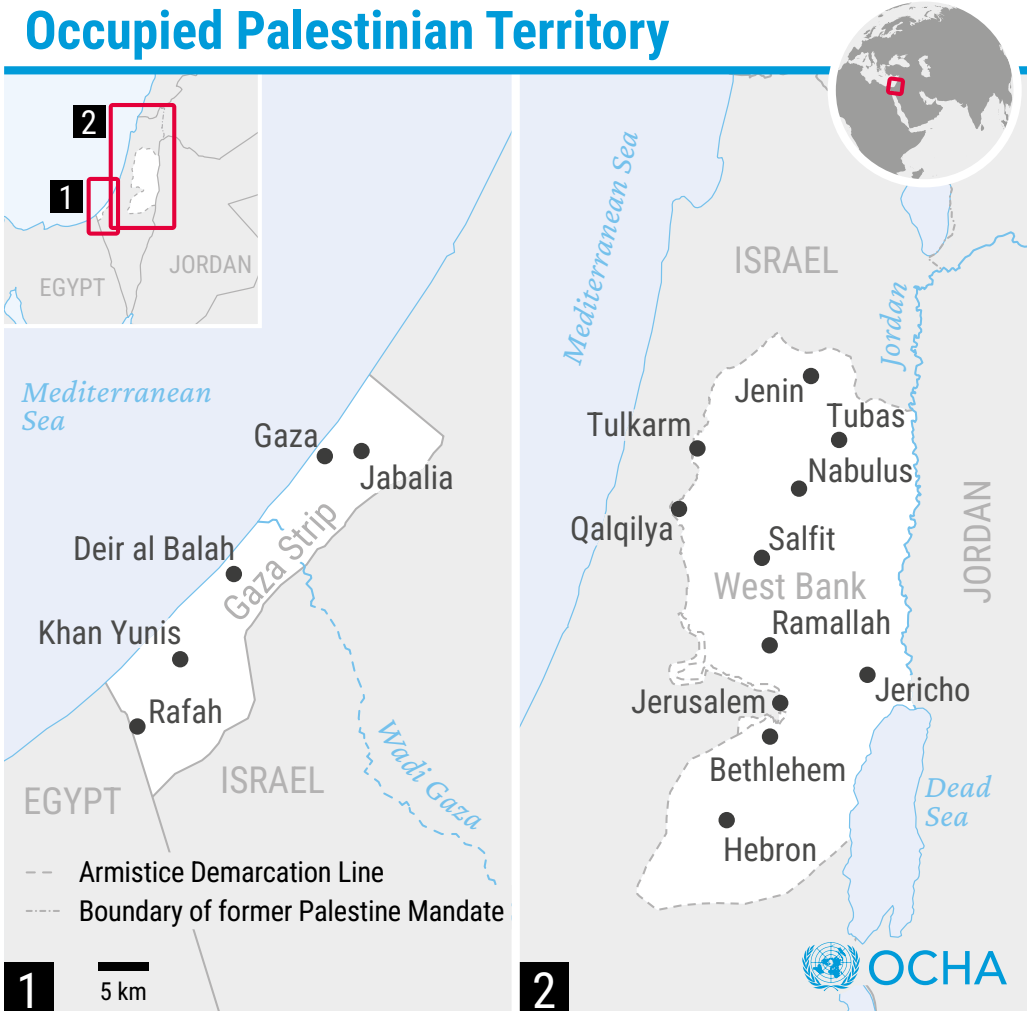
Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

In its report of September 2025, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Palestine and Israel found that Israeli security forces committed torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence and ill-treatment against Palestinian detainees that resulted in 'severe bodily and mental harm to the victims'.¹⁹¹ The Commission of Inquiry's March 2025 report documented cases of sexual and gender-based violence against male and female inmates during detention in more than ten military and Israel Prison Service facilities.¹⁹²

In an earlier report, the Commission had documented multiple incidents of forced public nudity, forced stripping and sexual humiliation, and abuse and harassment, mostly of Palestinian men and boys, but also of women and girls. These acts occurred during arrest or evacuations.¹⁹³ The IDF says that: 'Due to the militants' tactics of concealing explosives and other weapons under civilian clothing and the need to ensure they do not pose an immediate threat to the ground force, there may be a need to search them, including by partial removal of clothing'. It clarified that undressing detainees is only permitted on security or health-related grounds; that detainees are allowed to dress again at the first opportunity available; and that only female soldiers search female detainees.¹⁹⁴ While not excluding the possibility of forced stripping for security reasons, the Commission found that in certain incidents, 'the motivation from the outset appeared to have been retribution and a desire to humiliate', while in other cases, even if a security rationale existed, the acts were not conducted according to acceptable standards and in a dignified manner'.¹⁹⁵

Figure 12.2: UN Map of Palestine © United Nations

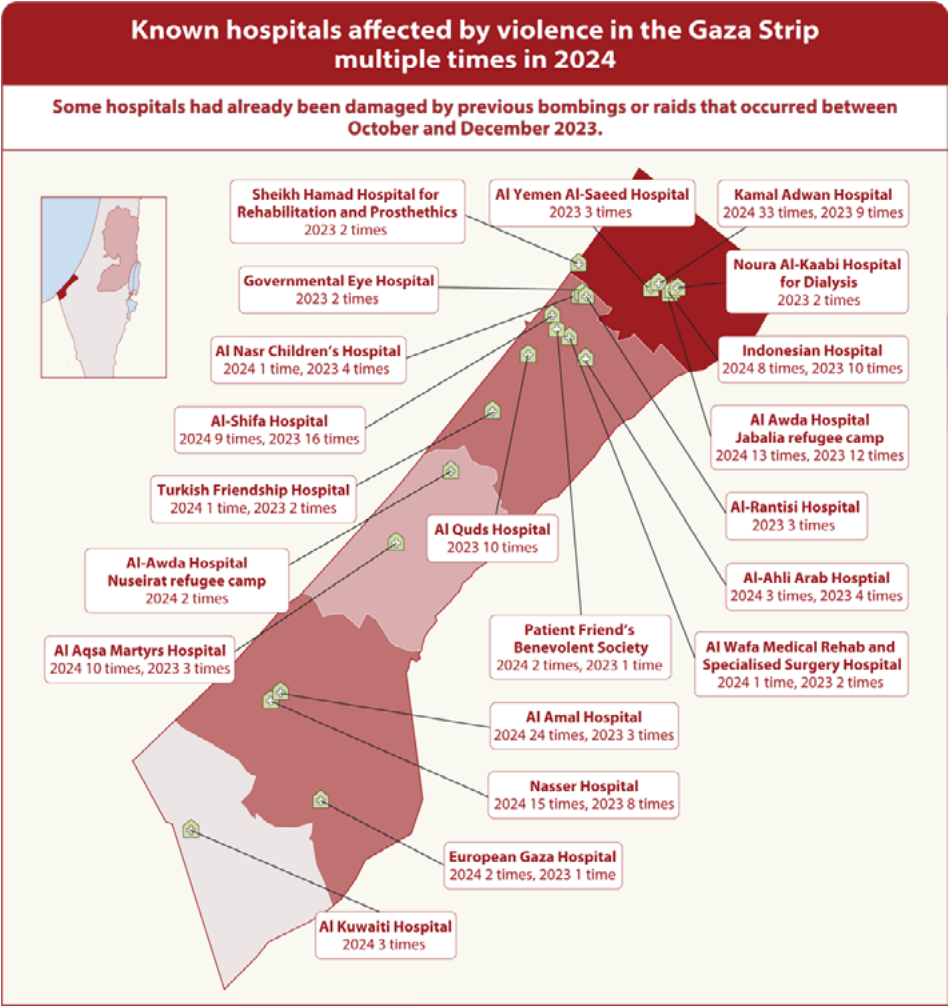
Occupied Palestinian Territory



Map Sources: ESRI, OCHA, UNGIS.

The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Map created in Jan 2025.

Figure 12.3: Attacks against hospitals in Gaza in 2024 © SHCC¹⁹⁶



Source: Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

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13. MALI



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

For more than a decade, Mali has been engaged in multiple armed conflicts against non-State armed groups operating on its territory. As in other Sahelian countries, the roots of the armed conflicts lie in a combination of ethnic tensions, fragile State institutions, and limited government control over peripheral regions.¹ JNIM, the largest jihadist coalition in Mali, is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg who once served as a Malian diplomat. Ghali previously played a prominent role in the 2012 Tuareg uprising against the government, seeking to establish an independent homeland ('Azawad') in the north.²

There have been conflicts with Tuareg separatist armed groups in the north; with an al-Qaeda affiliate, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM); and the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISSP), previously known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Other instances of armed violence have involved armed groups that did not amount to armed conflicts, either because the group was not sufficiently organized or, more often, because the violence was not of a sufficiently repeated and intense nature.

Between 2014 and 2015, pro-government armed groups formed the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger (Platform), while separatist armed groups established the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA). The CMA was composed of the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad, the Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad, and the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad. Platform included the Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad, as well as the Groupe d'autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies. In 2015, these two coalitions engaged in peace talks with the Malian government, which led to the conclusion of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali on 20 June 2015.

JNIM was formed in 2017 by the merger of five jihadist organizations operating in the Sahel, including Ansar Dine and Al-Mourabitoun. This coalition emerged after French-led operations in 2012 had temporarily pushed back the separatist and jihadist groups that had seized control of the north of Mali. Since its formation, JNIM has pursued an agenda of rejecting the authority of Sahelian governments while imposing its strict interpretation of Islamic law on populations under its influence.³

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The early months in the period under review were characterized by large-scale assaults by jihadist and separatist groups against the Malian armed forces (Forces Armées du Mali, FAMA) and the supporting Wagner Group.⁴ Major confrontations included the battle of Tinzaouaten in July 2024, and an attack on the national gendarmerie academy and the international airport in Bamako in September 2024.⁵ Three non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) continued in Mali, pitting the State against, respectively: JNIM, the ISSP, and the Front de Libération de l'Azawad (FLA). ISSP and JNIM have clashed on several occasions in the Gao region in the north-east, but these were not of sufficient intensity and regularity to amount to a NIAC.

The ISSP was formed in 2015 as an armed group affiliated with Islamic State. Highly organized, the ISSP clashed with FAMA in a few – but significant—instances in 2023 and 2024. There was then a marked increase in hostilities between the two parties in June 2025.⁶ On 4 June, the group launched its first major attack in several months when

it attacked Tessit military camp in Gao region, killing ninety-four people (of whom only around forty were soldiers, indicating the remainder were civilians).⁷

The FLA was established in November 2024 after the dissolution of the coalition 'Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad' (CSP-DPA).⁸ On 25 July 2024, the CSP had ambushed a military convoy transporting FAMA and Wagner personnel to Tinzaouaten, a commune near the border with Algeria. Three days of fighting saw scores of deaths among the State actors. The FLA is fighting for the independence of Azawad territory in the north of Mali.⁹ Despite several of its leaders being killed shortly after the movement's creation,¹⁰ the FLA was able to sustain fighting against FAMA in Kidal region in June 2025.¹¹

Mali, along with Burkina Faso and Niger, its partners in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2025. In the months that followed, clashes between FAMA and the armed groups (as well as sporadically between the armed groups themselves) continued across the country, with growing numbers of civilian casualties blamed on all parties to the armed conflicts.¹²

The Humanitarian Situation

In June and July 2025, as the Russian military presence in Mali was 'restructured',¹³ jihadist groups intensified their attacks on military bases, cities, and convoys, especially in the centre and north of the country, killing hundreds of soldiers and civilians.¹⁴ By early November 2025, JNIM had been besieging Bamako for more than two months, with some reports even suggesting that it could seize the capital imminently. JNIM's members created a tight economic and fuel blockade by sealing off major highways used by tankers to transport fuel from neighbouring Senegal and the Côte d'Ivoire to landlocked Sahel country since September.¹⁵

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

During the reporting period, three NIACs persisted in Mali:

- Mali (supported by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) *v* JNIM
- Mali (supported by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) *v* the ISSP
- Mali (supported by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) *v* the FLA.

Combat between JNIM and FAMA, which has been occurring over the course of several years, intensified in the second half of 2024 and the first half of 2025, with JNIM attacking FAMA at multiple locations across the country, including the capital, Bamako.¹⁶

As noted, Mali's armed forces have been supported in the conduct of hostilities by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps. The month of June 2025 marked a violent turning point in Mali's conflicts, with the Wagner Group formally leaving the country to be replaced by 'Africa Corps'. Africa Corps is under more direct organizational supervision from the Russian Ministry of Defence¹⁷ and its members may best be considered as State agents. The deployment of Africa Corps coincided with a sharp escalation of violence on several fronts. Over the course of July 2025, FAMA with Africa Corps launched a series of airstrikes and mounted ground offensives targeting the ISSP, the FLA, and JNIM strongholds in the north and centre of the country.¹⁸ In December 2025, villagers accused Africa Corps of committing widespread atrocities against civilians. A village chief who fled the Russian

forces said: 'It's a scorched earth policy. The soldiers speak to no one. Anyone they see, they shoot. No questions, no warning. People don't even know why they are being killed.'¹⁹

All three NIACs are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international humanitarian law (IHL). Mali is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.²⁰ The NIAC with JNIM meets the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of the Protocol – specifically that the group exercised territorial control that would enable it to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol – and this treaty is directly applicable to that armed conflict. By the end of the reporting period, the NIAC with the ISSP had also become governed by the Protocol.

Mali remained a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court throughout the reporting period.²¹ Its announced withdrawal from the Court on 22 September 2025 (along with Burkina Faso and Niger)²² was without legal effect at the time of writing, as it had not made a formal notification of withdrawal to the depositary of the Statute – the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). If and when it does so, the withdrawal will take effect one year after the notification. All events covered in this report therefore potentially fall within the material jurisdiction of the Court.

The situation in Mali was referred to the Court by the Malian government in July 2012 and an investigation was opened in January 2013. The current focus of that investigation is alleged war crimes committed in Mali since January 2012, with a regional focus in three northern regions (Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu), along with certain incidents in Bamako and Sévaré in the south.²³

On 26 June 2024, Mr Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz, an alleged member of the non-State armed group Ansar Dine and de facto chief of Islamic police, who was alleged to have been involved in the work of the Islamic court in Timbuktu, was convicted of multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes. The war crimes for which he was convicted were of torture, outrages upon personal dignity, mutilation, cruel treatment, and the passing of sentences without prior fair trial. They were committed between 2 April 2012 and 29 January 2013 in Timbuktu, in the north of the country. On 20 November 2024, Mr Al Hassan was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.²⁴

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

While many jihadist attacks have been mounted against military objectives in Mali, both non-State armed groups and State actors also attacked civilians and civilian objects during the period under review. There is a clear lack of accountability for unlawful actions of all parties to the armed conflicts, including FAMa and Africa Corps. Although not formalized at the time of writing, Mali's announced intent to withdraw from the International Criminal Court in September 2025 further undermines the likelihood of improvement in the near term.²⁵

Civilian Objects under Attack

JNIM especially has regularly attacked civilian objects in its ongoing conflict with FAMa and the Malian authorities. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.²⁶ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective

contribution to military action.²⁷ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives²⁸ and, as such, are protected against attack.

Between June and November 2024, JNIM committed widespread violations of IHL in central Mali in its destruction and seizure of civilian property, including livestock, and its targeting of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. During this period, JNIM fighters burned down more than 1,000 homes and looted thousands of heads of cattle, targeting communities perceived as supporting the Dan Na Ambassagou militia,²⁹ an ethnic Dogon militia established in 2016 to defend Dogon communities against attacks.³⁰ In the village of Tilé alone, more than 500 houses were destroyed and hundreds of animals were stolen (an act of pillage). Witnesses described armed men arriving on motorbikes setting homes ablaze and shooting civilians.³¹

Similar tactics by JNIM have been reported in the village of Souleye in Ségou region. Inhabitants described a situation where, for the third consecutive year, agriculture was made impossible due to the risk of attacks by armed groups. With the rainy season approaching, villagers were not able to begin ploughing, raising fears of widespread food insecurity. Souleye has had no functioning school for two years, and access to healthcare has completely collapsed — there is no longer a health centre or access to medicine, leaving the population without any basic services. The destruction of property and loss of livelihoods have left communities in a state of acute vulnerability.³²

IHL strictly prohibits pillage and wanton destruction of civilian property during armed conflict in IAC and NIAC. Pillage consists of appropriation by members of armed forces or armed groups of private property and may amount to a war crime.³³

JNIM attacks in Bamako in September 2024

On 17 September 2024, JNIM claimed responsibility for two coordinated attacks in Bamako.³⁴ The first targeted the Faladié national gendarmerie training school, resulting in heavy casualties among gendarme trainees.³⁵ Simultaneously, as noted above, JNIM attacked Base Aérienne 101, located within the capital's Modibo Keita International Airport.³⁶ The assault, which struck the presidential pavilion and destroyed the presidential airplane, also caused material damage to a humanitarian airplane operated by the World Food Programme (WFP). While the attack on the presidential aircraft does not per se breach IHL — insofar as the President of Mali is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces³⁷ — damage to a clearly marked humanitarian plane raises concerns about compliance with the rules of distinction and proportionality in attack (and the underlying duty to take precautions in attack).

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.³⁸ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between soldiers/fighters and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.³⁹ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁴⁰ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets without the law being violated. Such attacks must, however, not be disproportionate⁴¹ and all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid or, in any event, to minimize incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians.⁴²

Attacks directed against civilians

Since July 2024, multiple attacks by parties to the armed conflicts in Mali have involved the killing of civilians – serious violations of customary and treaty IHL.⁴³ On 19 July 2024, the ISSP attacked an internally displaced person (IDP) camp hosting around 200 ethnic Dawsahak on the outskirts of Ménaka town in the east, killing at least seven men. According to witnesses, the attack was targeted retaliation against the Dawsahak, a Tuareg ethnic group that the ISSP accuses of collaborating with JNIM.⁴⁴ Two days later, at least twenty-six people – twenty-two farmers and four members of the Dan Nan Ambassagou militia – were killed in an attack attributed to JNIM in the village of Dembo Songo Anna in central Mali.⁴⁵

On 7 February 2025, a convoy of 19 vehicles transporting more than 100 civilians was ambushed. The convoy was being escorted by FAMa and the Wagner Group. Although military escorts may pose risks to civilians, they do not as such render a civilian convoy a military objective. Even where soldiers may lawfully be targeted, IHL requires that such actions comply with the rule of proportionality in attack and with the duty to take all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm.

While the attack was not claimed by any party, it was committed in an area where the ISSP is active.⁴⁶ Moreover, FAMa and the Wagner Group had conducted a military operation against ISSP earlier in the week on the same road, indicating the possibility the ambush may have been a retaliation by the group.⁴⁷ The fact that the armed group opened fire against the convoy as a whole⁴⁸ indicates an indiscriminate attack.

The convoy was travelling between Gao and Ansongo and heading towards a gold mine at N'Tahaka when it was attacked by one hundred or so men on motorbikes.⁴⁹ Discrepancies exist in the recorded casualty figures, with FAMa reporting the death of twenty-five civilians and thirteen injured.⁵⁰ According to an investigation by Human Rights Watch, however, the attack caused a total of seventy-eight civilian casualties. Local populations have warned of the risks they face while under military escort.⁵¹

Forced displacement

Under IHL, parties to a NIAC are prohibited from ordering displacement of the civilian population in relation to the armed conflict, except to ensure the safety of civilians or for imperative military reasons.⁵² Orders by JNIM to vacate villages have been reported on numerous occasions.⁵³ Notably, on 10 March 2025, an armed group said to be composed of members of JNIM ordered civilians out of the village of Fatakara in Timbuktu.⁵⁴ A group of armed men came to the village to pray, but then ordered everyone to leave by 11 am the following morning.⁵⁵ When they came back and saw that people had not left, they captured and killed the leader of the village and left his body in the middle of the town.⁵⁶ As a result, by 13 March 2025, more than 700 families had fled the village and found refuge in Goundam.⁵⁷

No fighting appears to have taken place in the village and no reports have provided information about the reasons for the evacuation order. As such, ordering the displacement of the villagers from Fatakara would amount to a violation of the customary rule prohibiting the forced displacement of the civilian population other than for their safety or for imperative military reasons⁵⁸ – a possible war crime.⁵⁹

Use of armed drones

Use of armed drones by parties to the armed conflicts in Mali has increased over the course of this reporting period.⁶⁰ FAMa have had Bayraktar TB2 drones since 2022 and have

acquired at least two Bayraktar Akinci high-altitude, long-endurance drones.⁶¹ The increased use of drones by FAMA is explained in part by its loss of territorial control in Kidal region (to the FLA in particular). FAMA therefore remotely attacks armed groups operating there.⁶²

On several occasions, drones have been used in indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks. For example, on 25 August 2024, FAMA mounted drone strikes in the town of Tinzaouaten in Kidal. FAMA claimed the strike was targeting terrorists and that approximately twenty FLA fighters were killed. However, images and reports have shown that the drones first hit a pharmacy and then civilians who had gathered after the first explosion. Nothing indicates the presence of a military objective in the pharmacy or nearby. Reportedly, the operation resulted in the deaths of twenty-one civilians, including eleven children, with no confirmed casualties among fighters. The twenty-one individuals killed were classified by FAMA as fighters, while local sources identified them as civilians.⁶³

On 21 October 2024, the Malian armed forces carried out drone strikes on the weekly market of Inadiatafane (in Timbuktu) on a busy day. At least eight people, including four children, were reportedly killed, and between fourteen and twenty others seriously injured.⁶⁴ Nothing indicates the presence of a military objective in the market.

On 17 March 2025, the Malian Airforce hit a weekly market in Timbuktu region, fifteen kilometres north of the city of Lerneb. According to the Collective for the Defence of the Rights of the Azawad People, which is linked to separatist Tuareg rebels, the operation killed at least eighteen and injured seven; FAMA again claimed the attack had targeted terrorists.⁶⁵ There is no further information regarding the identity and activities of the persons killed.

Since July 2024, armed groups in Mali also have airstrike capabilities. The FLA, for example, is said to have been using the FDG410 drone⁶⁶ while JNIM is using drones to drop improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on its targets.⁶⁷

Use of landmines and other improvised explosive devices

Throughout the reporting period, IEDs continued to pose a grave and persistent threat to civilians across Mali. The types of IED deployed by armed groups range from victim-activated devices amounting to anti-personnel mines or improvised anti-vehicle mines,⁶⁸ to command-detonated and time-delayed munitions.⁶⁹

On 5 September 2024, 15 kilometres north of the town of Kidal, a vehicle with civilians aboard struck an IED thought to have been laid by JNIM. Four civilians were killed and three were wounded in the explosion.⁷⁰ On 10 November 2024, between Goun-guede and Ngai, in Koulikoro region, a cart carrying civilians struck an IED likely planted by JNIM, killing six civilians.⁷¹ On 14 December 2024, a vehicle with civilian passengers struck an IED likely planted by JNIM between Balagina and Diallassagou, in Mopti region. Five women were killed and the driver was seriously injured.⁷² On 1 May 2025, an IED likely planted by JNIM at the entrance of the village of Bomboukore in Mopti region detonated, killing three civilians.⁷³ These incidents raise concern about the risk of indiscriminate effects from use of these weapons. In accordance with the principle of precautions under IHL, all feasible measures must be taken to avoid or at least minimize incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects. Repeated civilian casualties from IED incidents suggest a failure to uphold this obligation.

Mali is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its forces from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as an explosive munition

placed under, on, or near the ground that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind non-State armed groups directly under international law, but they remain subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take feasible precautions to protect civilians. The effects of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature employed by non-State armed groups, are often indiscriminate.

Mali is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory as soon as possible, irrespective of who has used them.⁷⁴ Its clearance deadline expired on 1 March 2009 and it had not sought a new deadline at the time of writing, although in June 2025, the government announced its intention to submit a formal request by March 2026.⁷⁵ Mali is also a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its protocols restricting the use of landmines, including anti-vehicle mines (Protocol II of 1980 and Amended Protocol II of 1996).⁷⁶ The Amended Protocol II applies to all parties to a NIAC, including non-State armed groups.

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Treaty and customary IHL offers fundamental guarantees of protection to anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting murder, torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, all forms of sexual violence, and enforced disappearances. As mentioned, a series of attacks involving the murder of civilians occurred during the reporting period.

Murder of civilians

FAMa, supported by the Wagner Group, are accused of widespread killing of civilians. According to Human Rights Watch, between May and December 2024, they deliberately killed at least 32 civilians during operations in towns and villages in central and northern Mali.⁷⁷ Incidents were generally reported during counterterrorism operations or were in retaliation for attacks by armed groups on their forces. They often appeared to target victims on the basis of their ethnicity (especially Fulani, who are suspected of having a link with Islamist groups). Non-State armed groups have also committed atrocities, with JNIM and the ISSP thought to have murdered at least 47 civilians from June to December 2024.⁷⁸

The killings continued into 2025. Between 2 and 4 January, FAMa accompanied by the Wagner Group allegedly killed six men, three women, and a two-year-old boy in the locality of Fatissouma, near Dioura, in the Mopti region. The bodies of the victims (as well as their burnt-out vehicle) were found on 4 January 2025: some were hidden in a hole filled with tree trunks or buried, while some were simply thrown into a well.⁷⁹

Between 21 and 22 January 2025, during joint operations in the Douentza region of central Mali, the same two actors were accused of executing at least ten civilians across several localities. On 21 January 2025, three Dogon men from the commune of Dinangourou were abducted and later found decapitated. The following day, in the village of Bouldé in the southern Mopti region near the border of Burkina Faso, five Fulani civilians, aged between 14 and 73, were executed and four others wounded by gunfire. Witnesses described early morning raids, with victims killed in their homes, around forty millet granaries set ablaze, and the destruction of several motorbikes. Later the same day, two Dogon and three ethnic Bellah individuals were executed in the village of Niangassadiou. Some victims were identified as fuel sellers, suggesting they may have been targeted for supplying fuel to the 'enemy'.⁸⁰

On 12 April 2025, 100 men, most Fulani, were arrested by FAMA and the Wagner Group in Sebabougou. FAMA confirmed conducting military operations between 11 and 15 April 2025 in several areas, including Sebabougou and Kwala. FAMA said their soldiers were searching for Islamist fighters and had targeted the victims on the basis of their ethnicity, accusing Fulani of being jihadists. Around sixty of the men arrested on 12 April 2025 were taken to Kwala military camp in Koulikoro region where they are said to have been tortured. Afterwards, the Wagner Group were accused of executing the men outside the camp. Between 21 and 22 April 2025, several dozen decomposing bodies, believed to be those who had been arrested in Sebabougou on 12 April 2025, were found around the Kwala military camp by people searching for their relatives.⁸¹

On 12 May 2025, FAMA allegedly executed at least twenty-two Fulani men in the village of Diafarabé in Mopti region. Witnesses said soldiers arrested the men at a local market; one escaped and alerted villagers, leading to the discovery of two mass graves containing the victims' bodies.⁸²

Non-State armed groups were similarly reported to have conducted multiple summary executions. Intensified acts of violence against civilians have occurred in Gao, Kidal, and Menaka regions by the ISSP, and in Bandiagara, Kayes, Kidal, Mopti, and Tombouctou by JNIM.⁸³ On 11 March 2025, for instance, as mentioned above, unidentified armed men, likely belonging to JNIM, went to the village of Fatakara, killed the leader of the village and left his body to rot in the middle of the town.⁸⁴

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and constitute serious violations of IHL and war crimes.⁸⁵ The armed conflicts in Mali have been marked by severe incidents of gender-based violence, with women and girls most often targeted.

Reports indicate that both armed groups⁸⁶ and State actors⁸⁷ have perpetrated acts of gender-based and sexual violence. The United Nations have previously found that sexual violence has been used by both Malian armed forces and members of non-State armed groups in the conflict in Mali both as a method of intimidation and also to 'reward' fighters.⁸⁸ These acts may even form part of a strategy, particularly in regions controlled by, or in support of, armed groups.⁸⁹

Indeed, the number of victims is increasing. Since 1 July 2024, the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) used by certain UN agencies and NGOs⁹⁰ registered 15,136 incidents of gender-based violence, of which 3,570 involved cases of sexual violence.⁹¹ The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, along with the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Mali, have underlined that children have increasingly been victims of violence, including rape, sexual assault, and forced marriage.⁹²

What is more, the numbers published by the GBVIMS are probably under-reported, due to trauma, social stigma, and fear of reprisals, as well as the lack of adequate services and reporting mechanisms.⁹³ Moreover, while women form the majority of the victims of sexual and gender-based violence, men are also affected, but are particularly reluctant to come forward.⁹⁴ At the same time, the data presented includes both conflict- and non-conflict-related violence. While establishing a direct link between sexual violence and the armed conflict in every case is complex, certain indicators, such as the affiliation of perpetrators to a party to the conflict, and the real or perceived affiliation of victims, provide grounds for establishing such a nexus.

In one example, between 10 to 12 February 2025, FAMA and the Wagner Group undertook a military operation against the JNIM and its perceived supporters in the region of Goundam, Timbuktu. In that context, women in several villages were reportedly tied up, assaulted, and raped by FAMA and Wagner Group combatants.⁹⁵ As of October 2024, Goundam was a region considered to be supportive of, or even controlled by, JNIM. The data suggest that, in the context of the armed conflict, sexual violence is used by State authorities to punish or deter those perceived as supporting armed groups.⁹⁶

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty, enforced disappearance, and hostage-taking

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must not be arbitrary and must be conducted with respect for fundamental legal safeguards.⁹⁷ Persons in detention must thus be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions in place on torture or other ill-treatment.⁹⁸ Authorities must also ensure that detainees have access to medical care and that they are protected against violence. The unlawful killing of a detainee is likely to constitute a war crime.⁹⁹ Enforced disappearance, which involves secret detention or the failure to disclose the fate or whereabouts of a detainee, violates IHL's prohibition of the practice as well as the requirement to register detainees and the right of families to know the fate of their relatives.¹⁰⁰

Abductions and detentions have been performed by FAMA, the Wagner Group, and JNIM. The practice of keeping arrested people without providing any information to their relatives, if confirmed, is an enforced disappearance. On 12 May 2025, media alleged that civilian Peul men were arrested by the Malian Army at a market. Their family were left with no information about their whereabouts, until the bodies of the men were found three days later. All the men had been beheaded.¹⁰¹

Unidentified armed men have also abducted civilians,¹⁰² including children.¹⁰³ While it has not been possible to attribute the conduct to a specific party to the conflict, the abductions did take place in areas controlled by JNIM. Examples of such events include the abduction of six civilians in the village of Safienso, seemingly in revenge for the arrest of a member of an armed group.¹⁰⁴ In December 2024, JNIM claimed responsibility for the abduction of Khalif Amadou Hady Tall, demanding he cease his interactions with the Malian government.¹⁰⁵ Abduction of civilians 'in order to compel a third party to do or to abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for his or her release' amounts to hostage taking,¹⁰⁶ which is prohibited under customary and treaty IHL and a war crime.¹⁰⁷

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees of access to food, medical care, and education.¹⁰⁸ For 2024, the United Nations identified and verified 892 grave violations against 778 children. The violations were against 612 boys and 161 girls (the sex of the other five was unknown).¹⁰⁹

IHL explicitly prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of fifteen years or their use in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups.¹¹⁰ Violations of the prohibition amount to possible war crimes. Yet the recruitment and use of children in combat, particularly by non-State armed groups, continues to occur. In the course of 2024, the United Nations verified that at least 285 children (264 boys, 21 girls) were recruited and used to participate in hostilities in Mali. Almost all concerned non-State armed groups, principally JNIM (113 children).¹¹¹

Figure 13.1: UN Map of Mali © United Nations



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14. MOZAMBIQUE



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Mozambique continues to be involved in an armed conflict in its northern Cabo Delgado province, although violence has also spread into neighbouring Niassa province. In total, 6,000 people have been killed and countless others seriously injured since the conflict broke out in 2017. The Mozambican Armed Forces (FADM) are supported by troops from other African nations in their operations against Islamic State Mozambique (ISM), also known as Ahlu Sunna Wal-Jama. Authorized communal militias ('Local Forces'), which are nominally under the Ministry of Defence¹ and comprise mainly demobilized soldiers, fight sporadically against ISM.²

The conflict started in 2017 following an encounter between local law enforcement and affiliates of an Islamist group designated locally as 'Al-Shabaab', which had launched attacks on police stations and briefly occupied the port town of Mocímboa da Praia. Although the intensity of the conflict in Cabo Delgado has waxed and waned over time, widespread attacks against civilians and civilian objects by ISM have been a constant feature.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Violations during the reporting period have involved pillage (the looting of private property) and hostage-taking of civilians (abduction for ransom). Fighting in the conflict was particularly intense during the first half of 2025, with the month of May recording the sharpest rise in casualties since June 2022. ISM increased its territorial dominance in several parts of northern Cabo Delgado in the course of 2025.

The FADM has also engaged in abductions of those suspected to be affiliates of ISM, including of fishermen at sea for this reason. In addition, notwithstanding the fact that Rwandan forces supporting the FADM have officially prioritized civilian protection, their actions during the reporting period may have put civilians at risk, whether through inaction or delayed reaction. This has been seen in particular on the N380, a highway running from Pemba (the provincial capital in the south) to the port town of Mocímboa da Praia in the north of Cabo Delgado. The N380 is critical to the flow of people and goods through the province, as well as to securing a major liquified natural gas (LNG) project at Afungi. But evidence suggests Rwandan troops may often have been 'unresponsive' when civilians were being attacked or threatened.³

The Soufan Center in the United States has suggested that the Mozambican government's approach to counterterrorism risks 'deepening local grievances by prioritizing economic interests over addressing the root causes of conflict'.⁴ The lack of government services, widespread poverty, rising ethno-sectarian tensions, and lingering land disputes amount to something of a 'perfect storm' for a rebellion. ISM has leveraged entrenched grievances in the Mozambican population about socio-economic inequalities to destabilize the region. The Center argued that the wave of post-election violence following the disputed 2024 presidential elections strengthened ISM narratives, facilitating its extension of territorial control.⁵

The month of October 2025 marked eight years of the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) spoke of a 'failed military strategy' with a terrorist threat that remained 'acute' despite deployment 'of thousands of local and foreign troops'.⁶

The Humanitarian Situation

Hostilities with ISM have led to greatly increased internal displacement. Despite recorded returns, in May 2025, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported more than 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mozambique, most in the north of the country. In 2024, Norwegian Refugee Council described Mozambique for the first time as one of the world's most neglected displacement crises.⁷ What is more, tensions with host communities worsened towards the end of the reporting period; on occasion, Local Forces militia were instructed by local authorities to repel IDPs by force. IDPs who return home face renewed insecurity and little to no external assistance. Indeed, local NGOs have spoken of the difficulties they encounter in seeking to assist those affected by the conflict in Cabo Delgado.⁸

Challenges and impediments to humanitarian access have had significant humanitarian consequences. Across Mozambique, between October 2024 and March 2025, 4.9 million people were calculated to be facing high levels of acute food insecurity – at or above crisis level, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). In addition, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported a sharp rise in severe acute malnutrition cases in March and April 2025, with more than 5,000 children admitted for treatment in March alone — the highest number in recent years and well above the five-year average.⁹ By June 2025, escalating conflict across northern Mozambique, funding shortfalls, cholera outbreaks, and the aftermath of three consecutive cyclones were severely constraining humanitarian efforts and exacerbating civilian suffering. Many people have been displaced multiple times and urgently need food, water, and shelter.¹⁰

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

There is a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) between Mozambique and ISM. Mozambique is supported by Rwanda (the Rwandan Security Forces, RSF) and Tanzania (TPDF). Until 15 July 2024, it was also supported by the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), a force comprising troops from Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. After SAMIM's withdrawal, the SANDF remained in Mozambique until December 2024 (see below). Collectively, these forces have endeavoured, albeit with varying degrees of success, to contain ISM.¹¹ Greater progress has been made in the south of Cabo Delgado than in the north.¹²

Mozambique and its allies are States Parties to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and other rules of customary international humanitarian law (IHL) apply to the armed conflict. Mozambique is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,¹³ whose additional requirement for sustained territorial control by an organized armed group is met by ISM in Cabo Delgado. Rwanda and Tanzania are both parties to Additional Protocol II and the Protocol similarly applies to their actions.¹⁴ South Africa (also a party to Additional Protocol II) deployed troops from its defence forces, the SANDF, until the end of 2024. In addition, from 2021 to mid-July 2024, SAMIM had contributed troops to fight alongside the Mozambican military.¹⁵

SAMIM, for the most part, operated in parallel with the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and the Rwanda National Police (RNP). The RDF and RNP, which are known in Mozambique

as the Rwandan Security Forces (RSF), remain operational in the province. The RSF had more than 4,000 troops in northern Mozambique during the reporting period – an exceptionally large, and well-equipped force.¹⁶ The RSF had been dispatched to Cabo Delgado in 2021, a month prior to SAMIM's deployment, in the wake of an ISM attack on the town of Palma. This attack caused the suspension of the huge LNG project sited nearby.¹⁷ In addition, the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF) has fought ISM in Cabo Delgado's Nangade district since 2021 – first as part of SAMIM, and, since October 2022 (after SAMIM's withdrawal), through a bilateral agreement with the Mozambican government.¹⁸

Although not a party to the NIAC in Cabo Delgado, the European Union (EU) has been providing training and capacity-building to the Mozambican military, aiming to support the FADM in their efforts to restore safety and security to the province. The support, which began in October 2021, has focused on training selected army units for organization into eleven 'Quick Reaction Forces'. The mandate of the EU Military Assistance Mission Mozambique (EUMAM Moz), which includes instruction in both IHL and international human rights law, has been extended to June 2026.¹⁹

The Local Forces militia are not a party to the NIAC. Although they were authorized by the Mozambican government in 2023 to fight ISM, they are not sufficiently organized to meet the requirements of IHL. Members of Local Forces are best understood as individuals directly participating in hostilities (when they meet the criteria for this status under IHL, which involves actual or potential harm to an enemy from their actions).

The NIAC in Mozambique has a distinctly economic element, with fears in Cabo Delgado that international companies will profit and the local businesses and communities will lose out. Indeed, the armed conflict as a whole is perceived to be driven by discontent over exploitation of large-scale natural gas reserves.²⁰ This economic perspective does not preclude the existence of an armed conflict under IHL.

Most of the nation's natural gas reserves, some five trillion cubic metres' worth, are concentrated in the northern province, an attraction to many multinational companies. Thus, TotalEnergies (France), ExxonMobil (United States), Eni (Italy), and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have all invested in strategic concessions to explore and then share gas production with the Mozambican government. Gemfields (United Kingdom) is a majority owner of Montepuez Ruby Mining (MRM), which operates one of the world's largest ruby mines.²¹ There is also artisanal gold mining in Cabo Delgado.

In 2025, TotalEnergies announced its intention to restart operations at the US\$20 billion liquified natural gas project in the Afungi peninsula in the east of the province, which by then had lain dormant for four years. It stated: 'The Company remains committed to supporting the development of the project, led by Mozambique LNG, while ensuring the safety of the personnel working at the Afungi site and the respect of local communities' rights.'²² But despite the country's mineral and natural resource wealth, local business owners fear that security restrictions will hinder supply by local services to the TotalEnergies LNG project.²³ At the end of 2025, the project remained suspended 'due to the security situation in the country'.²⁴

TotalEnergies also faces a potential criminal case for its actions during the 2021 Palma attack.²⁵ In March 2021, during its attack on Palma, ISM killed or kidnapped more than 1,500 civilians living next to the gas plant. Locals who sought help from the forces at the Total facility were accused of aiding ISM. Men were separated from the group by force and held in shipping containers. The exact number of civilians subsequently killed by Mozambican forces providing security for Total is not clear.²⁶ On 14 March 2025, French

prosecutors opened an investigation into the company over alleged neglect of contractor safety. Later in 2025, a complaint was filed with the French prosecutorial authorities by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), accusing TotalEnergies of complicity in war crimes.²⁷ TotalEnergies has reiterated its denial of any wrongdoing.²⁸

South Africa is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.²⁹ Mozambique has signed but not ratified the Statute. Rwanda is also a State not party to the Statute and has not signed it.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, there were consistent reports of ISM attacking civilians and civilian objects – health facilities, humanitarian convoys, and tourism sites – across Cabo Delgado. This occurred in parallel with continued targeting of Mozambican and foreign military personnel by the group (acts that are not generally unlawful under IHL). Violence has also spread into neighbouring Niassa province, especially since May 2025.³⁰

ISM often focuses attacks on Christians, resulting in displacement by these communities during and following the violence. Sometimes it is enough that the presence of ISM fighters nearby is rumoured. Such fears appear well founded. In November 2024, for instance, ISM announced publicly that it had attacked civilians and villages described as Christian in Mocímboa da Praia and Muidumbe districts, with their fighters either beheading or shooting dead four civilians in three separate attacks. They also reportedly burned down 12 homes – some in the village of Mbau in Mocímboa da Praia and in a locality known as Maniania in Muidumbe.³¹ In 2021, the United States designated ISM as a foreign terrorist organization, naming it ISIS-Mozambique.³²

In a small number of areas, however, mostly in Macomia and Quissanga districts, the United Nations has found that ISM has adopted a ‘winning hearts and minds’ approach, avoiding violence against and intimidation of the civilian population, and paying for items before leaving – without engaging in violence.³³ By the end of 2024, ISM tactics were being described as increasingly sophisticated, calculated, and well-executed.³⁴

The FADM has also been accused of attacking civilians, albeit to a considerably lower extent than ISM. The Mozambican army stands accused of intimidation and abduction of those it suspects of having links to ISM. The FADM is also believed to have killed civilians, including fishermen at sea (see below). Adding to this violence, community members in Cabo Delgado allege the authorities of routine corruption, involving, for instance, the supply of food and weapons to ISM and release of suspected members in exchange for bribes.³⁵

There has been little suggestion that Rwandan forces have targeted civilians during their military operations in the province. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project suggests that Rwanda’s central role in adopting and promoting the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians helps to explain its low level of civilian targeting – although the Principles were devised for UN peacekeeping missions, ‘they seem to have also shaped how Rwandan forces undertake counter-insurgency in Mozambique’.³⁶ That said, use by the RSF of combat helicopters from August 2024 provoked fears of significant civilian harm.³⁷ Moreover, in March 2025, a senior figure in the Local Force militia claimed that Rwandan forces in the province had become unwilling to engage with ISM militarily.³⁸

He claimed that their troops often turned up hours after an attack, even when they were nearby. He noted how ISM is based close to the N380 highway and that it would 'take advantage of any opportunity' to attack.³⁹

Although the needs of the civilian population are acute, the Mozambican government has made the delivery of humanitarian aid increasingly difficult in certain respects, such as by delaying the granting of work permits, credentials, and humanitarian visas. These were affecting at least six international NGOs as of June 2025 (and probably more, due to under-reporting).⁴⁰ Increased military checkpoints by both ISM and the security forces in 2025 have restricted movement in Cabo Delgado, further delaying aid deliveries.⁴¹ It is a customary IHL rule in all armed conflicts that the parties to an armed conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, where the aid is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction. This duty is subject to the parties' right of control, but consent may not be arbitrarily denied.⁴²

Civilian Objects under Attack

ISM has regularly attacked civilian objects. Under customary IHL in all armed conflicts, attacks must only be directed against military objectives and not civilian objects.⁴³ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives as defined in IHL, with special protection afforded to medical facilities, including but not limited to hospitals.⁴⁴ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁴⁵ Pillage – the looting of private property – is strictly prohibited under IHL.⁴⁶

Attacks against health facilities

Health infrastructure in Cabo Delgado has been severely affected by the armed conflict. By July 2025, only one health centre in Macomia district in the centre of the province was still functional, down from the seven that existed before the conflict. What is more, the facility in Macomia town that did remain open was overwhelmed by the needs of the population. Macomia was attacked by ISM in May 2024, forcing Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and other humanitarian organizations to stop or suspend activities. MSF was gradually able to resume operations in April 2025.⁴⁷

In a press release, MSF called for better protection of health facilities and medical workers against the violence. 'With the increase in displacements, many people have come to seek refuge in Macomia, overwhelming the only functional health center', MSF doctor Emerson Finiose said. 'We're struggling to do medical referrals. We must prioritize the most severe cases, leaving a significant gap in care for the rest of the community.'⁴⁸

The situation in Macomia, which illustrates the fragility of the health system in Cabo Delgado, has been repeated across the three other districts where MSF is present – Mocímboa da Praia, Mueda, and Palma. Since the conflict began, more than half of the province's health facilities have been completely or partially destroyed, according to official data. The situation worsened when Cyclone Chido struck the south of Cabo Delgado in December 2024. The violence has led to further deterioration in healthcare provision. In 2025, MSF was forced to suspend outreach activities five times due to insecurity, for at least two weeks at a time, particularly in Macomia and Mocímboa da Praia.⁴⁹ Under a customary IHL rule applicable in all armed conflicts, facilities dedicated to medical purposes must be respected and protected in all circumstances.⁵⁰

Attacks against humanitarian aid

ISM has regularly targeted aid supplies. On 25 May 2025, a non-State armed group, believed to be ISM, looted a humanitarian truck in Rio Muera (in Mocímboa da Praia), leading to a temporary halt of movements along the N380. By 29 May, one international NGO had suspended food distributions in Macomia, relocating two international staff members to Pemba due to increased threats to its staff. But on occasion local communities, frustrated at what they perceive as poor aid distribution, have also assailed humanitarian relief. On 23 May 2025, humanitarian supplies were looted in Chiúre, highlighting the rising tensions.⁵¹

Attacks against mines

ISM has launched multiple attacks on mines across the province. In early April 2025, for instance, ISM targeted artisanal gold mining in Ancuabe, reportedly occupying the site for several days. This was part of a funding drive by the group, which may be partly related to Islamic State's setbacks in Somalia (see the entry on Somalia), as Al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based Islamic State affiliate, previously distributed funds throughout Africa, including to ISM.⁵²

Attacks against tourism sites

In April 2025, as part of the group's fundraising – and propaganda – ISM launched a series of attacks in Niassa province, located to the west of Cabo Delgado. On 19 April, a group of 40 ISM fighters stormed the luxury Chapungu-Kambako Safari hunting camp in the Niassa Special Reserve. The militants beheaded two workers and took several hostages – both war crimes – and occupied the site for five days. The rebels demanded a ransom of three million meticaís (€40,000) for the release of four workers. After this demand was rejected, the militants set fire to the main camp. The attacks secured ISM considerable attention in international media.⁵³

Attacks against commercial shipping

The first attack on a foreign commercial ship, apparently mounted by ISM, occurred in May 2025. The group targeted a Russian oceanographic vessel off Tambuzi Island, near Mocímboa da Praia, marking 'the first major terrorist operation at sea in Mozambique'.⁵⁴ The piratical attack involved the *Atlantida K-1704* being approached by two speedboats when it was four nautical miles east of the island. The ship and its crew escaped by heading into deeper waters, out of reach of the attackers' boats. While ISM has previously targeted fishermen around the islands of Mocímboa da Praia and Macomia (Quirimbas Archipelago), this was the first known attack on a foreign-flagged vessel. Sources in the Mozambican Navy, however, argued that the likelihood of similar attacks was low, given the limited capacity of ISM to conduct maritime operations.⁵⁵

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁵⁶ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁵⁷ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful military objectives. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the

least to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life and injury to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).⁵⁸

Aside from certain instances and specific localities where ISM has generally respected the members of local communities, its forces have consistently targeted civilians. After a sustained decrease in ISM violence for the first eleven months of 2023, when most of its attacks targeted military forces, in December 2023 and throughout 2024, the conflict dynamics changed drastically. This was seen not only in the regularity and intensity of attacks, but also in the group's modus operandi, which increasingly involved attacks directed against civilians and civilian infrastructure.⁵⁹ The departure of SAMIM in July 2024 saw a new wave of deadly attacks by ISM in Chiure, Macomia, and Nangade districts, which led thousands of civilians to flee in search of safety.⁶⁰

The situation continued to deteriorate in 2025. May saw the sharpest monthly rise in violence in the province since June 2022, affecting more than 134,000 people. Of the 61 'security incidents' recorded in May 2025 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), at least 38 involved attacks on civilians. Between January and June, ISM is believed to have abducted up to 300 people. Violence centred on Ancuabe, Macomia, Mocímboa da Praia, Montepuez, Muidumbe, and Palma, but also spread into Mecula district in Niassa province, displacing about 2,000 people in the process.⁶¹

Attacks directed against civilians

Violence against civilians thus became widespread during the reporting period. Among the five most severe protection risks identified by the Global Protection Cluster for Mozambique in 2024 were attacks on civilians and unlawful killings and abduction of civilians, and the use, recruitment, and association of children in armed forces and groups. Also increasing significantly was conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.⁶² Compared to 2023, recorded civilian casualties in 2024 were up by 89 per cent (rising from 144 to 272); the number of people abducted increased by 224 per cent (from 101 to 328), while those struck by explosive devices increased by 305 per cent (albeit from a low base – rising from 17 to 69).⁶³

This pattern continued in 2025. In June, OCHA reported that in attacks in the central and northern districts of Macomia, Meluco, and Muidumbe ISM killed twenty-six civilians and abducted a further forty-seven.⁶⁴ ISM fighters raided several villages and clashed with security forces. On 6–8 June, for instance, ISM targeted Magaia village in Muidumbe district, abducting six civilians. Local Forces fighters later forced ISM to retreat, killing a number of the group's fighters while losing one of their own.⁶⁵

Attacks against fishermen

The Mozambican armed forces have also fired on fishing vessels on multiple occasions during the reporting period. On 5 July 2025, a FADM marine patrol opened fire on three fishing boats off Pangane, killing at least three men and injuring at least four others. The reason for the attack is not known but it may be related to the hostilities with ISM around Quiterajo. Video clips showed two of the wounded being rushed to Mucojo by vehicle, where they were treated at a Rwandan health facility before being transferred to Macomia town. Sources identified the boat as belonging to the FADM. A spokesperson for the armed forces, Colonel Benjamin Chabualo, told local media they were aware of the incident but did 'not yet have any official information on this concerning matter'.⁶⁶

On 16 July, the FADM navy fired on fishers off the coast of Macomia at least twice, killing at least six people. This brought the total of civilian killings by FADM at sea to 110 since 2020, according to ACLED. The killings occurred as fighting between FADM and ISM continued around nearby Quiterajo.⁶⁷

Use of improvised explosive devices

In the course of 2024, ISM began increasingly to rely on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as a means of warfare.⁶⁸ While ISM has largely sought to target military personnel with these munitions, predictably civilians have also been harmed. This continued to occur in 2025, with an IED injuring a civilian in Quiterajo on 19 May and another injuring several civilians, including children, in Nangade on 23 May.⁶⁹ In Nambija village in Macomia district, a civilian was killed by an IED in June 2025 – again the device seems to have been placed by ISM.⁷⁰

Mozambique is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its forces from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as a munition that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person.⁷¹ Mozambique is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory as soon as possible.⁷²

This disarmament treaty does not bind ISM directly under international law and Mozambique is not a party to the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons whose Amended Protocol II of 1996 binds all parties to an armed conflict.⁷³ Nevertheless, ISM's attacks are all governed by the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians. While not an inherently indiscriminate weapon, the effects of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature as ISM use in Cabo Delgado, are all too often indiscriminate. Customary IHL requires that 'when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects'.⁷⁴

The use of air-dropped munitions

In August 2024, as noted above, the RSF turned to combat helicopters to bomb ISM forces, an approach that significantly increases the risk of incidental civilian casualties. On 8 August, Mucojo was said by ACLED to be 'in ashes' due to the intensity of the RSF's aerial attacks. This raises concern about compliance with the IHL rules of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack. On 16 August, Mucojo was again bombed, with local sources reporting that many civilians had sought refuge in Macomia town.⁷⁵

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

The armed conflict in the province continues to have very strong elements of sexual and gender-based violence. As Save the Children has reported, the conflict has exacerbated existing levels of rape and other sexual violence and exploitation, with girls as young as twelve years of age abducted, often resulting in sexual violence, early pregnancy, and forced marriage.⁷⁶ Each instance that occurs with sufficient nexus to the conflict is a war crime.

Forced marriages of girls are said to be common in Cabo Delgado.⁷⁷ 'Telma' (not her real name for reasons of protection), a seventeen-year-old girl in Chiúre district, told the organization:

There are girls who have been caught and forced to marry these armed men. Here in the area, there is a girl who escaped after three years and came back last week. Some girls are still in prison today. They are forced to obey everything they are told to do, and they even have children. Even little girls are taken and grow up there, until they become women. Some girls are killed, and the younger ones are left to grow up for a while and then they are forced to have sex.⁷⁸

Other women raped and abused by ISM in the past are now speaking about their suffering.⁷⁹ Maria was twenty-seven years of age when ISM fighters abducted her and other women from her village and took them to a military camp where they were forced to become 'wives'. She was subjected to sexual violence and brutal beatings for months until her ISM 'husband' grew tired of her and sold her to another fighter for 50 meticaís (less than \$1). 'I was later sold a second time to another man', she said.⁸⁰

The problem of sexual and gender-based violence is even worsening. The United Nations reported that the number of people in need of urgent response services increased from more than 475,000 in 2023 to 558,000 in 2024.⁸¹ Particularly, older women, adolescent girls, and women and girls living with disabilities face heightened risks and challenges in this unstable environment.⁸² The first few months of 2025 saw a twenty-two per cent rise in reported cases in Cabo Delgado. Part – but by no means all – of the increase is ascribed to improved reporting and a growing awareness of the problem.⁸³ Women and girls face stigmatization and rejection from their communities upon return, as testimonies gathered by UNHCR have demonstrated.⁸⁴

Moreover, the survivors lack access to quality specialized life-saving services for gender-based violence, such as clinical management of rape, psychosocial support, legal aid, and confidential referral mechanisms. Data show that three quarters of women and girls have no access to specialized, comprehensive services in Macomia, Mocímboa da Praia, and Quissanga, while, according to a 2024 UN assessment, sixty per cent of women and girls felt that the risk of sexual violence had increased in their communities.⁸⁵

Accountability for earlier violations remains a serious challenge. Thus, in July 2025, traditional leaders of Palma and fifteen surrounding villages, supported by sixty-six human rights and environmental organizations, formally requested the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to establish an independent investigation into severe human rights violations allegedly committed in 2021 by Mozambican security forces, including members of the Joint Task Force who were protecting TotalEnergies' Mozambique LNG project Cabo Delgado. The letter states:

We do not consider that any of the ongoing initiatives are adequate and sufficient to ensure a fully independent and transparent investigation. We strongly believe that an investigation conducted by OHCHR is required to guarantee a fair, impartial, secure and victim-centred process.⁸⁶

Hostage-taking and pillage

Ransom demands for those abducted have been widespread, hindering safe movement for civilians, including aid workers. Hostage-taking is a war crime under IHL. In June 2025, there was also regular acts of extortion – a form of pillage. This concerned especially Macomia, southern Meluco, and Mocímboa da Praia. Along roads such as the N380 and the R766 between Napala and Mucojo, vehicles were stopped at makeshift roadblocks and passengers were forced to pay to pass. In Ravia (in Meluco), they raided an artisanal mine, demanding 5,000 meticaís (about €70) from each miner.⁸⁷

Similar extortion by ISM occurred at sea, with fishing boats intercepted and released only after ransom. In Pangane, a beach village along the northern coast opposite Mozambique's largest island national park, the Quirimbas Archipelago, stores were looted and the engines removed from boats whose owners or crew did not make the required payments.⁸⁸ In Maculo village, in Mocímboa da Praia, residents were held hostage for two days in May 2025 and forced to pay 'fees' for owning boats, canoes, or tents. Fishermen were also under threat from the FADM in their communities. The same month saw reports of arbitrary arrests by the FADM in Ibo, Mocímboa da Praia, and in Quissanga of fishermen the army suspected of having links to ISM.⁸⁹

Child recruitment

ISM continued to recruit and use children as fighters during the reporting period while also attacking schools.⁹⁰ In March 2025, as part of its activities, ISM preached to children during 'visits' to village schools in Mocímboa da Praia.⁹¹

About 120 children were abducted in Cabo Delgado in May and June 2025 as part of the 'surge' in child recruitment that was reported by Human Rights Watch. Once taken, they are forced into combat, labour, or early marriage. When ISM fighters 'enter or attack certain areas, they tend to abduct children', said Augusta Laquite, coordinator at the Association of Women in Legal Careers in Cabo Delgado. 'They take them to train them and later turn them into their own fighters.' While ISM released some of the children it had abducted earlier in the year, many remained missing, while those who had returned to their communities struggled to reintegrate successfully.⁹²

Figure 14.1: UN Map of Mozambique © United Nations



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15. MYANMAR



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

The armed conflicts taking place in Myanmar for decades intensified dramatically following the military coup of February 2021. The violent crackdown on nationwide protests ultimately led to intensified violence with both long-established and newly formed non-State armed groups, often with an ethnic dimension. Fighting has taken place across the country, including in the Bamar heartland straddling Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway where many 'People's Defence Forces' (PDFs) emerged – citizen militia formed to combat the military dictatorship which came to power after the 2021 coup. While some PDFs are under the control of the government-in-exile – the National Unity Government – many operate in concert with other armed groups.

In October 2023, a coalition of armed groups (notably three ethnic armed organisations: the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army) launched 'Operation 10/27'. The military campaign saw them make substantial territorial gains against the Myanmar Armed Forces (the Tatmadaw), especially in Rakhine and Shan states, but also in Kachin, Karen, and Kayenni states and in Sagaing region. The Tatmadaw, whose capacity to re-take territory through ground offensives has diminished, often conducted airstrikes on opposition-controlled territory, in attacks that were frequently indiscriminate.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

While the situation for the State armed forces appeared dire at the end of 2024, recruitment drives have since increased the Tatmadaw's strength, while use of drones appears to have secured a tactical advantage in some confrontations. China, after appearing to tacitly accept Operation 10/27, is said to have strongly pressured armed groups to reach peace agreements with the military, and even sometimes to return territory previously taken.¹ Nevertheless, at the time of writing, almost all of Rakhine state remained under the control of the Arakan Army, and many other areas of Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Shan states were firmly under the control of armed groups.

The case brought by The Gambia before the International Court of Justice in 2019, alleging that Myanmar has committed genocide against the Rohingya community, is proceeding to judgment. Eleven States are now intervening, with the Court finding in July 2025 that declarations of intervention by Belgium, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ireland, and Slovenia were admissible.² The Court was holding hearings on the merits of the case in January 2026.³

General elections were held on 28 December 2025, although they had been widely decried as a sham, intended only to try to give political cover to the junta.⁴

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

During the reporting period, Myanmar was engaged in six non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) on its territory:

- Myanmar *v* Arakan Army
- Myanmar *v* Chin National Defence Force (CNDF)⁵

- Myanmar v Kachin Independence Army (KIA)
- Myanmar v Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)
- Myanmar v Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)
- Myanmar v Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)

These armed conflicts are all governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international humanitarian law (IHL). Myanmar is not a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.⁶

Certain PDFs are subsumed within armed groups, notably in Karen state where some operate under the KNLA umbrella and others under the aegis of the KIA. Where a PDF is part of a KNLA unit, the commander is from the KNLA and the deputy from the PDF, with joint coalition committees operating at the brigade level.⁷ In Kachin state, the Kachin People's Defence Force (KPDF) operates under the command of the KIA (as is the case with other PDFs in Kachin).⁸ PDFs active in areas in which the KIA operates are subsumed within its command structure.⁹

Myanmar is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁰ But as described below, investigations into the situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court started in November 2019. Bangladesh ratified the Statute in 2010.

The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) has been collecting evidence of international crimes in Myanmar since its establishment by the UN Human Rights Council in 2018.¹¹ The IIMM has been sharing evidence with the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, though looming budget cuts were placing in jeopardy its future work as of December 2025.¹²

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Civilians were killed and injured and civilian objects destroyed in two main circumstances in hostilities in Myanmar during the reporting period: aerial bombardments and the burning of villages in the course of ground offensives. Areas with a concentration of civilians – whether in residential neighbourhoods or internally displaced person (IDP) camps – have frequently been struck. Sometimes civilians have been targeted while other attacks have been indiscriminate in nature, and others still have been directed against a military objective but in circumstances that amount to a disproportionate attack. The vast majority of the IHL violations are attributable to the Tatmadaw, although credible reports exist also of killings of civilians by non-State armed groups, in particular the Arakan Army. The intensity of the attacks and the scale of resultant civilian harm have appreciably increased compared to previous years.¹³

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁴ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.¹⁵ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives¹⁶ and, as such, are protected against attack.

The strikes described below were conducted by the Tatmadaw against areas under the control of opposition armed groups. On 8 January 2025, with the Arakan Army making territorial advances in Rakhine state, combat aircraft of the Tatmadaw bombed Kyauk Ni Maw village in Ramree township. The attack killed at least twenty-six civilians, and, according to analysis of satellite imagery by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), also destroyed 362 dwellings and other structures. The Myanmar military acknowledged mounting the attack, but justified it on the basis that its pilots had ‘observed fire flashes from the target area’s building, confirming the presence of military activity’.¹⁷ In contrast, the Arakan Army claimed that the attack struck areas away from their positions, with an emergency responder asserting that ‘they targeted crowded civilian areas’.¹⁸ Even assuming the presence of Arakan Army fighters within the village, the massive and widespread destruction of civilian buildings and areas, and killing of more than two dozen civilians, indicates that the attack was at least disproportionate.

On 8 May 2025, fifteen IDPs who had taken shelter in Kanna Yeiktha monastery from ongoing combat in the town of Bhamo in Kachin state were killed and another thirty were injured. The combat aircraft involved in the attack dropped up to eight bombs on the monastery before strafing the site. In this instance, KIA forces were reportedly present and fighting from the monastery. The KIA claimed to have been making every effort to evacuate the monastery of civilians once their forces came under attack.¹⁹ The circumstances of this attack indicate that it may have been disproportionate, with an attendant failure to take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects.

Attacks against schools

Schools were also struck from the air during the reporting period. On the morning of 12 May 2025, in one of the worst losses of life during the reporting period, a combat aircraft dropped bombs on a school in Oe Htein Kwin village, Depayin township, in Sagaing region. Twenty students and two teachers were reportedly killed and fifty students injured. The aircraft allegedly circled over the school before dropping its payload.²⁰

A Tatmadaw-affiliated news source, the Global New Light of Myanmar, asserted that reports of the incident were ‘fake news’, but without denying the air force had conducted the bombing or offering a justification for the attack.²¹ Claims circulated in military-allied social media that the school was a bomb-making facility are not supported by evidence, and open-source imagery confirms that the damage to the school was caused by unguided air-delivered munitions of types used by the Myanmar Air Force.²² A National Unity Government spokesperson denied the presence of resistance fighters at the school, while witnesses rejected the notion of recent fighting in the area.²³ This was, at the very least, an indiscriminate attack, and possibly even an attack directed against civilians.

Schools have, however, been used by both fighters in non-State armed groups and the Tatmadaw, which potentially transforms at least the salient part of the premises into a military objective.²⁴ Although such use is not per se an IHL violation, the use of schools by armed forces and groups and attacks against them have a devastating and long-term effect on access to education. An aerial attack on 26 January 2025 on a school in Singut in Mandalay region killed twelve fighters and six civilians, indicating substantial use by a non-State armed group.²⁵ Myanmar Witness earlier reported that, as of 10 July 2024, 174 attacks had been mounted against educational institutions since early 2021.²⁶

Attacks against medical facilities

Health clinics and hospitals have been subjected to repeated airstrikes. The single largest loss of life came in an attack on a clinic in Hnan Khar village in Gangaw Township (Magway region) on the morning of 22 March 2025. Eleven civilians were killed, including a doctor and nurse (who were husband and wife), their five-year-old son, and several patients. The clinic was in the middle of a village of nearly 1,000 households and the purpose of attacking it is unknown.²⁷

In Kachin, airstrikes hit a medical clinic providing healthcare to IDPs on 22, 24, and 26 April 2025, apparently as part of a Tatmadaw offensive against the KIA.²⁸ A hospital in Kyaukme in northern Shan state, which had been under the control of the TNLA since August 2024, was bombed on 25 January 2025, killing two nurses and a patient and injuring twenty other healthcare workers and patients.²⁹ A hospital in Laukkai, a city seized by the MNDA in January 2024, was reportedly bombed in early August, killing ten civilians.³⁰ Medical units and personnel are specially protected under IHL, and such attacks appear to constitute serious violations.³¹

Attacks against cultural property

Reports indicate that cultural property has been severely damaged by Tatmadaw airstrikes. According to data gathered by Radio Free Asia as at 8 September 2023, nearly 200 religious buildings – including Buddhist monasteries, Christian churches, and mosques – have been destroyed since the military coup in 2021. Chin state has been the most affected, with eighty-five ethnic Chin Christian churches destroyed. Sagaing has also been significantly impacted, with forty Buddhist monasteries, six churches, and three mosques damaged.³² According to data from the National Unity Government, between 1 January and 12 May 2025, 435 religious buildings were destroyed by Tatmadaw airstrikes.³³

Assessing the scale of the destruction of religious buildings in the conduct of hostilities is complicated by the earthquake that occurred on 28 March 2025, which destroyed or damaged many structures. Nevertheless, there is specific evidence of continuing destruction of religious and cultural sites in the course of attacks. This includes a 12 April 2025 airstrike on a monastery in Tabayin township in Sagaing that killed five.³⁴ The following day, an airstrike destroyed several buildings, including the Myoma Baptist Church in Mindat township in Chin state.³⁵ On 8 May 2025, the Tatmadaw conducted an airstrike on Kanna Yeiktha monastery, killing fifteen civilians.³⁶

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.³⁷ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between soldiers/fighters and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.³⁸ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.³⁹ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets without the law being violated. Such attacks must, however, respect the rule of proportionality in attack⁴⁰ and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or, in any event, to minimize incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).⁴¹

Attacks directed against civilians

Airstrikes have often been indiscriminate in nature or have targeted civilians deliberately.

On 5 September 2024, at around 9.15 pm, an IDP camp housing more than 600 civilians near La Ei village of Pekon township in Shan state was attacked with two 500 lb bombs dropped by combat aircraft of the Myanmar Air Force. Nine civilians were reportedly killed and a further thirty were wounded. The numbers would have been higher, but many people sleep in underground bunkers as a precaution. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, the village was strafed with gunfire.⁴²

OHCHR reported finding ‘no discernible military objective, reported fighting or the presence of anti-military armed groups in the vicinity to justify the attacks.’⁴³ Even if there were any such fighters, dropping bombs of that yield on a densely packed area of shacks housing IDPs amounts to an indiscriminate or at least disproportionate attack, and arguably of an intention to target civilians. Subsequent aerial strikes were carried out on the same IDP camp on 18 November 2024 and 14 May 2025, by which time most of its residents had fled.⁴⁴

On 14 March 2025, at around 6 pm, at least twenty-seven civilians were killed and thirty injured by two 500 lb bombs dropped on a crowded market in Let Pan Hla village in Singu Township, in Mandalay region. This was the deadliest attack on the area since its seizure by the Mandalay People’s Defence Forces (MDY-PDF) in July 2024. Although some MDY-PDF fighters were identified as having been present at checkpoints in the general vicinity of Let Pan Hla, the location on which the bombs were dropped was easily identifiable as civilian in character.⁴⁵

The Myanmar military did not respond to OHCHR’s requests for an explanation or otherwise comment on the attack, but witnesses reported that the attacking jet circled the area before dropping its payload. Many witnesses also believed that the pattern of attacks on civilian areas through air power was part of a ‘long-established pattern of the military’s use of air power against civilian targets as a means of engendering fear and breaking the morale of those resisting the military’s superior firepower.’⁴⁶ Even assuming that a military objective was being targeted by the attack, dropping two 500 lb bombs on a location manifestly crowded with civilians is strongly indicative of an indiscriminate or at least a disproportionate attack.

As mentioned above, aerial bombardments by the Myanmar military continued in the weeks immediately following the earthquake of 28 March 2025, in particular in the severely affected areas of Sagaing and Mandalay. Thirty-seven civilians were reportedly killed by air attacks on 9 April 2025 alone, including twenty-five killed and twenty-four injured in Nan Khan village, Wuntho township, in Sagaing region. Photographic and satellite imagery confirm reports that the deaths resulted from two bombing raids, one at 3 pm and a second at 6 pm. Reports suggest that a PDF checkpoint was located at or near the site of the attack, but the extent of damage to structures suggests that large bombs were used, explaining the many civilian casualties,⁴⁷ and raising significant concerns about compliance with the rule of proportionality in attack.

Twelve civilians were also killed in two separate aerial bombardments in Chin state that day: in Saizang village, Tedim township, and in Hpwi village, Mindat township. In the former case, six members of the same family were killed, while in the latter, the victims included a pastor and a disabled person. Both attacks reportedly involved 500 lb bombs, which is consistent with photographs of the damage.⁴⁸ On 17 and 19 April 2025, Leik Kya and Yae Htwet, two villages in Thabeikkyin township, Mandalay, were struck with large bombs, reportedly killing a total of fifty civilians.⁴⁹

Use of anti-personnel mines

Myanmar is not a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits any use of anti-personnel mines by any State actor. Myanmar is also not a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its protocols restricting the use of landmines, including for non-State actors pursuant to Amended Protocol II.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, as with any other weapon, the use of mines is subject to the general rules of IHL governing the conduct of hostilities, including the principles of distinction and proportionality in attack. The risk of an indiscriminate attack is especially acute if mines are used in areas frequented by civilians.

The Tatmadaw continue to use anti-personnel mines on a regular basis. There are specific reports that as it lost territory, in particular in Rakhine state, it emplaced mines in and around villages and military camps from which it was retreating, as well as in forests and on mountain paths.⁵¹ While such reports are difficult to verify given the situation in the country, placing mines in and around villages without targeting a military objective is an indiscriminate attack.

The effects of past and ongoing mine use continue to be felt throughout Myanmar. During the first three months of 2025, a total of 227 mine casualties were reported nationwide, roughly the same level as reported in 2024.⁵² In 2023, Myanmar emerged as the nation with the world's highest mine casualties,⁵³ a situation that seemed set to continue at the time of writing.

Use of gravity ordnance

As described above, many airstrikes causing substantial civilian casualties involve the use of unguided bombs – gravity ordnance – dropped from combat aircraft. When dropped into densely populated areas, the effects on civilians are likely to be disproportionate, even if the bomb does hit a military objective. The Myanmar Air Force possesses a variety of aircraft capable of delivering heavy unguided bombs.⁵⁴ Bombs of up to 500 lb have been dropped, which, as seen in the incidents recounted above, can kill many people and badly damage civilian structures within a wide radius.

Use of armed drones

Armed drones are not unlawful per se. But the Arakan Army in particular has been accused of using them to target Rohingya civilians as they fled its territorial advances in Rakhine state. On 5 and 6 August 2024, thousands of displaced Rohingya had congregated near Maungdaw town on the bank of the river Naf with the intention of fleeing to Bangladesh. They came under attack from drones emanating from areas under Arakan Army control. One interviewee who was on a boat that was attacked by a drone said that thirty-eight civilians, including four children, were killed.⁵⁵ Sources suggest that as many as 200 civilians in total may have been killed by drone strikes and shelling as they fled Maungdaw town.⁵⁶

Forced displacement

As of March 2025, an estimated five million people in total have been displaced as a result of the armed conflicts in Myanmar, of whom 3.5 million are IDPs.⁵⁷ Most are in Kayin and Rakhine states and Magway and Sagaing regions.⁵⁸ Approximately 1.5 million people have been displaced to and sought refuge in neighbouring States, primarily Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.⁵⁹ Only 15 per cent of the displaced are in formal camps, with most living in informal shelters with limited access to food, water, and healthcare.⁶⁰

Under IHL, parties to a NIAC are prohibited from ordering displacement of the civilian population in relation to the armed conflict, except to ensure the safety of civilians or for imperative military reasons.⁶¹ Forced displacement may also be caused by unlawful attacks on civilians. In Chauk township, starting on 25 October 2024, the Myanmar military targeted one town after another with artillery fire and airstrikes, followed by looting, the torching of homes, unlawful killings, arbitrary detention of civilians, and the use of civilians as human shields.⁶²

The Arakan Army, which has control of much of Rakhine state, is suspected of mistreating Rohingya civilians. The United Nations estimates that nearly 350,000 Rohingya have been displaced from the state as well as from the bordering Paletwa township in Chin state since the intensification of fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military in November 2023.⁶³

Investigations into the situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court started in November 2019.⁶⁴ For the Court to have jurisdiction, crimes must, at a minimum, have occurred within the territory of Bangladesh, a State Party to the Rome Statute, and in connection with the violent events in Rakhine state in Myanmar in 2016 and 2017, or be a crime perpetrated since 9 October 2016 and closely linked to those events.

On 27 November 2024, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court announced the issuance of an arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Defence Services, for crimes against humanity related to the deportation and persecution of the Rohingya. The Prosecutor said that further applications of this nature would follow. The Prosecutor alleges that the Tatmadaw committed these crimes between 25 August and 31 December 2017, with support from the police and non-Rohingya civilians.⁶⁵

Humanitarian aid

The humanitarian needs of the civilian population in Myanmar were significantly worsened by Typhoon Yagi which hit the country on 8 September 2024, and then a 7.7 magnitude earthquake on 28 March 2025, which caused substantial damage in Mandalay and Sagaing. The typhoon killed 440 people, displaced more than 631,000, and damaged or destroyed 141,000 buildings. The earthquake killed 3,800 people, injured more than 51,000, and displaced 207,000. Already 15.2 million people were facing acute food insecurity before the earthquake, reflecting the precarity of the humanitarian situation in much of Myanmar.⁶⁶

Despite requesting international humanitarian aid in the wake of these disasters, the Tatmadaw has systematically impeded the flow of humanitarian supplies to areas outside its control. Humanitarian workers were instructed by the military not to assist in areas perceived as aligned with anti-government forces, both after the typhoon⁶⁷ and the earthquake,⁶⁸ in an attempt to cut off supplies to opposition forces or to punish the population for its perceived support of those opposition forces.

Furthermore, despite the declaration of ceasefires in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake by the Tatmadaw and various armed groups, none ceased military operations in practice. The Myanmar Air Force, in particular, launched numerous airstrikes in April, about two thirds of which were in areas affected by the earthquake. A number of the attacks were manifestly indiscriminate and killed civilians, as well as impeding humanitarian assistance in areas where the attacks took place.⁶⁹

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Treaty and customary IHL offers fundamental guarantees of protection to anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting murder, torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, all forms of sexual violence, and enforced disappearances. As noted above, a series of attacks involving the murder of civilians occurred during the reporting period.

Murder and torture of civilians

There have been many grave instances of the murder of civilians during the reporting period, perpetrated by both the Tatmadaw and non-State armed groups. On 2 March 2025, the Tatmadaw raided Myay Sun Taw village in Magway, executing by a gunshot to the head eleven civilians, nine of whom were older persons. The bodies were discovered by villagers upon their return to the area.⁷⁰ On 10 March 2025, the military attacked Kya Pin village, captured seven villagers, and tortured and then killed four of them. Their bodies were found in a toilet pit covered in garbage, with their hands tied behind their backs and slash wounds on their necks and other parts of their bodies. Villagers also discovered electro-shock devices set up by the military, possibly to torture the victims before they were killed.⁷¹

Similar events have occurred elsewhere in Myanmar. By March 2025, the Arakan Army had seized control of 14 of the 17 townships of Rakhine state, with only Kyaukphyu, Manaung, and Sittwe remaining under the effective control of the Myanmar military. Reports have emerged of Rohingya civilians being executed *en masse* by the Arakan Army, and of mutilation, including beheadings.⁷² Severe abuses of Rohingya during detention have also been documented, including acts of torture.⁷³

Civil servants and local politicians who are protected civilians under IHL have also been the object of targeted assassinations by armed groups during the reporting period, continuing a trend since early 2021. At least 136 assassinations occurred during the reporting period, sometimes for the victims' alleged involvement in abducting locals to be used as porters and for aiding or participating in the conscription of civilians by the military.

Acts of terrorism against the civilian population

While individual massacres of civilians are all war crimes of murder, a series of events indicate that the Tatmadaw is also responsible for acts of terrorism perpetrated against the civilian population. For instance, after suffering substantial losses due to enemy ambushes in September 2024 in Budalin township in Sagaing, the Myanmar military responded with a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. On 11–12 October, they raided a part of Budalin town and Myauk Kyi villages, murdering thirteen civilians.⁷⁴ In the early hours of 17 October, they seized control of Si Par village, four miles north of Budalin town. When villagers returned the next day after Tatmadaw forces had withdrawn, they discovered three dead bodies at the entrance to the village, with gunshot wounds and dismembered limbs, and, in the centre of the village, three beheaded, burned and dismembered bodies, with their heads placed on a fence.⁷⁵ After leaving Si Par village, the military reportedly raided the nearby village of Se Wa, killing two more men, with the body of one found with severed limbs.⁷⁶

The Myanmar military acknowledged that it had been present in Si Par village at the time, but asserted that the civilians had been killed by returning insurgent groups as 'punishment for being alleged informers to security forces'.⁷⁷ However, media and NGO reports of the incident, based on testimony by multiple eyewitnesses, reject this account. Body parts were found 'all over the village' when the residents returned; one witness

noted that heads and limbs had been severed and that ‘they also opened their stomachs. The heart was put on a plate.’ One of the victims is reported to have been in his eighties.⁷⁸

This event is just one recent example in a long-running pattern of cruel treatment and mutilation by the Myanmar military in Sagaing, going back to events in Tar Taing in March 2023. Notably, the annual reports of the Independent Investigation Mechanism for Myanmar from 2023 and 2024 both reported ‘credible information’ of the ‘mutilation’ of victims killed in detention by ‘soldiers in civilian or military attire and/or military-affiliated militias’.⁷⁹

As of October 2024, more than 105,000 incidents of the burning of homes have been reported since February 2021, which may also amount to terrorizing the civilian population. Sagaing region was disproportionately impacted by arson attacks, accounting for nearly 64,000 of all reported incidents. According to reported data for Myanmar, almost 23,500 structures were burnt in the first ten months of 2024, with Rakhine state seeing the largest number of incidents (9,571), followed by Sagaing (4,792) and Mandalay (3,622).⁸⁰ Arson is often accompanied by other violations, including murder, pillage, and forced conscription.⁸¹ The use of arson in conjunction with other IHL violations continues a trend from previous reporting periods.⁸²

The offensives in the ‘Dry Zone’ of Magwe, Mandalay, and Sagaing have been systematically accompanied by mass arson of homes. Although reports vary concerning the extent to which Si Par was destroyed, OHCHR estimated that ‘up to 1,000 houses’ were burned in a single day of this particular offensive in Budalin township.⁸³

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and constitute serious violations of IHL and war crimes.⁸⁴ The scale of sexual violence related to armed conflict in Myanmar is difficult to assess due to the ongoing conflict and social stigma associated with coming forward as a survivor of such a crime. Nonetheless, during the reporting period, the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar has reported finding evidence of ‘rape (including with objects and gang rape), sexual slavery, sexualized torture, sexual mutilation, sexual assault at military checkpoints and forced nudity’.⁸⁵ The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict also noted in 2025 the ‘persistent and alarming reports about the continued use by Myanmar security forces of sexual violence during ground operations, village raids, at checkpoints, and in detention settings.’⁸⁶

Among the most alarming public reports is the rape of more than fifty women at a single detention centre in Sagaing run by the Myanmar military and an allied militia.⁸⁷ In another case, a thirty-year-old woman residing at a monastery in Bago Region was gang-raped and severely beaten by three Tatmadaw soldiers. The attack was reported by other residents and an official of PDF Battalion 3801 in Tharyawady district.⁸⁸ A video has circulated on social media of Pyu Saw Htee fighters, who are aligned with the military, goading each other to rape civilian girls during an attack on a village.⁸⁹

There are also credible reports of sexual violence being committed against many of the thousands of prisoners who have been detained for long periods based on charges of opposition to the Myanmar military. These include individuals detained in specific relation to the armed conflict.⁹⁰

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty

OHCHR reported in January 2025 that, since the military coup in February 2021, more than 28,000 individuals had been arrested. The victims were activists, journalists, humanitarian workers, lawyers, and religious leaders.⁹¹ The number of charges brought under counterterrorism legislation has significantly increased, particularly against individuals accused of associating with anti-military groups, even where such involvement consisted of providing humanitarian aid. For example, aid workers have been arrested for supporting the armed opposition in Mon state.⁹² The military administration has also arbitrarily detained the relatives and associates of activists, including their children, as a means of coercion and collective punishment.⁹³

Forced recruitment

The Myanmar military and various armed groups have been accused of engaging in forced recruitment. While it is not, in general, unlawful for State armed forces to engage in conscription, the manner of such conscription may violate other rules, including the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Many individuals are said to have been abducted from the street to serve in the military, or identified for military service based on their particular ethnic affiliation or other discriminatory grounds.⁹⁴ Some armed groups are said to have required each household in areas under their control to provide someone to serve in the armed group.⁹⁵

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Unless and for such time as they participate in hostilities, children are entitled to protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees of access to food, medical care, and education.⁹⁶ For 2024, the United Nations identified and verified 2,138 grave violations against children (1,248 boys, 499 girls, 15 sex unknown). The killing (262) and maiming (999) of 1,261 children (767 boys, 480 girls, 14 sex unknown) was attributed mostly to the Tatmadaw, including related forces and affiliated militias (840).⁹⁷

IHL prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of fifteen years or their use in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups.⁹⁸ Serious violations of the prohibition amount to war crimes. Yet the recruitment and use of children in combat, particularly by non-State armed groups, continues to occur. In the course of 2024, the United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 482 children (467 boys, 15 girls), most by the Tatmadaw, including related forces and affiliated militias (400).⁹⁹

Figure 15.1: UN Map of Myanmar © United Nations



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16. NIGER



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Niger has long suffered internal ethnic problems, especially from Tuareg rebellions. The ongoing conflict in Nigeria against Boko Haram that began in 2009 spilled over into southern Niger. Added to this, multiple *coups d'état* have been mounted by the military since independence. Since 2015, the border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has been the focus of jihadist groups originating in Mali. In the south-west of the country in the tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Mali, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (now known as the Islamic State in the Sahel Province) has conducted persistent attacks while Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has established control in the south-east. The most recent coup, in 2023, has further destabilized the country.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The period under review was marked by widespread insecurity, with civilians repeatedly caught in ongoing violence between non-State armed groups and the Nigerien Armed Forces. The non-State armed groups that are party to the two non-international armed conflicts in Niger – Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) – increased coordinated attacks, resulting in widespread harm to civilians. In a single attack on 21 June 2025, ISSP fighters attacked civilians in a mosque in Manda village, killing more than seventy and injuring at least twenty others.¹ Violence by other non-State armed groups implanted in Nigeria, notably Boko Haram and ISWAP, also killed and injured civilians in Niger.² Overall, the increased level of civilian harm mainly reflected the ISSP's consolidation of control over rural areas in the west of Niger, especially in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions.³

The Humanitarian Situation

As a result, the humanitarian situation similarly continues to be troubling. Estimates suggest that by the end of June 2025, almost 460,000 people were internally displaced in Niger.⁴ Additionally, the country hosted more than 430,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Nigeria and Mali.⁵ Humanitarian organizations were compelled by the Nigerien authorities to cease working on the basis of a false allegation that they were supporting non-State armed groups.⁶ Overall, the situation, coupled with extreme climate events, rapid population growth, and chronic poverty, has precipitated acute food insecurity among Nigerien civilians.⁷

Parallel to the worsening armed conflict environment, the contraction of civic freedoms persisted throughout the reporting period. Press freedom was eroded through successive suspensions of media channels in 2024 and 2025, including the BBC in November 2024 and Canal 3 TV in January 2025.⁸ Freedom of expression was significantly curtailed through arbitrary arrests, revocation of nationality, and intimidation of political opponents to the military government, media workers, and peaceful dissidents. This included the continued detention of the former president, Mohamed Bazoum, and his wife since the *coup* in July 2023, and the arrest of Moussa Tchangari, the secretary-general of the civil society organization Citizens' Alternative Spaces in December 2024. On 10 October 2024, President Abdourahamane Tchiani revoked the citizenship of nine of Mr Bazoum's allies, claiming they had conspired with hostile foreign powers.⁹

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

Two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in Niger continued throughout the review period:

- Niger *v* Islamic State Sahel Province (the ISSP)
- Niger *v* Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

Both conflicts are regulated by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary international humanitarian law (IHL). Niger is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.¹⁰ The two NIACs in Niger continue to meet the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II – specifically, the need for a level of territorial control that would enable the respective armed groups to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol – and this treaty is directly applicable to those conflicts.

Niger is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, having ratified it in 2002.¹¹ Niger's announced withdrawal from the Court on 22 September 2025 (along with Burkina Faso and Mali)¹² was without legal effect at the time of writing, as it had not made a formal notification to the depositary of the Statute – the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). If and when it does so, the withdrawal will take effect one year after the notification. All events covered in this report therefore potentially fall within the material jurisdiction of the Court, although Niger is not a situation under preliminary examination by the Office of the Prosecutor.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review continued to see serious violations of the protection afforded by IHL to civilians and civilian infrastructure across the territory of Niger. Civilians continued to be subject to regular attacks. In June 2025 alone, attacks by non-State armed groups killed at least one hundred civilians.¹³ Particular concerns were recurring cases of deliberate attacks against civilians; the manner in which improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are being used; and instances of unlawful forced displacement.

Allegations persisted of arbitrary detention, inhuman treatment, and enforced disappearance, in particular by governmental forces, as a means to silence individuals expressing their concerns about the situation in the country. Widespread violations of IHL by the military through the destruction of homes, medical facilities, and schools were compounded by regular looting by non-State armed groups, involving especially the ISSP.

There was little progress to report on efforts by the government to investigate conflict-related atrocities, which have eroded public trust in the rule of law and risk perpetuating a cycle where abuses go unchecked. Niger's announced withdrawal from the International Criminal Court on 22 September 2025 further exacerbates concerns about growing impunity gaps.¹⁴ Finally, the overall humanitarian situation has deteriorated due to the suspension of many humanitarian aid programmes amid funding cuts.¹⁵

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁶ Civilian objects are all objects that are not

military objectives¹⁷ and, as such, are protected against attack.¹⁸ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.¹⁹

Attacks directed against civilian objects

As part of its offensive to establish control over rural areas in the west of Niger, ISSP fighters frequently destroyed civilian infrastructure, firing upon and burning down homes and shops.²⁰ This occurred, for example, when the ISSP attacked the mosque in the Fambita quarter of the border town of Kokorou on 21 March 2025, which was accompanied by the burning of people's homes.²¹ Similar patterns of serious violations of IHL were seen in relation to ISSP attacks on other villages throughout the reporting period, especially in Tillabéri. Witness and victim testimony reports the ISSP attacking homes as a warning against collaborating with governmental forces.²²

Attacks against food convoys and humanitarian aid

ISSP fighters frequently attacked convoys transporting goods to supply the Nigerien population along the border with Burkina Faso. The Nigerien Armed Forces escort these convoys for security reasons.²³ On 1 December 2024, trucks were set on fire by a non-State armed group, allegedly the ISSP, and the fighters exchanged gunfire with the soldiers escorting the convoy.²⁴ On 7 December, goods being transported from the market in Tera were attacked by the ISSP in the course of which twenty-one civilians were killed.²⁵ The Transport Workers' Union has raised concerns about drivers being routinely under attack on these transport routes. As one employee described, however, 'we have no choice since we need to provision our country.'²⁶

Under IHL, parties to armed conflicts are obliged to facilitate the delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance.²⁷ Moreover, although military personnel escorting a convoy may pose risks to civilians and humanitarian aid in terms of incidental harm during lawful attacks, they do not render a civilian convoy a military objective *per se*. This means that ISSP attacks against governmental forces must be proportionate²⁸ and that all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid, or at least minimize, civilian harm during such operations.²⁹ The Nigerien Armed Forces are also required to take all feasible measures to protect civilians in fending off attacks.³⁰

Attacks against medical facilities

Under IHL, medical units and transports must not be attacked and must be protected.³¹ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.³² The reporting period saw regular attacks on medical facilities in Niger, particularly in Tillabéri.³³ Most of the incidents were attributed to ISSP fighters burning down or firing upon hospitals or other medical facilities.³⁴ In October 2024, however, one incident was attributed to the Nigerien Armed Forces – a drone strike on a health facility in Tillabéri.³⁵

As is the case in neighbouring Burkina Faso, Niger is experiencing a rising negative sentiment towards the aid sector. The dissemination of false information through social media has played a role in this sentiment, leading to notable consequences.³⁶ An increasing number of humanitarian and health organizations have had to cease their activities based on government decisions.³⁷ This is worsening the already dramatic health crisis for the civilian population in Niger.³⁸

Attacks against religious property

Under customary law rules of IHL, cultural and religious property, including places of worship, holy sites, and objects of spiritual significance, is afforded special protection against attack.³⁹ On 21 March 2025, the ISSP attacked a mosque in the village of Kokorou in south-western Niger.⁴⁰ Individuals had gathered for prayer during the holy month of Ramadan when the attack on the mosque in the Fambita quarter of the town occurred.⁴¹ Testimonies describe how fighters surrounded the mosque before attacking, killing forty-four civilians.⁴²

There is no evidence to suggest the mosque was being used to contribute to Niger's military activities or that its armed forces were using the site for military operations against the ISSP (or indeed that they were about to do so). In the absence of such evidence, the attack is a serious violation of IHL – breaching both the fundamental principle of distinction and the rule affording special protection to religious property.

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁴³ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁴⁴ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁴⁵ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must be proportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).

Attacks directed against civilians

Civilians were deliberately targeted by the parties to the armed conflicts during the reporting period. Direct attacks against civilians, as well as acts of violence aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population, are strictly prohibited under IHL, and can constitute war crimes.⁴⁶ Where such acts form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack, they may also constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law.⁴⁷

Although the non-State armed groups involved in attacks on civilians in Niger have not always claimed responsibility, multiple testimonies show that most were perpetrated by the ISSP.⁴⁸ Civilians in Tillabéri, a region bordering Burkina Faso, have been particularly affected. Between 12 and 14 December 2024, the ISSP conducted two coordinated attacks in Kokorou and Libiri, killing thirty-nine civilians, including several children.⁴⁹ There were no reports of government armed forces being involved, suggesting the ISSP attacks were deliberately targeting civilians.

Similar incidents continued to be reported in 2025. On 13 May, ISSP fighters attacked the village of Dani Fari and killed five men and two boys, also burning down at least a dozen homes. One local herder said,

The bodies were scattered ... riddled with bullets. There wasn't a single body out there that had fewer than three bullet holes. The bullets had hit people in the back, arms, head.... We found the bodies of the two children lying on their backs.⁵⁰

As described above, on 20 June, ISSP fighters attacked civilians in a mosque in Manda village, killing more than seventy and injuring at least twenty.⁵¹ As the UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, declared, the ISSP attacked the religious site in order to cause ‘as many civilian casualties as possible’.⁵² The attack followed the one on 21 March in Téra department in which fighters believed to belong to the ISSP killed forty-four civilians while they were praying in the local mosque.⁵³

Available evidence of the involvement of the Nigerien Armed Forces in the death or injury of civilians is scarce. One of the few incidents was in November, when the army are said to have killed a civilian in Tillabéri region they suspected of being an ISSP collaborator.⁵⁴

Potentially disproportionate attacks

In addition to the deliberate attacks on civilians in Niger, civilians were frequently killed or injured during clashes between State forces and non-State armed groups. On 10 December 2024, ISSP fighters surrounded a local market in Téra in which the Nigerien Armed Forces were present.⁵⁵ The ISSP fighters opened fire, reportedly killing ninety soldiers but also more than forty civilians.⁵⁶ The government denied the attack had occurred and suspended BBC radio for three months for its reporting of the incidents.⁵⁷

An incident involving the conduct of the State’s armed forces concerned airstrikes that targeted columns of non-State armed groups who had just attacked a military position in Tyawa near the Burkina Faso border, but which also killed several civilians.⁵⁸ A resident in Tillabéri describes the population’s frustration:

We told [the military] that an attack was in the making, that we needed protection.... But they came when the hamlet had already been looted, houses burned, and people killed.⁵⁹

Attacks against medical personnel

Under IHL, medical personnel must not be attacked and must be protected.⁶⁰ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.⁶¹ An attack on medical personnel was reported during the ISSP attack on a health centre in Téra – two unarmed health workers were killed.⁶² The incident should be viewed in the wider context of insecurity impacting medical units, personnel, and other humanitarian workers in Niger, with increasingly negative feelings being stirred up towards the aid sector by false information shared on social media.⁶³

Use of anti-personnel mines

Throughout the reporting period, landmines continued to pose a threat to civilians in Niger.⁶⁴ Continued use of anti-personnel mines of an improvised nature by non-State armed groups raise serious concern as to the compliance with IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities. As evidence shows, when deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, these explosive devices may have indiscriminate effects.⁶⁵ If they are not directed at specific military objectives, this renders their use a violation of the principle of distinction. Where feasible precautions are not taken to limit their impact on civilians, this may also violate the principle of precautions in attack.

Niger is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its armed forces from using any anti-personnel mine, defined as a munition (including IEDs) that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind non-State armed groups directly under international law. Nevertheless,

these groups are subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians.

Moreover, Niger is also party to Amended Protocol II of 1996 to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (Amended Protocol II), which binds all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁶⁶ Although the Amended Protocol II does not ban all use of anti-personnel mines, it specifically prohibits their indiscriminate use and requires that a party to an armed conflict take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from their effects.⁶⁷ Similarly, customary law mandates that 'when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects.'⁶⁸ While not an inherently indiscriminate weapon, anti-personnel mines, such as improvised devices used by non-State armed groups in Niger, all too often cause significant civilian harm.

In all cases, Niger is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory 'as soon as possible'.⁶⁹ Yet, the government has shown limited progress in this field.⁷⁰ Mine Action Review, an annual assessment of clearance published by Norwegian People's Aid, has expressed concern about the lack of monitoring of mined areas and the occurrence of incidents involving landmines or other explosive devices.⁷¹ No progress has been reported since 2020, raising serious doubts about Niger's compliance with the 1997 Convention.⁷²

Forced displacement

Under customary IHL, in both IAC and NIAC, parties are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless it is required for their security or for imperative military reasons.⁷³ Breaches of these prohibitions may be war crimes.⁷⁴ Any displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁷⁵ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁷⁶

The two NIACs in Niger appear to have precipitated or maintained the displacement of many civilians. As of June 2025, almost 460,000 persons were displaced within the country,⁷⁷ which also hosted more than 430,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Nigeria and Mali.⁷⁸ Ongoing armed violence continues to be one of the major causes of displacement.⁷⁹

The destruction and looting of civilian property and widespread acts of violence have generated deep-seated fears among the population. Many have been forced to leave their homes and livelihoods in search of safety. Witnesses reported that members of non-State armed groups, whether the ISSP or JNIM, arrive in villages, kill the men, destroy homes, and seize belongings.⁸⁰ Women and their children, left with nothing, often have no choice but to seek protection elsewhere. In Tillabéri region, testimonies describe the decision to flee: 'If they reached us, they could rape and kill us.'⁸¹

It is reasonable to conclude that displacement of civilians often occurred under duress or threats, and amid a generalized fear of violence. The cumulative effect of these actions, including the destruction of property and the violence against civilians, constitutes unlawful forced displacement within the meaning of IHL.⁸² Accordingly, available evidence supports a finding that the ISSP and JNIM have committed serious violations of IHL in forcing civilian displacement.

Additional concerns arise from the Nigerien government's woefully inadequate response to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) caused by the

widespread violence.⁸³ Funding shortfalls, regular flooding, government requests to humanitarian organisations to leave,⁸⁴ and economic instability have further left many displaced households without safe shelter, food, or medical care.⁸⁵ Some of these actions may violate IHL rules; all indicate violations of the duties under international human rights law to secure the right to food and to implement the rules prohibiting arbitrary deprivation of life and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.⁸⁶

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Customary and treaty IHL provide fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, collective punishments, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials. Special protection is afforded to civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁸⁷

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence committed in connection with armed conflict are war crimes.⁸⁸ The conflicts in Niger have been marked by incidents of gender-based violence, with women and girls disproportionately exposed to harm. Extreme financial hardship has also led a growing number of young girls to marry men who belong to non-State armed groups.⁸⁹ Some have described their fear of being subjected to violence if they do not marry. One widow described how, after being asked why her daughter was not married, an ‘assailant took off her clothes and raped her.’⁹⁰ As another woman recounted:

It happens that they ask girls for marriage, especially in the camps around the grazing areas. The marriage will happen if the girl says yes. They also pay the bride price. But people are scared, they don’t dare say no.⁹¹

Pillage

IHL prohibits pillage and unlawful destruction of property during all armed conflicts. Pillage consists of the systematic and violent appropriation by members of armed forces or armed groups of movable public or private property that belongs either to protected persons or to the adverse party to an armed conflict and constitutes a war crime.⁹² Destruction of property not justified by military necessity is forbidden.⁹³

Evidence indicates that the ISSP has failed to comply with these obligations. Reports show a consistent pattern of ISSP fighters burning civilian homes and looting civilian shops, personal belongings, and resources, such as livestock.⁹⁴ As a resident in the Tillabéri Region described:

My hut, made of goat skin, and my shed had been burned.... My animals were gone, goats, sheep, donkeys. They took everything. There was nothing left in the hamlet. They looted homes, taking everything that was useful, including millet and rice.⁹⁵

In none of the above incidents did evidence indicate the measures taken were justified by imperative military necessity. The systematic nature of these violations created conditions that forced many civilians into flight to seek safety and shelter elsewhere.⁹⁶

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, non-arbitrary, and carried out with appropriate legal safeguards.⁹⁷ Persons deprived of liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.⁹⁸ Detaining authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care; are held in humane conditions; and are protected from violence or reprisals.⁹⁹

During the reporting period, persistent patterns of arbitrary detention, deprivation of liberty, and inhuman or degrading treatment of civilians by governmental forces were observed in Niger. The most prominent cases involve the former President Bazoum, several former ministers, and their close advisers, who remained detained as of January 2025 pending trial before military courts. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention condemned the detention of former President Bazoum on 10 February 2025 and called for his immediate release, and NGOs similarly characterized the detentions as politically motivated and arbitrary.¹⁰⁰

This is, however, just one incident amid a growing trend of arbitrary arrests and detention of political opponents to the government, media workers, and peaceful dissidents by government since the *coup* in July 2023. Another deeply concerning case involves the arrest in December 2024 of Moussa Tchangari, Secretary-General of the civil society organization Citizens' Alternative Spaces. Upon returning from Nigeria, Mr Tchangari was forcibly taken from his home at night and transported to an undisclosed location. He was later charged with serious offences, including 'criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist enterprise,' 'undermining national defence', and 'plotting against the authority of the state through intelligence with enemy powers'.¹⁰¹ Prior to his arrest, he had publicly criticized the government's decision to ban humanitarian organizations from Nigerien territory.¹⁰²

Abductions and hostage-taking

In addition to government-perpetrated abuses, abductions and kidnappings by non-State armed groups remain widespread, particularly in conflict-affected areas. During the reporting period, there has been a discernible increase in targeted actions against foreign nationals, including an incident involving an Austrian woman on 11 January 2025 and a Swiss-Nigerien woman in April 2025, both of whom were abducted from their residences. These acts have been attributed to the ISSP.

Similar incidents also regularly occurred in the context of attacks by the ISSP against the Nigerien Armed Forces. For instance, on 18 January 2025, four Moroccan truck drivers delivering electrical equipment in the region were abducted before being freed three days later by ISSP fighters. On 1 February, two Chinese workers for a Petroleum Company in Diffa region were kidnapped while being escorted by soldiers by suspected ISSP fighters.¹⁰³ On 25 April, the ISSP are reported to have abducted six Indian workers working on power lines near Kandadji dam.¹⁰⁴ While some of those abducted were released, others were killed (or their whereabouts are unknown).¹⁰⁵

The shifting by the ISSP to targeting foreigners seems to aim at gaining higher ransom fees than is feasible for abductions of local civilians.¹⁰⁶ Where the abductions seek to compel the Nigerien Armed Forces to do or to abstain from doing any act, these amount to the violation of the prohibition of hostage-taking.¹⁰⁷ Even where the intent cannot be demonstrated, these acts would amount to arbitrary deprivation of liberty and potentially also inhuman and degrading treatment.¹⁰⁸

In many cases, the fate and whereabouts of detainees were concealed, amounting to violations of IHL provisions aimed at preventing enforced disappearance,¹⁰⁹ including the obligation to register persons deprived of their liberty in NIAC.¹¹⁰ These acts may violate the IHL obligation to respect family life¹¹¹ and to take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and to provide their family members with information held on their fate.¹¹² Finally, where abduction is followed by death, it is likely also to constitute murder and torture or other ill-treatment.¹¹³

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of fifteen years in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and forbid their participation in combat.¹¹⁴ Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.¹¹⁵

During the reporting period, children continued to be disproportionately affected by the ongoing hostilities in Niger. Incidents of recruitment and use of children; the killing and maiming of children; rape and other forms of sexual violence against children; and the abduction of children have been documented. In its report covering 2024, the United Nations reported on children being killed or maimed due to shootings, with most of the acts attributed to the ISSP.¹¹⁶

Allegations of recruitment and use in hostilities of children by armed groups continued to emerge,¹¹⁷ although the identity of the perpetrators could not be verified. Moreover, schools have continued to be attacked by the ISSP in particular.¹¹⁸ As part of the recurring threat of violence against schools, teachers and students, many schools remain closed, leaving many children without education.¹¹⁹

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17. NIGERIA



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Over the past decade, Nigeria has been involved in armed conflicts with non-State armed groups on its territory – notably Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which in turn have fought each other. Since 2015, the African Union (AU) Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) – comprising soldiers from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger (until its withdrawal in 2025), and Nigeria as well as non-combat troops from Benin – has been supporting Nigerian State forces in combating Boko Haram and ISWAP. Local militia – the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – have also been supporting the authorities against Boko Haram.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Nigeria remains affected by widespread and escalating insecurity, with two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) continuing between the State and organized armed groups during the reporting period: one with Boko Haram and the other with ISWAP. These two non-State armed groups also continued to fight each other in a separate NIAC. The north-eastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe remain the epicentre of the fighting, with both armed groups regularly targeting civilians in attacks and murdering or abducting many others.

The Nigerian Armed Forces have conducted indiscriminate airstrikes, some causing a significant number of civilian casualties. The military's ability to respond effectively to the insecurity generated by armed groups has been hampered by weakening regional cooperation, most notably by Niger's withdrawal from the MNJTF in March 2025. This created a security vacuum along the shared border with the other Lake Chad Basin nations, including Nigeria – one swiftly exploited by armed groups and criminal networks, further destabilizing the region.¹

On Christmas Day 2025, the United States entered the conflict in Nigeria, ostensibly against ISWAP, launching airstrikes on the basis that Islamic State was committing a 'genocide' against Christians in the country. The president said in a post on his Truth Social platform: 'Tonight, at my direction as Commander in Chief, the United States launched a powerful and deadly strike against ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria, who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians, at levels not seen for many years, and even Centuries!'² While the Nigerian government rejected the premise of a genocide, it declared that not only had it consented to the airstrikes but it had also provided intelligence to the United States on possible targets.³

But the precise identity of the targeted group was disputed. Jabo, a village in the north-western state of Sokoto, is not an ISWAP stronghold but rather under the control of the Lakurawa group whose ties with Islamic State are said to be 'unproven'.⁴ ISWAP has its strongholds in the north-east of the country.⁵ It was subsequently claimed, however, that the targets were foreign Islamic State fighters entering Nigeria from the Sahel.⁶

The US airstrike involved 'about a dozen Tomahawk missiles launched from a US Navy warship in the Gulf of Guinea'. Nigeria's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Tuggar, claimed that no specific religion had been targeted. After the strike, US Secretary of State for Defense Pete Hegseth posted on social media platform X that there was 'more to come'. A US defence official, however, speaking under condition of anonymity, told the media that another strike did not appear to be imminent.⁷

The Humanitarian Situation

Competition over scarce natural resources has fuelled additional layers of violence outside the armed conflicts. The Niger Delta continues to be a focal point of violence, where militias contend for dominance over oil reserves. Although not regulated by international humanitarian law (IHL), rising tensions between different pastoralist communities across central and southern regions regularly harm local populations. Economic hardship and widespread discontent have exacerbated the crisis. A surge in inflation since late 2023 sparked nationwide protests over the government's mismanagement of the economy and the nation's food resources. The protests have been met with State repression through mass detentions and use of live ammunition.⁸

The humanitarian crisis has been further aggravated by recurrent flooding. Catastrophic floods in September 2024 and May 2025 destroyed entire villages, killed thousands, and provoked widespread food insecurity, prompting many to move to other, safer areas.⁹ In 2024, Nigeria experienced one of the highest levels of displacement in West Africa, with an estimated 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the country by year's end. More than half were in Borno state.¹⁰

The level of severe malnutrition was particularly acute in the north.¹¹ Thus, by early 2025, more than 2.5 million children were at risk of acute malnutrition in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states,¹² while over the course of the first half of the year, more than 600 died from malnutrition in Katsina state in the north-west – a rise of 208 per cent compared to the same period in 2024.¹³ As the President of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Belgium declared: 'Children are dying, the crisis is out of control, and the outlook is worsening given the cuts to international aid budgets.'¹⁴

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

Three existing NIACs continued during the reporting period:

- Nigeria (supported by the MNJTF) *v* Boko Haram
- Nigeria (supported by the MNJTF and, since 26 December 2025, the United States) *v* ISWAP
- Boko Haram *v* ISWAP.

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary IHL apply to all three NIACs. Nigeria is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,¹⁵ which applies to the NIACs between Nigeria and, respectively, Boko Haram and ISWAP. These conflicts meet the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of the Protocol – specifically the need for a level of territorial control that enables them to mount sustained military operations and implement the Protocol. The NIAC between Boko Haram and ISWAP is not regulated by the Protocol as it requires one of the parties to be the territorial State.¹⁶

Nigeria is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, having ratified it in 2001.¹⁷ Nigeria is a situation that has been under preliminary examination by the Court for more than fifteen years, with the opening of the examination of the made public by the Court on 18 November 2010. This examination has focused on alleged crimes committed by Boko Haram since July 2009 and by the Nigerian Security Forces since the beginning of the NIAC with Boko Haram since June 2011, but has also examined alleged crimes 'falling outside the context of this conflict'.¹⁸

On 11 December 2020, the then Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, announced that her preliminary examination had found a reasonable basis to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity had been committed. In March 2024, on a visit to Nigeria, Deputy Prosecutor Mame Mandiaye Niang stressed that the Office was giving 'a chance to the principle of complementarity in Nigeria', but that it remained committed 'to move forward with investigations in the absence of genuine efforts by Nigerian authorities to bridge existing impunity gaps'.¹⁹

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review saw continued attacks against civilian infrastructure across Nigeria. The conduct of hostilities in populated areas regularly involved significant destruction of churches and supplies of humanitarian aid as well as pillage of private property. Civilians were regularly attacked, with particular concerns about Nigerian Air Force airstrikes in populated areas and attacks by the two non-State armed groups, including through increased recourse to suicide bombings. Frequent use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) caused civilian casualties on the roads, while there were multiple cases of unlawful, forced displacement.

Allegations persisted of arbitrary detention, inhuman treatment, and enforced disappearance by governmental forces and non-State armed groups alike. Armed groups frequently kidnapped women and children for ransom – hostage-taking is a specific war crime. Boko Haram and ISWAP continued to recruit children for sexual purposes or for use in combat; recruitment of children under fifteen years of age are likewise war crimes.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.²⁰ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives²¹ and, as such, are protected against attack.²² Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²³

Attacks directed against civilian objects

Both Boko Haram and ISWAP fighters frequently attacked and destroyed civilian objects, burning or firing upon shops and homes.²⁴ On 13 January 2025, for instance, fighters said to belong to Boko Haram attacked two communities in Borno state, shooting indiscriminately and setting fire to homes.²⁵ A resident described a gun battle between the fighters and Nigerian soldiers that lasted from eleven o'clock at night until four o'clock in the morning, saying: 'I don't know the number of casualties now, but many houses and properties were destroyed.'²⁶ ISWAP claimed responsibility for an attack against Banga village in April 2025 in which its fighters burned down at least thirty homes.²⁷

Attacks against cultural property

Under customary IHL, cultural and religious property, including places of worship, holy sites, and objects of spiritual importance, is afforded special protection against attack.²⁸ The reporting period saw repeated attacks against churches by Boko Haram fighters as

part of their larger offensives on, predominantly, Christian communities in Borno state. In January 2025, Boko Haram fighters destroyed the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa church as part of an attack on a village, threatening residents and demanding they convert to Islam.²⁹ A local farmer described how the population were living in fear: 'They burned down our church and homes. Many of us have lost everything.'³⁰

Attacks against humanitarian aid

IHL requires that parties to armed conflicts respect impartial humanitarian assistance.³¹ There were, however, frequent attacks by armed groups on convoys transporting goods, in particular those with humanitarian aid desperately needed by the civilian population. Aid workers using the Gajiram to Monguno route – a vital humanitarian and civilian access corridor in Borno – have documented repeated incidents of abductions by individuals from armed groups.³²

The offices of humanitarian aid organizations have also been attacked. On 26 February 2025, for instance, members of an unidentified armed group entered Solidarités International's office in Monguno and set it ablaze, kidnapping two security guards and destroying six vehicles belonging to a local car rental company. The seriousness of the attack led humanitarian agencies to suspend their activities for two days.³³

Attacks against medical facilities

Under IHL, medical units and transports must be protected and not attacked.³⁴ Serious violations of these obligations are war crimes.³⁵ The reporting period, however, saw regular attacks on medical activities in Nigeria, particularly in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states.³⁶ Most incidents involved ISWAP or Boko Haram fighters.

In Nigeria, non-State armed groups frequently attack the aid sector because they perceive humanitarian workers as collaborating with the government. This has led an increasing number of humanitarian and health organizations to cease operations due both to the insecurity and a funding crisis, risking the deterioration of the already severe health situation.³⁷ As of early 2025, seventy per cent of medical facilities had either closed or were operating at reduced capacity; half of all nutrition centres were also impacted.³⁸

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.³⁹ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁴⁰ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁴¹ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must be proportionate,⁴² and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or, in any event to minimize, incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).⁴³

Airstrikes in populated areas

In the course of the reporting period, both the Nigerian Air Force and the MNJTF regularly conducted airstrikes targeting non-State armed groups on Nigerian territory. These operations often involved the killing of civilians, raising significant concerns about compliance with IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities. On 31 October 2024, for instance, Chadian military forces in the MJNTF conducted an airstrike on the island of Tilma, on the Nigeri-

an side of Lake Chad, targeting fishermen mistakenly identified as Boko Haram fighters. A military officer sought to justify the error by claiming that Boko Haram 'often blend in with fishermen and farmers whenever they commit their crimes', emphasizing the difficulties they had in distinguishing combatants from civilians.⁴⁴ However, eyewitness accounts indicate that a fighter jet had 'circled' the island before dropping multiple bombs on an area where civilians were clearly trying to escape.⁴⁵

Further strikes followed that also killed significant numbers of civilians. On 25 December 2024, at least ten were killed in an airstrike by the Nigerian Air Force that was said to be targeting non-State armed group fighters.⁴⁶ In January 2025, another strike in Zamfara state killed at least sixteen and injured several others, again due to a mistake of target identification.⁴⁷ The following month, six civilians were reported killed by a Nigerian airstrike near Zakka village with the munitions launched after members of the non-State armed group had already left the area.⁴⁸

The recurring nature of these 'mistakes' strongly suggests that at the least, the Nigerian Armed Forces and the MNJTF have failed to take all feasible measures to verify that targets are lawful military objectives, as required by IHL. The accumulation of errors demonstrates a pattern of non-compliance.

Attacks directed against civilians

Nigeria has experienced a sharp escalation in attacks by non-State armed groups, many of which targeted the civilian population. Throughout the reporting period, both Boko Haram and ISWAP targeted farmers, villagers, and religious minorities, killing and injuring many hundreds of civilians. In early September 2024, around 150 fighters, said to be from Boko Haram, attacked the village of Mafa, killing more than eighty residents they had accused of supporting the Nigerian Armed Forces.⁴⁹ On 26 April 2025, while working on their land in Gwoza region, at least fourteen farmers were killed and an unknown number of others injured in a Boko Haram attack.⁵⁰

The reporting period also witnessed a resurgence of suicide bombings, most attributable to Boko Haram. In late June 2024, Boko Haram conducted suicide bombings across three locations in Borno state over the course of two days.⁵¹ The first attack was in Gwoza, where a woman carrying a baby detonated an explosive device during a wedding reception. The subsequent attacks occurred near a hospital and then at the funeral of the victims of the first attack. Together, the bombings killed more than thirty civilians and injured another forty-two, including many children and women. A few weeks later, another explosion occurred in a tearoom in the same region, killing nineteen and injuring more than twenty others.⁵²

Use of improvised explosive devices

Throughout the reporting period, improvised landmines and remotely controlled or command-detonated IEDs continued to pose a grave and persistent threat to civilians across Nigeria. When deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, these explosive devices tend to have indiscriminate effects.⁵³ If they are not directed at specific military objectives, this renders their use a violation of the principle of distinction. Where feasible precautions are not taken to avoid, and in any event to minimize, civilian harm, this will also violate the IHL rule of precautions in attack.

Improvised anti-vehicle mines are regularly placed on strategic routes that also serve as a lifeline for economic activities in the south of Borno state, resulting in the death

and injury of many civilians. For instance, in April 2025, a mine killed at least eight individuals travelling in a bus in Borno state.⁵⁴ A month earlier, a mine killed four passengers in a commercial bus in the same region.⁵⁵

On 21 June 2025, a woman detonated an IED among a crowd at a fish market in Konduga town, killing at least twelve.⁵⁶ Sources suggest the explosion occurred when the market was busiest and at a location known for gathering civilians in support of the Nigerian Armed Forces.⁵⁷ But given the lack of evidence that at the time of the attack these civilians were directly participating in hostilities, they remained civilians protected from attack under IHL.

Forced displacement

Nigeria is one of the countries most affected by conflict-related displacements on the African continent, with an estimated 3.7 million IDPs.⁵⁸ Under customary IHL applicable in all armed conflicts, parties are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless required for the security of the civilians or for imperative military reasons.⁵⁹ Breaches of these prohibitions are typically serious violations of IHL.⁶⁰ Furthermore, such displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁶¹ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁶²

The continued displacement of civilians is particularly pronounced in areas affected by the armed conflicts where significant civilian harm has occurred. Many have decided to leave due to the overall insecurity and the specific fear of violence at the hands of State or non-State forces.⁶³ Monitoring indicated that the displacement entailed the relocation of entire villages due to persistent pressures, especially the enforcement of 'taxes' and the targeting of civilians by ISWAP and Boko Haram.⁶⁴

The prospect of return remains minimal while the insecurity persists. As an IDP told a journalist: 'If our hometown were peaceful, we would return immediately. Farming is all we know. But they won't let us live – they seize our crops, invade our homes, and kill at will.'⁶⁵ Residents have described an environment of fear and coercion, with one noting: 'If the community continued to refuse their errands, they would return to slaughter everyone, and burn the village down.'⁶⁶ Many have also felt compelled to flee because they are unable to produce the food to sustain themselves and their families. As a farmer describes the situation created by recurring alleged Boko Haram attacks on his community: 'Even if you are starving and food is scarce, you can't go to the farm. When we try, they chase us away or even kill us.'⁶⁷

Reports indicate that IDPs faced similar threats and extremely poor living conditions when in government-run camps. They are overcrowded, with heightened risks of disease and sexual or gender-based violence, and insufficient access to food and health-care.⁶⁸ Many children are unable to pursue their education, as there is no arrangement for children to be taught in the camps.⁶⁹ Those who try to return to their homes face obstruction and intimidation. The situation is sometimes described as a never-ending cycle of displacement.⁷⁰

In light of these realities, it is reasonable to conclude that the displacement of civilians in Nigeria often occurred under duress, threats, and a generalized fear of violence. The cumulative effect of these actions, including armed groups' threat to life and their

destruction of property constitutes unlawful forced displacement under IHL. The Nigerian authorities in turn have not complied with their obligation to ensure that IDPs have basic shelter, hygiene, health, safety, and nutrition.⁷¹

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Under customary IHL, special protection is afforded to ‘protected persons’, including several categories of civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁷² IHL provides certain fundamental guarantees for anyone who is in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, all forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials.

Murder of civilians

On 12 January 2025, armed group fighters killed more than forty civilians during an attack against an agricultural community in Borno state.⁷³ The attackers reportedly gathered the farmers and fishermen, separated the men, and shot them at close range.⁷⁴ Those who tried to escape were chased and killed, while dozens of others were injured. During the reporting period, evidence has also emerged about the mass execution of individuals captured by armed groups. Video footage reportedly shows how ISWAP executes groups of individuals who confess loyalty to the government.⁷⁵

Pillage

IHL prohibits pillage and the unlawful destruction of property during all armed conflicts. Pillage is the forcible appropriation by members of armed forces of private property and constitutes a war crime.⁷⁶ Destruction of property not justified by military necessity is likewise unlawful.⁷⁷

Evidence indicates that Boko Haram and ISWAP have regularly violated these obligations. Reports show a pattern of fighters burning down homes and looting civilian shops, personal belongings, and livestock.⁷⁸ Testimonies recount how fighters ‘killed many people and burned many shops and houses’.⁷⁹ In none of the recorded incidents did available evidence suggest the measures were in any way justified by imperative military necessity. Moreover, the systematic nature of the violations forced large groups of civilians to flee their homes in search of safety.⁸⁰

That non-State armed groups commit these acts does not, however, discharge the Nigerian government from its duty to ensure the protection of civilian property.⁸¹ There are credible allegations that the government was aware of some of the violations perpetrated by these armed groups, yet failed to exercise due diligence to prevent or suppress them.⁸²

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, and death in detention

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, non-arbitrary, and carried out with appropriate legal safeguards.⁸³ Persons deprived of liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.⁸⁴ Authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care, are held in humane conditions, and are protected from violence or reprisals. The death of a detainee in custody, particularly under suspicious conditions, may involve a war crime and needs to be effectively investigated.⁸⁵ Enforced disappearance – secret detention and the failure to disclose the fate or whereabouts of a detainee – violates IHL’s prohibition of the practice as well as the requirement to register detainees and the right of families to know the fate of their relatives.⁸⁶

Allegations of torture, extortion, and forced confessions by Nigerian security forces persisted during the reporting period, along with breaches of the right of anyone charged with a crime to a fair trial. Many detainees were arrested on the basis of alleged affiliation with a non-State armed group, but often without hard evidence to support this. They then wait years for access to courts, in breach of the peremptory rule of habeas corpus. Also arrested and detained, often for extended periods, are women and children supposedly linked in some way to either Boko Haram or ISWAP.⁸⁷

Journalists, activists, and government critics have increasingly faced abductions, unlawful arrests, and detentions, further shrinking civic space.⁸⁸ In one notable case, Isaac Bristol, a social commentator, was reported missing in August 2024 and was only confirmed to be in police custody three weeks later.⁸⁹ He had been arrested in his hotel room for alleged serious offences concerning obtaining or release of information pertaining to military operations.⁹⁰

This pattern of repression has coincided with legislative efforts that erode fundamental freedoms. In July 2024, a federal legislator introduced the Counter Subversion Bill, purportedly to strengthen Nigeria's counterterrorism framework. However, the proposed law was criticized for its broad and troubling provisions, such as imprisonment or fines for failing to recite the national anthem or for perceived 'insults' towards the country's leadership.⁹¹ Following widespread public condemnation, the Counter Subversion Bill was withdrawn. Nevertheless, it attests to the level of ongoing threats to freedom of expression and civic space in Nigeria.

Moreover, reports also underscore the ongoing risks of false accusation, coerced confessions, collective punishment, and prolonged detention without due process, including of women and children.⁹² Recent estimates indicate that of the 77,800 inmates across 240 prisons in the country, only 26,898 have been convicted of a crime.⁹³ The reporting period has also evidenced cases of death in custody in suspicious circumstances.⁹⁴

Moreover, conditions of detention, including for those accused of affiliation with armed groups, continue to raise significant IHL concerns. There is severe overcrowding and prisons have outdated infrastructure.⁹⁵ Multiple testimonies depict how women fleeing captivity by armed groups are detained by Nigerian Armed Forces on suspicion of association with armed groups and are often subjected to severe mistreatment.⁹⁶ The lack of access to adequate food, water, sanitation, and medical care violates the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment under IHL.

In addition to abuses perpetrated by the authorities, abductions and kidnappings by armed groups remain widespread in conflict-affected areas. Hundreds of abductions are reported monthly,⁹⁷ including of children.⁹⁸ Armed groups often perform mass abductions, such as in August 2024, when twenty medical students were kidnapped in East Nigeria.⁹⁹ An inquiry report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women describes how girls are often kidnapped for ransom, forced into marriage, or used for trafficking or prisoner exchange.¹⁰⁰ Deprived of adequate nutrition, they are physically punished for any act of disobedience, including sometimes by being repeatedly raped. Many were compelled to marry fighters and to renounce their religion, with some giving birth while in captivity.¹⁰¹

Medical staff are also regularly subject to kidnappings for ransom.¹⁰² Numerous accounts depict the evolution of kidnappings into a profitable enterprise used by armed groups. Relatives unable to pay the ransom risk their family members being murdered. Testimonies describe how they threatened 'to burn them alive or shoot them if they

didn't pay the ransom on time.¹⁰³ Some individuals even witnessed their relatives being murdered due to their inability to pay.¹⁰⁴ The situation of relatives is further complicated because Nigeria introduced a law in 2022 criminalizing ransom payments, with a maximum prison sentence of fifteen years for a breach.¹⁰⁵ Still, many choose to pay to free their relatives, and no evidence of a conviction following such payments has been found.¹⁰⁶

Overall, where people are kidnapped with a view to compelling the Nigerian Armed Forces to do or to abstain from doing any act (or demand a ransom from the families), this is the war crime of hostage-taking.¹⁰⁷ In many cases, the fate and whereabouts of detainees were concealed, amounting to the war crime of enforced disappearance. Where an abduction leads to death, this may amount to murder.¹⁰⁸

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit recruitment or use of children under the age of fifteen years in hostilities, whether in State or non-State armed forces, and forbid their participation in combat.¹⁰⁹ Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees such as access to food, medical care, and education. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.¹¹⁰

During the reporting period, incidents of recruitment and use of children, their killing or maiming,¹¹¹ rape and other forms of sexual violence, and abduction were all documented. According to the United Nations, Nigeria is among the five nations in which children are most affected by violence worldwide, with more than 2,500 violations verified in 2024.¹¹² Almost one thousand children were abducted for recruitment and used in combat, mainly by Boko Haram, but also by ISWAP. The training of child recruits is even depicted in an ISWAP propaganda video.¹¹³

While few in number, three cases of child recruitment by the Nigerian Armed Forces were nonetheless verified.¹¹⁴ Nigerian security forces often detain minors based on alleged associations with non-State armed groups, either directly or through their parents. Fortunately, all 732 verified cases resulted in their subsequent safe release.¹¹⁵

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and are serious violations of IHL.¹¹⁶ The conflicts in Nigeria have been marked by widespread incidents of gender-based violence. A particularly concerning trend is the rise in sexual violence perpetrated against children.¹¹⁷ Most verified cases follow forced marriages and are attributed to either Boko Haram or ISWAP.¹¹⁸ Reports thus describe how the groups force their captives into marriage, rape them, and then turn them into sexual slaves. Sometimes they use these victims to reward fighters or motivate new recruits, leading some families to accept forced marriage as a strategy to prevent abduction.¹¹⁹

Those who manage to escape captivity face severe difficulties in reintegrating into society due to the lack of adequate services.¹²⁰ Indeed, some describe how they were taken to prisons, questioned, and even held for prolonged periods by the authorities owing to their 'association' with armed groups.¹²¹ Following release, they are left with no assistance

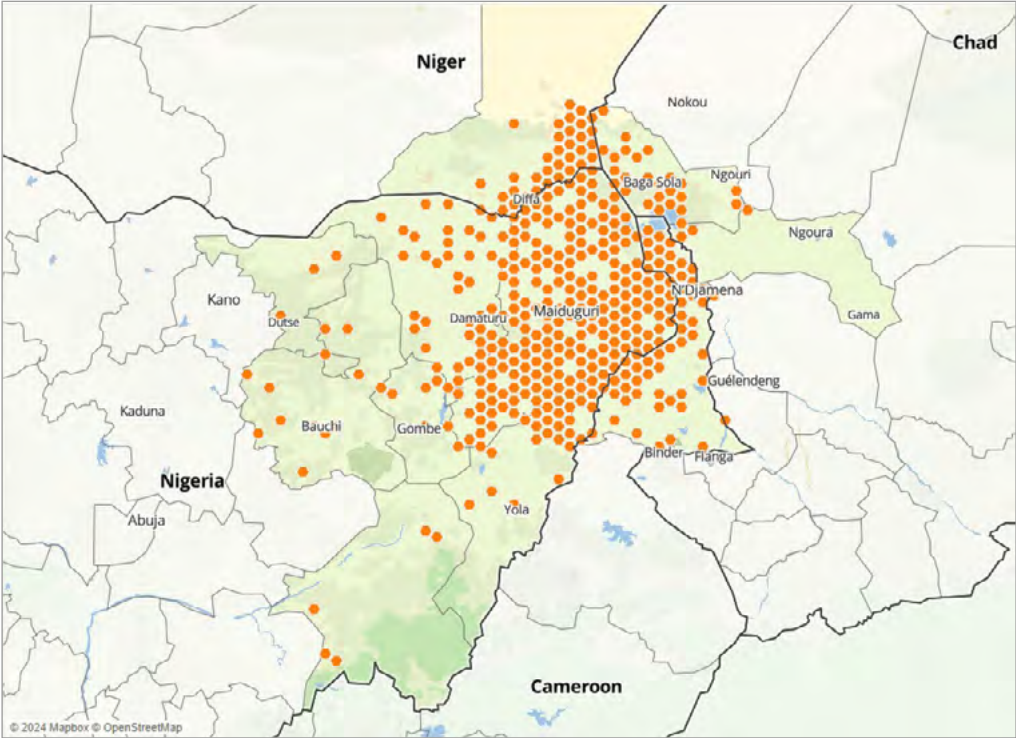
for shelter and food.¹²² As the Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women describes:

The testimonies of survivors highlight not only the suffering endured during captivity, but also the profound challenges faced upon their return. These girls were failed twice, first when they were abducted, and again when so many of them were left abandoned without care or support after escaping, including those left in IDP camps.¹²³

Figure 17.1: UN Map of Nigeria © United Nations



Figure 17.2: Boko Haram attacks in 2014–2024 © ACLED



ENDNOTES

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18. RUSSIA - UKRAINE



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Russia seized Crimea in 2014 and initiated rebellions against the government in Kyiv in the eastern Donbas. The European Court of Human Rights has held that Russia was directing separatist operations in Ukraine, and that, from 11 May 2014 onwards, those areas were under its effective control.¹ This means that Russia bears responsibility under international law for violations of international law perpetrated by the separatist regions in Ukraine.²

The latest phase of Russian aggression began with its large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Three days earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin had announced his decision to formally recognize the ‘independence and sovereignty’ of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic.³ On 22 February 2022, Russia concluded ‘Treaties on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’ with the two republics.⁴ On 24 February, President Putin announced his decision to conduct a ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine, in response to ‘requests for assistance’ from the authorities of these two entities.⁵ The same day, Russian forces entered Ukraine from both Russia and Belarus and began their advance with the apparent purpose of extending full control over Ukraine.

This was the worst act of aggression⁶ on European soil since the Second World War. The unlawful occupation of Ukrainian territory continues, with Russian forces extending the area they control in Ukraine at the time of writing.⁷

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The widespread and systematic commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity continued to characterize the conduct of Russian forces in Ukraine during the reporting period. On 6 August 2024, a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kursk region of Russia saw, for the first time, ground combat occurring on Russian territory. The operation resulted in Ukraine taking control of a substantial part of the regions of Kursk and Belgorod.⁸ Russian efforts to regain control over the region intensified in late 2024 and early 2025. On 26 April 2025, Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, reported to President Putin that Russian forces had re-established authority over the last populated area in Kursk occupied by Ukrainian forces and that a ‘security zone’ had been created in the Sumy region of Ukraine.⁹

From October 2024, troops from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) sent to Kursk were undergoing training before deployment on the battlefield. A number of videos on social media showed North Korean soldiers in Russian uniforms. In December 2024, reports of the capture of North Korean soldiers by Ukraine confirmed their combat role.¹⁰ On 26 April 2025, in a meeting with President Putin, General Gerasimov underlined the role played in Kursk by North Korean troops.¹¹ A report from the State-run North Korean Central News Agency confirmed this.¹²

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

The armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (supported by North Korea) is of an international character. The direct involvement of significant numbers of North Korean troops in the conflict is of a nature to make North Korea a co-belligerent alongside Russia. The sending of those troops to assist Russia has been acknowledged by both nations.

Each of the three States involved in the international armed conflict (IAC) is party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I of 1977. All of these international humanitarian law (IHL) treaties apply to the IAC alongside other rules of customary IHL. The law similarly governs the two instances of military occupation – Russia’s ongoing occupation of part of Ukraine, and, from August 2024 until April 2025, Ukraine’s occupation of part of Russia.¹³

Both Russia and Ukraine are party to the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention.¹⁴ North Korea is one of four States not party.¹⁵ Ukraine – but not North Korea or Russia – is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.¹⁶ In 2025, Ukraine attempted to illegally suspend its implementation of the 1997 Convention, an issue discussed below. None of the three States is a party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.¹⁷

Ukraine but not Russia is a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁸ Russia is a signatory to the Statute, but on 30 November 2016, it informed the depositary (the Secretary-General of the United Nations) that it did not intend to become a party to it.¹⁹

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Widespread and systematic violations of IHL by Russia continued during the reporting period in the armed conflict with Ukraine. Aerial attacks on densely populated Ukrainian cities and towns, which sharply increased from the middle of 2025, regularly violated the principle of distinction or at least the principle of proportionality in attack. Some of the attacks were indiscriminate while others involved precision weapons where the only reasonable conclusion is that the civilians and/or civilian objects were deliberately targeted. This is particularly so in the case of drone attacks in and around Kherson.

Prisoners of war (POWs) continue to be the victims of war crimes. More than 106 Ukrainian soldiers were executed during the reporting period while in the hands of Russian forces.²⁰ Others were tortured, subjected to sexual violence, and detained in inhumane conditions. POW status has been wrongfully denied to foreign nationals who were members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Some Ukrainian soldiers were prosecuted before Russian courts for participating in hostilities – in violation of combatant’s privilege under customary IHL – and invariably defendants were denied fundamental fair-trial rights.

Substantial and widespread violations of the laws of occupation continue to be committed by the Russian administration in occupied Ukraine. Large-scale expropriation is underway of homes purportedly ‘abandoned’ by Ukrainians who have fled occupied territory, which is typically the result of unlawful forced displacement.²¹ The houses are being allocated to Russian citizens to encourage them to move into the occupied territory, also a violation of IHL as States ‘may not deport or transfer parts of their own civilian population into a territory they occupy’.²² Ukrainians continue to be coerced into enlisting in the Russian Armed Forces.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Russia has systematically attacked civilian objects in Ukraine. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.²³ Special protection is afforded to medical units, such as hospitals and other

medical facilities.²⁴ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁵ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.²⁶

Attacks against civilian homes

Russian armed forces continued to fire explosive weapons into residential areas of Ukraine, using missiles and glide bombs²⁷ as well as armed drones. Glide bombs started to be used against the city of Zaporizhzhia in the summer of 2024, causing many civilian casualties, including eight who died after their apartment building was struck on 7 November 2024.²⁸ Residential areas in Ukrainian cities far from the front lines were also subjected to heavy aerial attacks. Some of the deadliest incidents occurred on 8 July 2024, when Russian forces launched airstrikes on Kyiv, Dnipro, and Kryviy Rih, killing at least forty-three civilians.²⁹ The Russian military generally did not seek to justify the attacks as having targeted lawful military objectives.

On 4 September 2024, a Russian airstrike on Lviv is said to have killed seven people and damaged more than fifty civilian objects, including residential buildings, educational and medical facilities, and objects of cultural heritage. Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi reported on Telegram that four members of the same family were among the dead: a forty-three-year-old mother and her three daughters aged seven, eighteen, and twenty-one years. Only their father survived.³⁰ On 1 February 2025, a Russian KH-22 missile hit an apartment building in Poltava, some 240 kilometres from the frontline, killing fifteen civilians. The missile is said to be accurate to within 200 metres.³¹ The Russian authorities claimed to be targeting energy infrastructure, but Human Rights Watch could identify no such targets, and the nearest conceivable military objective was said to be 700 metres away.³² Based on an *amicus curiae* brief by a number of leading international lawyers with annexed opinions by military experts, IHL in Focus considers any medium or long-range weapon that cannot reliably fire or drop its munitions within a 400-metre radius of its target to be indiscriminate.³³

On 24 April 2025, Russian armed forces carried out one of the largest attacks on the Ukrainian capital since July 2024.³⁴ The combined attack, involving ballistic missiles and armed drones, targeted at least five residential neighbourhoods of Kyiv and caused severe damage to civilian infrastructure, killing at least twelve civilians and injuring ninety others.³⁵ On 17 June 2025, a Russian missile and drone attack killed 29 civilians and injured at least 152, with a direct strike on an apartment block in Kyiv causing the building to collapse.³⁶

Attacks against medical facilities

In IHL, medical facilities – whether civilian or military – are afforded a high level of protection against attack.³⁷ On 8 July 2024, two civilians were killed and a further eighteen injured in Kyiv after a KH-101 cruise missile struck Okhmatdyt children's hospital. Russian authorities sometimes accuse Ukraine of placing anti-missile defences and other military facilities in residential areas, but in this case, they claimed the damage to the hospital was caused by debris from Ukrainian anti-missile defence systems.³⁸ The day after the multiple strikes on Ukraine, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson M. V. Zakharova thus declared that:

The Russian Armed Forces have launched a group strike with long-range precision weapons against military facilities in Ukraine. ... The Kiev junta has long been

using purely civilian enterprises for military purposes, turning them either into workshops for the assembly and repair of military equipment or into warehouses for the storage of Western military equipment. In addition, the Ukrainian armed forces are covering themselves with civilians and civilian facilities.³⁹

Although not every claim regarding the location of military facilities in residential areas can be confirmed – particularly in light of Ukrainian legislation prohibiting reporting on such matters⁴⁰ – this has certainly occurred in certain instances. That said, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported in this instance that based on ‘an immediate in-depth assessment of the impact site, witness accounts and videos, including footage of the missile hitting the hospital’, the strike on Okhmatdyt Hospital ‘was likely due to a direct hit from a missile, and not from falling debris resulting from an air defense interception.’⁴¹ The KH-101 cruise missile is said to be accurate to within twenty metres of its designated target.⁴² The strikes of 8 July also significantly damaged the Center for Children’s Cardiology and Cardiac Surgery as well as a medical centre with two clinics in Kyiv, and a private medical clinic in Kryvyi Rih.⁴³ These strikes would appear to constitute war crimes.

On 19 March 2025, a hospital in Krasnopillia, Sumy region, was targeted by Russian forces using loitering munitions (a form of autonomous weapons system) on five successive occasions, which is highly suggestive of deliberate targeting of a hospital, again indicating that a war crime may have been committed.⁴⁴ Direct criminal responsibility would potentially lie with the commander who directed the attack as well as any weapons programmer who included a hospital as a possible target.

Attacks against power plants

Russia has made the targeting of Ukrainian electrical-generating plants a feature of its warfare. Some are being used to generate power for the Ukrainian military, which means they are a lawful object of attack, but in such cases, the principle of proportionality in attack demands that the expected civilian harm not be excessive when compared to the anticipated military advantage.⁴⁵ More broadly, the destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population is unlawful.⁴⁶

Continued Russian attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure have disrupted access to services indispensable to the survival of the civilian population especially during the winter. In December 2024 to May 2025, OHCHR recorded 115 attacks on energy infrastructure, with ninety-one directed at territory controlled by Ukraine.⁴⁷ On 26 August 2024, more than 100 missiles and munitions fired from drones damaged at least twenty-five energy facilities across fifteen Ukrainian regions, including the Kyiv Hydroelectric Power Plant. This attack, which killed seven civilians and injured twenty-three others, led to nationwide blackouts.⁴⁸ Attacks on dams are specifically restricted under IHL, which requires that particular care be taken to avoid the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.⁴⁹

On 17 November 2024, Russian forces conducted widespread attacks on energy infrastructure in multiple regions of Ukraine, some of which endangered nuclear safety.⁵⁰ A further attack on 28 November caused widespread emergency power outages, leaving millions of households without electricity.⁵¹ Further attacks involving multiple locations throughout Ukraine took place on 13 and 25 December, 15 January, and 7 March 2025.⁵²

In March 2025, discussions concerning a potential ‘energy ceasefire’ were initiated, with an informal moratorium on attacks coming into effect on 25 March 2025.⁵³ These agreements do not affect the binding obligations of the parties under Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits attacks against objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. Following the ‘energy ceasefire’, both sides accused the other of breaching the arrangement.⁵⁴

The International Criminal Court has issued warrants of arrest in relation to earlier attacks against energy infrastructure. On 5 March 2024, warrants were issued for Sergei Ivanovich Kobylash, a Lieutenant General in the Russian Armed Forces who at the relevant time was the Commander of the Long-Range Aviation of the Aerospace Force, and Viktor Nikolayevich Sokolov, an admiral in the Russian Navy, who was the Commander of the Black Sea Fleet. A Pre-Trial Chamber of the Court found reasonable grounds to believe that each bears responsibility for the war crimes of directing attacks at civilian objects and of causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects, as well as for the crime against humanity of inhumane acts.⁵⁵ The Pre-Trial Chamber stated that the two suspects could bear responsibility for

missile strikes carried out by the forces under their command against the Ukrainian electric infrastructure from at least 10 October 2022 until at least 9 March 2023. During this time-frame, there was an alleged campaign of strikes against numerous electric power plants and sub-stations, which were carried out by the Russian armed forces in multiple locations in Ukraine.⁵⁶

Ukraine has also targeted Russian energy supplies and infrastructure on Russian territory and was ramping up these attacks at the time of writing. Strikes have seemingly targeted fuel supply for civilian use rather than diesel production, which is predominantly used by the Russian military. This would indicate a violation of the IHL principle of distinction, or at least of the principle of proportionality in attack. It was reported in October 2025 that twenty-one of Russia’s thirty-eight large refineries had been hit since January, with successful hits said to be forty-eight per cent higher than the whole of 2024.⁵⁷

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has said while Kyiv is not seeking to kill ordinary Russians, they ‘must understand the price’ of Putin’s war. These comments, which came the day before a series of Ukrainian attacks on Russian energy plants and resources, indicated a deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure as Memorial, a Russian human rights group banned by the Kremlin, has observed.⁵⁸

Attacks against cultural property

Cultural property, and sites of national significance, continued to be severely damaged and destroyed by Russian armed forces during the reporting period. As of 25 June 2025, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had verified damage to 501 sites of cultural importance since 24 February 2022.⁵⁹ On 29 October 2024, the historic building of Derzhprom in Kharkiv⁶⁰ – the first modern skyscraper in the Soviet Union upon its completion in 1928 – was struck with an FAB-500 (500 kg) bomb, prompting the launch of a UNESCO special monitoring mechanism.⁶¹ In Odesa, strikes on 14 November 2024 and 31 January 2025 involving ballistic missiles severely damaged many buildings within the UNESCO heritage area.⁶²

These attacks appear to violate the prohibition of attacks against cultural objects and places of worship in Additional Protocol I,⁶³ the Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property of 1954,⁶⁴ and customary IHL.⁶⁵

Civilians under Attack

OHCHR recorded that between 1 July 2024 and 30 June 2025, at least 2,245 Ukrainian civilians were killed and 11,353 injured in the armed conflict, most as a result of Russian aerial attacks.⁶⁶ This is a significant increase in recorded casualties compared to the previous reporting period, in which 1,828 civilian deaths and 6,634 injuries were recorded.⁶⁷ The month of June 2025 marked a substantial intensification of attacks, resulting in the highest recorded total of civilian deaths in a single month – 232 – since the opening months of the war.⁶⁸ For 2025 as a whole, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine found that total civilian casualties in Ukraine were at least 2,514 killed and 12,142 injured. This is a thirty-one per cent increase compared to 2024 and a seventy per cent increase compared to 2023.⁶⁹

Russian authorities have reported Ukrainian attacks resulting in civilian casualties in both occupied Ukraine and Russia, which amounted to five per cent of total civilian deaths in the war during the period from December 2024 to May 2025.⁷⁰ Most of the reported incidents were linked to the Ukrainian operation in Kursk. Between 6 and 24 August 2024, Russian authorities claimed twelve civilian deaths were caused by Ukrainian forces, and by early October 2024, this number had increased to seventy.⁷¹ The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR) said it was unable to verify reported casualty figures from incidents in Kursk region.⁷² Outside Kursk, Russian authorities reported five civilians killed and forty-six injured in an aerial attack on the city of Belgorod in Russia.⁷³ On 13 August 2024, Russian sources reported that the shelling of a bus in Russian-controlled Lysychansk in Luhansk region had killed two civilians and injured thirty-one others.⁷⁴

Attacks against medical personnel

First responders were killed on a number of occasions as a result of ‘double-tap’ attacks, in which an attack takes place after medical personnel and others rendering assistance arrive at the scene of an initial attack. One research group identified thirty-six such attacks by Russian forces in 2024.⁷⁵

In addition to the attacks on the hospital in Sumy described above, on 13 July 2024, an initial 9M723 ‘Iskander’ missile strike on railway infrastructure in Budy, Kharkiv region, was followed by a second missile strike, killing a rescuer and a police officer and injuring twenty-five other civilians.⁷⁶ On 6 June, a series of Russian airstrikes injured twenty-four emergency workers, in addition to killing six civilians and injuring twenty-nine others.⁷⁷ The sequencing of attacks indicates an attempt to target persons rendering assistance, including medical personnel, or those who are *hors de combat*, both of which are serious violations of IHL.⁷⁸

Clearly-marked ambulances were targeted by drones in Kherson in circumstances where the operators could not have failed to appreciate the nature of the target. Some ambulances were destroyed. These attacks, and the near-constant threat of drone deployment in Kherson, made it difficult for ambulances to promptly assist seriously wounded civilians.⁷⁹ There is thus *prima facie* evidence that Russia has violated the special protections to which these objects and their personnel are entitled under IHL.

Russian use of chemical weapons

Russia has used prohibited chemical weapons in the conduct of hostilities against Ukraine. During the reporting period, three consecutive technical assistance reports by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed the presence of CS gas⁸⁰ – a riot-control agent whose use is prohibited as a method of warfare under the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention⁸¹ – in multiple battlefield samples in Ukraine.⁸² While the OPCW does not attribute responsibility to a user, the circumstances clearly indicate these chemical agents were deployed by Russian forces. Ukraine has accused Russia of using tear gas to clear trenches and has reported more than one thousand such incidents since the beginning of the invasion in 2022.⁸³

There have also been credible – but as yet unconfirmed – allegations that Russian forces have used a toxic chemical, chloropicrin, as a method of warfare.⁸⁴ Chloropicrin is a pesticide that was used as a chemical weapon in World War I as a vomiting agent.⁸⁵ Listed in Schedule 3 of the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention,⁸⁶ its use is comprehensively prohibited in warfare. Moreover, if confirmed, its use by any armed force in the conduct of hostilities would be a war crime.⁸⁷

Use of armed drones

Armed drones are subject to the ordinary rules on targeting under IHL. There has been a significant increase in the use of aerial drones targeting Ukrainian civilians, killing 207 and injuring 1,365 between December 2024 and May 2025.⁸⁸ Around seventy per cent of these casualties occurred in Kherson province.⁸⁹ The circumstances of the attacks leave no doubt that their operators knew the targets they fired upon were civilian: many of the drones are equipped with cameras permitting target sighting in real time, and video footage from these cameras has been widely disseminated online by the perpetrators, especially on social media site Telegram.⁹⁰ Russians involved in these operations boast on social media that their targets are ‘anyone or anything that moves’.⁹¹

The videos confirm eyewitness reports that civilians are ‘hunted’ and targeted deliberately, whether in vehicles (such as cars, buses, ambulances, fire trucks, or in humanitarian convoys) or just standing or walking outside.⁹² Civilians reported feeling terrorized, often staying indoors out of fear of these attacks. Indeed, residents appear to be fleeing from Kherson as a result.⁹³

These incidents are indicative of deliberate and systematic targeting of the civilian population of Kherson, of individual civilians, of medical personnel and humanitarian workers, and of civilian objects, all serious violations of IHL. The persistent nature of these attacks strongly indicates that their primary purpose is to spread terror among the civilian population, which is also a serious violation of IHL.⁹⁴ The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) held that a serious violation of this rule is a war crime under customary international law.⁹⁵ In addition, some of the videos, and especially their graphic nature, combined with taunting or threatening remarks by those posting them, violate the IHL prohibition against outrages upon personal dignity.⁹⁶

Similar – albeit less systematic – Russian drone attacks targeting civilians occurred in other regions of Ukraine during the reporting period, particularly in areas close to the frontlines in the regions of Donetsk, Kharkiv, Sumy, and Zaporizhzhia. Attacks included a drone strike on a convoy evacuating civilians near Kostyantynivka in Donetsk on Easter Sunday 2025, followed by a strike on the same convoy by a drone equipped with rocket-propelled grenades. On 23 April 2025, a drone strike on a shuttle bus in Marhanets, Dni-

propetrovsk region killed nine civilians employed at the Marhanets Mining and Processing Plant. On 17 May 2025, a drone strike on a minibus evacuating civilians from Bilopillia in Sumy region killed nine.⁹⁷ None of these strikes is believed to have targeted a lawful military objective.

Use of cluster munitions

As noted, neither Russia nor Ukraine is a State Party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions and use of the weapons is not prohibited under customary IHL. Nevertheless, use of cluster munitions may violate the prohibition against indiscriminate attacks, especially when fired or dropped into populated areas. Several instances of use of cluster munitions in urban areas were documented during the reporting period.⁹⁸ On 7 March 2025, Russian forces targeted Dobropillia in Donetsk region with a range of munitions, including rockets from a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) carrying cluster munitions. OHCHR further concluded that the attack as a whole (including other unitary munitions) killed eleven civilians and injured forty-seven.⁹⁹ The attack may well have been indiscriminate in nature.

A Russian attack on Kryvyi Rih on 4 April 2025, which killed at least twenty, including nine children, is similarly thought to have involved cluster munitions. The bombing caused the largest verified killing of children in a single attack since 24 February 2022.¹⁰⁰ The Russian military asserted that Ukrainian commanders were meeting with western military advisors in the restaurant at the time.¹⁰¹ No independent reporting confirms this claim; on the contrary, contemporaneous reporting and video footage does not suggest a large number – or perhaps any – combatants were present among the many civilians in the restaurant at that time.¹⁰² Two weeks later, an attack on Kharkiv, which seemingly involved cluster munitions delivered from a ground-launched cruise missile (said to be the Iskander 9M727),¹⁰³ killed one civilian and injured more than a hundred others.¹⁰⁴

Use of anti-personnel mines

Ukraine is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its forces from using anti-personnel mines ‘under any circumstances’ – even when confronted with aggression.¹⁰⁵ Since the summer of 2022, however, Ukraine has been using anti-personnel mines.¹⁰⁶ In November 2024, Ukraine made it known that it would be importing mines from the United States – another serious violation of this disarmament treaty.¹⁰⁷

In July 2025, Ukraine informed the depositary of the Convention (the UN Secretary-General) that it had ‘decided, as of July 17, 2025, to suspend the operation’ of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.¹⁰⁸ This is a disguised reservation to the 1997 Convention’s application to Ukraine but, as all reservations to its provisions are prohibited,¹⁰⁹ the claimed suspension of the Convention was and remains without valid effect under international law.¹¹⁰ Following the declaration of suspension, the President of the Twenty-Second Meeting of States Parties of the 1997 Convention, Ambassador Tomiko Ichikawa of Japan, issued a statement, declaring: ‘Taking into account the special circumstances surrounding Ukraine, I will continue my engagement to clarify the situation in relation to the relevant provisions of the Convention and other rules of international law relevant to this matter.’¹¹¹

The issue was addressed at the Twenty-Second Meeting of States Parties of the Convention, whose final report stated that: ‘The Meeting affirmed that the Convention does not allow the suspension of its operation and consequently its obligations. The Meeting called

upon Ukraine, as a State Party, to further engage within the framework of the Convention.¹¹² Ukraine thus remains in serious violation of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

Russia, which is not a State Party to the 1997 Convention, has made massive use of anti-personnel mines, making Ukraine one of the world's most heavily mined nations.¹¹³ As of December 2024, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Health, at least 50,000 Ukrainians – soldiers and civilians – had lost limbs since the February 2022 invasion. Many of the tens of thousands of amputations among Ukrainians have been caused by landmines (although gunshot wounds and bombings would also be a frequent cause). Olga Rudnieva, co-founder of the 'Superhumans Center', said: 'Some people have double, triple, quadruple amputations. All these people will need prosthetics, or some will use wheelchairs.' Many amputations are the result of delays in evacuation from the battlefield with incoming fire often so intense that it may take many hours or even days to get a wounded soldier to hospital. With more than one million people on the front line, Ms Rudnieva said that Ukraine will become 'the country of people with disabilities'.¹¹⁴

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Treatment of prisoners of war

Ukrainian prisoners of war have been systematically abused by Russian forces. OHCHR recorded credible allegations of the execution of 106 Ukrainian soldiers captured by Russian forces between late August 2024 and May 2025.¹¹⁵ The most notorious incident was recorded on video and verified by multiple independent analysts. It involved ten captured Ukrainian soldiers being lined up and executed by automatic rifle fire by their Russian captors in September 2024 near Mykolaivka village in Donetsk.¹¹⁶ These exactions coincided with express exhortations on Telegram to execute prisoners by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ('They have no right to live. Execute, execute, execute')¹¹⁷ and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov ('Today, I instructed frontline commanders to take no prisoners').¹¹⁸ Russian soldiers also reportedly received orders to take no prisoners.¹¹⁹ Orders to deny quarter are serious violations of IHL and war crimes under customary law.¹²⁰

OHCHR recorded one credible allegation of execution of a Russian POW by Ukrainian forces during the reporting period.¹²¹

Combatants have also been targeted while *hors de combat*. Multiple reports document cases of manifestly incapacitated and unarmed Russian and Ukrainian soldiers being targeted by drone strikes or shot at close range. Videos of these incidents are then shared on social media platforms – usually Telegram – glorifying the conduct, often edited with music and accompanied by discriminatory commentary.¹²² Deliberately attacking a person who is *hors de combat* is a serious violation of IHL. The videos may also constitute outrages upon personal dignity.¹²³

Torture and inhumane treatment

Torture and inhumane treatment continue to be systematically inflicted on Ukrainian POWs and other Ukrainian detainees by Russian authorities. The forms of torture, which have been extensively described by those subsequently released from Russian custody, include sexual violence, electric shocks, suffocation, strangulation, sleep deprivation, 'welcome beatings' ('*priyomka*'), and extended periods in stress positions, excessively intense physical exercise, dog attacks, threats of violence or death, and mock executions. Deaths arising from this torture and deprivation of medical treatment have been reported.

The purposes of torture include extracting strategic or military intelligence, punishing those loyal to Ukraine or who are Ukrainian, and warning and instilling fear among Ukrainians. The extent and systematic nature of torture leads to the conclusion that it is being applied as a matter of State policy, a reality consistent with certain statements by Russian officials.¹²⁴ The commission of acts of terror against persons within the power of a party to an armed conflict is a serious violation of IHL and a war crime under customary law.¹²⁵

Credible reports record instances of rape, threats of rape and castration, electric shocks on genitals, forced nudity, and beatings while nude. Both male and female POWs are affected. Female POWs were subjected to degrading treatment in the form of forced nudity and acts of humiliation. Sexual violence against POWs is explicitly prohibited under IHL, with special protection afforded to female POWs.¹²⁶

Degrading treatment is commonplace, including being forced to recite the Russian national anthem and being subjected to insults and derogatory remarks about Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia has permitted and at times facilitated access to detention facilities by interrogators and media personnel to create and subsequently disseminate videos of POWs giving statements under duress.¹²⁷ These videos were then shared with the public, thereby exposing POWs to public curiosity – another IHL violation. IHL protects not only the physical integrity of POWs but also their dignity. Humiliation or degrading treatment of detainees is a violation of IHL.¹²⁸

Russian POWs in Ukrainian custody have also reportedly suffered mistreatment, usually at frontline transit sites during so-called ‘admission procedures’, which involved beatings, dousing with cold water, and dog attacks. In at least one confirmed case, the torture led to the death of a Russian POW. Several survivors also described sexual violence, including electric shocks to the genitals. Ukrainian authorities have announced criminal investigations into these allegations. While the UN Committee against Torture noted in April 2025 that some 240 Russian POWs had filed torture complaints since February 2022, it also praised measures taken by Ukraine to prevent further abuse of POWs, such as clear transfer procedures and specialized training for military personnel.¹²⁹

Denial of combatant immunity and fair-trial rights to PoWs

According to survivor testimonies, Russian authorities have prosecuted Ukrainian POWs in sham trials for crimes they did not commit, as well as for acts that do not constitute crimes. Confessions were extracted using torture, threats, and psychological manipulation. POWs were accused, tried, and convicted not only for the alleged unlawful killing of civilians, but also for terrorism and the so-called ‘seizure of State power’, under Russian domestic counterterrorism legislation. For example, on 26 March 2025, the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don convicted several Ukrainian POWs on terrorism charges and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from twelve to twenty-four years in maximum-security penal colonies.¹³⁰

While the detaining power can prosecute POWs for international crimes, the Russian proceedings are manifestly unfair and intermingled with domestic offences criminalizing participation in hostilities.¹³¹ This is a flagrant denial of combatant immunity as well as the right to fair trial. These actions constitute grave breaches of Geneva Convention III and are war crimes under customary IHL.¹³²

Russian authorities continued to prosecute and convict foreign nationals who had voluntarily joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces, designating them as ‘mercenaries’ and denying them the protections to which they are entitled as POWs. For example, in May 2025,

Australian citizen Oskar Jenkins was sentenced to thirteen years in a maximum-security prison following a seemingly sham trial at the so-called Supreme Court of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic. Two months earlier, a Russian military court in Kursk sentenced British citizen James Scott Rhys Anderson to nineteen years in prison for 'mercenary activities' and terrorism. While mercenaries do not have a right to POW status under IHL, foreign nationals who lawfully enlist in the Ukrainian Armed Forces are not mercenaries under IHL. As members of a State's armed forces, they are combatants authorized to participate directly in hostilities and become prisoners of war, protected as such, if they fall into the power of the enemy.¹³³

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance in occupied territory

Reports indicate detention of thousands of civilians by the Russian occupying authorities based on their actual or perceived support of the Ukrainian armed forces, or for having relatives associated with the Ukrainian armed forces. Many are detained for long periods without charge. These detentions are arbitrary in light of the frequent failure to provide information about the nature of the charges, the denial of legal representation, and the absence of any administrative or judicial review of detention or the grounds of detention.¹³⁴

Russia appears to be applying a 'coordinated policy' of holding detainees incommunicado for long periods, denying the fact of their detention, and then transferring them for detention in Russia without notice. Family members seeking information about their whereabouts are sometimes threatened or even detained or beaten themselves. These practices are violations of the rules of occupation, or general rules of treatment of civilians under IHL, and amount to enforced disappearance.¹³⁵

Systematic persecution in the occupied Crimea continued during the reporting period, with 223 civilians detained, of whom 133 were Crimean Tatars. As elsewhere in occupied territory, torture and psychological pressure are commonly used by Russian authorities to elicit confessions from detainees, who are then convicted in the courts of Crimea or Russia based on false confessions and manifestly deficient proceedings.¹³⁶

Death and ill-treatment of civilians in custody

Civilian detainees in the hands of Russian occupation authorities are systematically subjected to torture, sexual violence, and other forms of ill-treatment. Some have died in custody, including during this latest reporting period. One of the most shocking cases involved Ukrainian journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna, who was detained by Russian authorities in occupied Zaporizhzhia region, and died while being transferred for detention in Russia. Her body was later returned by Russian authorities with signs of torture and with some internal organs missing, namely the brain, eyes, and larynx.¹³⁷

Compulsory military service by the Occupying Power

IHL prohibits an Occupying Power from conducting forced conscriptions of protected persons, and such a practice may amount to a grave breach of Geneva Convention IV. Reports from both the previous and the current reporting period raise concerns about a Russian practice of forced conscription of Ukrainian nationals in occupied territories into the Russian armed forces. This violation is closely related to the prohibition on compelling individuals to swear allegiance to the hostile power – for example by means of forced adoption of Russian citizenship – since reports indicate that Ukrainians who received a Russian passport were subsequently conscripted.¹³⁸

Individuals who refused to join the Russian armed forces reportedly faced prosecution. In Crimea, for example, the Russian occupying authorities use criminal prosecution for evasion of service in its armed forces under Article 328 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. As of April 2025, at least twenty-three such cases had been heard in the courts in Crimea. In addition to the prohibition of compelling protected persons to serve in the Occupying Power’s armed forces, this practice is a violation of the prohibition on the Occupying Power imposing its laws in the occupied territory.¹³⁹

Occupation of Russian territory by Ukrainian Forces

The taking of control over Sudzha, a town with approximately 5,000 residents in Russia’s Kursk region, along with some smaller settlements, was the first instance in which Ukraine assumed the status of an Occupying Power under IHL. Ukraine established a military administration in the part of Kursk region under its control with the stated aim to provide humanitarian aid and restore public order and safety. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently issued an official statement inviting the United Nations and the ICRC to join the humanitarian response mission in Kursk. Access to the area was, however, subject to the consent of the Russian Federation, which was not granted.¹⁴⁰ On 28 April 2025, the Russian Investigative Committee reported that ‘191 civilians were killed by the Ukrainian armed forces in Kursk region during the occupation’.¹⁴¹

Figure 18.1: UN Map of Russia © United Nations



Figure 18.2: UN Map of Ukraine © United Nations



Figure 18.3: Memory wall of fallen defenders in Ukraine
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19. SOMALIA



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Somalia faced a multitude of violent power struggles and local armed conflicts between 1991 and 2004 due to an absence of effective government after President Mohamed Siad Barre was ousted. In the 1990s, the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions including forces from Belgium, Canada, Italy, and the United States (US) were deployed to try to address the dire security and humanitarian situation.¹ With the breakdown of national governmental authority, questions of territory and authority were accentuated when Somaliland declared independence in 1991, and again when the region of Puntland declared autonomy in 1998.

Throughout the 1990s, Somalia remained without a central government while at least thirty clan- and region-based factions competed for control. Despite the establishment of a transitional government in 2004, violence and limited government control over national territory continued. During this period, Islamist armed groups formed, taking control of Mogadishu and other areas outside the capital in 2006, and prompting intervention by Ethiopia and the African Union (AU) in support of the government. The Islamist armed group Al-Shabaab, which had captured key towns during this period, aligned itself with Al-Qaeda and launched an offensive on the capital.

Somali government forces, supported by Kenya and the AU, wrested control of key towns back from Al-Shabaab, leading to the establishment of an internationally recognized federal government in 2012. Al-Shabaab continued its intense armed activities both across the border against Kenya and within Somalia against the government (supported by AU peacekeeping forces, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United States). Inter-regional tensions within Somalia also sporadically erupted into violence. The UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) was deployed in 2013.²

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Somalia was engaged in two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) during the reporting period: the existing armed conflict with Al-Shabaab and, since December 2024, a NIAC with Islamic State Somalia (ISS). With 7,289 deaths attributed to non-State armed groups in 2024, Somalia has seen almost one third of all African fatalities from non-State parties to armed conflicts.³

The Somali Armed Forces are supported by the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), the United States, Ethiopia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in its struggle against Al-Shabaab. The African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) replaced ATMIS when the latter's mandate expired at the end of 2024. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) has little presence in much of rural Somalia, often leaving Al-Shabaab as the only functioning authority.⁴ UNSOM was replaced at the beginning of November 2024 by the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS).⁵

In the first half of 2025, Al-Shabaab negotiated a number of local power-sharing agreements, sometimes allowing clan fighters to keep their weapons in exchange for not contesting the group's authority. Increasingly, Al-Shabaab has been encouraging residents to remain when areas come under its control, rather than forcibly displacing them as it did in the past.⁶

While most of the violence has taken place on land, there have also been persistent piratical attacks. Some of those mounted by Al-Shabaab fighters fall within the scope of the

armed conflict.⁷ A piratical act can also be an act of hostilities governed by international humanitarian law (IHL) insofar as it is directed against civilians and within the context of Al-Shabaab's military operations. Between November 2023 and July 2025, forty-seven piratical acts were logged in the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean. Piracy by Al-Shabaab has greatly disrupted commercial shipping traffic through the Bab al Mandab Strait, causing billions of dollars in economic losses and increased transportation and other costs.⁸

In January 2023, a separate conflict between the government of Somaliland – a self-proclaimed independent region – and the Dhulbahante clan militias broke out in the long-disputed Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (SSC) regions. This conflict ended following withdrawal of Somaliland forces and the establishment of the SSC-Khaatumo administration. Sporadic clashes in the region have, however, continued. A greater problem has come from violence in the northern autonomous region of Puntland, which stopped recognizing the Federal Government in November 2024.⁹

Clashes between the Somali Armed Forces (SAF) and its support forces and ISS in Puntland, initially infrequent and sporadic, escalated during December 2024. Military operations by SAF in north-east Puntland that month are said to have inflicted 200 casualties among ISS, enabling the armed forces to retake villages previously under the group's control.¹⁰ Subsequent attacks included ISS drone strikes – for the first time – on Puntland security forces in January 2025.¹¹

Since the capture of a key ISS base in Buqa Caleed by Puntland security forces in March 2025, ISS has been in retreat, with the Puntland authorities even claiming victory over the group at one point.¹² On 3 May, military forces successfully repelled an attack in the Dhasaan Sare area of Miraale Valley, reportedly killing ten ISS fighters. On 31 May, the military claimed to have secured the final ISS base in Miraale in the region.¹³ Military operations shifted to the ISS stronghold of Togga Jecel Valley.¹⁴

The United States, through its Africa Command (AFRICOM), supports the Somali government in its fight against Al-Shabaab and ISS. It estimates that Al-Shabaab has 7,000 to 12,000 fighters, stating that, since 2014, the group has killed more US citizens than any other Al-Qaeda affiliate, and that, as of 2025, it was Al-Qaeda's wealthiest component.¹⁵ From 1 July 2024 to 15 March 2025, a minimum of another eleven airstrikes were conducted by AFRICOM in Somalia. From 15 March to 23 June 2025, a significant escalation in US military operations involved at least thirty AFRICOM airstrikes.¹⁶ As the United States is operating in Somalia at the invitation of the Somali government, its involvement does not affect the classification of the two NIACs in which Somalia is engaged.

But while the United States has escalated airstrikes against ISS in Puntland, Al-Shabaab's momentum in southern and central Somalia has gone 'largely unchecked'. On 20 July 2025, the group recaptured the towns of Sabiid and Anole, located some forty kilometres south-west of Mogadishu. This followed an abrupt withdrawal of AU forces, primarily Ugandan troops, and SAF, which ceased defensive operations amid a wave of deadly Al-Shabaab assaults targeting the joint force.¹⁷

At the time of writing, Al-Shabaab appeared to be seeking to encircle Mogadishu. While it is unclear if it has the capability to seize the capital, the city's isolation further weakens the FGS. Al-Shabaab fighters have been setting up roadblocks and collecting taxes in Moqokori, indicating early efforts to establish a parallel governance structure and extract revenues. Moqokori is close to major highways connecting to Bulobarde, a government-held town in central Somalia defended by Djiboutian AU forces. Al-Shabaab's renewed offensive has undone years of progress by the FGS in reclaiming territory,

highlighting the group's enduring strength.¹⁸ An improvised explosive device (IED) attack on the president's motorcade in March 2025, and an attack on an army recruitment centre in Mogadishu two months later, further eroded public confidence in the government and stoked fear of Al-Shabaab seizing power in the capital.¹⁹

In contrast, concerns about possible international armed conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia appeared to have receded, at least for the time being. In December 2024, following talks in Türkiye, Ethiopia and Somalia agreed to end their bitter dispute over Ethiopian plans to build a port in Somaliland. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud agreed to respect one another's sovereignty. The feud had begun on New Year's Day 2024, when Prime Minister Abiy signed an agreement with Somaliland to lease a twenty-kilometre section of its coastline for fifty years in order to set up a naval base. In exchange, Ethiopia would recognize Somaliland's independence, although the Ethiopian government never explicitly confirmed this. At the time, the FGS described it as an 'act of aggression'.²⁰

On 26 December 2025, however, Israel explicitly recognized Somaliland as an independent State. Somalia's government condemned the move as an 'unlawful step' and a 'deliberate attack' on its sovereignty.²¹ The African Union Chairperson issued a statement in which he 'firmly' rejected

any initiative or action aimed at recognizing Somaliland as an independent entity, recalling that Somaliland remains an integral part of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Any attempt to undermine the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Somalia runs counter to the fundamental principles of the African Union and risks setting a dangerous precedent with far-reaching implications for peace and stability across the continent.²²

An emergency session of the UN Security Council in late December 2025 discussed the Israeli action. The representative of Somalia, also speaking for Algeria, Guyana, and Sierra Leone, condemned Israel's 'flagrant assault' on his nation's unity and territorial integrity through its recognition of 'so-called "Somaliland", which is legally incapable of entering into any agreement or arrangement with another country'. He termed the Israeli action an 'act of aggression' and called on all Member States to condemn it 'unequivocally'.²³ Israel, however, characterized its engagement with Somaliland as having a 'long and consistent record'. Since 1991, he said, Somaliland has 'consistently met the objective criteria for statehood under customary international law as reflected in the Montevideo Convention'. The United States defended Israel's recognition of Somaliland, saying it had 'the same right to conduct diplomatic relations as any other sovereign State'.²⁴

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

The ongoing armed conflict between Somalia (and supporting forces) and Al-Shabaab, and the armed conflict since December 2024 between Somalia and Islamic State Somalia (ISS) are both of a non-international character.

Somalia is a State Party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which applies to the two conflicts, but not to Additional Protocol II of 1977.²⁵ Customary IHL applies to both NIACs.

Somalia is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.²⁶

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, there were consistent reports of Al-Shabaab targeting civilians and civilian objects and perpetrating indiscriminate attacks. A prevalent means of warfare has been IEDs, some of which constitute anti-personnel mines. In the preamble to its Resolution 2776 (2025), which imposed sanctions and an arms embargo on Al-Shabaab, the UN Security Council strongly condemned the 'reported targeting of civilians' by the group 'as well as its indiscriminate use of explosive weapons, in particular in densely populated areas, and the consequences for the civilian population'.²⁷

Civilian Objects under Attack

Both Al-Shabaab and ISS have regularly attacked civilian objects. Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives and must not be directed against civilian objects.²⁸ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁹ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives.³⁰ Special protection is afforded to medical units, such as hospitals and other medical facilities.³¹ Special care must also be taken in military operations to avoid damage to buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education unless they are military objectives.³²

For 2024, the UN Secretary-General reported UN verification of thirty-six attacks on schools and three attacks on hospitals. Of the total, twenty-eight were attributed to Al-Shabaab, with responsibility for most of the remainder ascribed to clan militias.³³ In Mahas town and other districts of Hiraan region, hostilities in the first half of 2025 led to suspension of services in thirteen health facilities. Insecurity also forced temporary closure of one stabilization centre and seven community health sites.³⁴ The surge in fighting across the country has not only put additional strain on medical facilities treating the wounded but has also forced more than 100,000 people to flee their homes, placing more pressure on the dwindling humanitarian resources.³⁵

Civilians under Attack

The United Nations recorded 854 civilian casualties (295 killed, 559 injured) between January and September 2024. This represents a thirty-five per cent decrease from the almost 1,300 casualties recorded in 2023.³⁶

Individual attacks, however, caused major loss of civilian life. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for an attack on 2 August 2024 in which a suicide bombing was followed by a gun battle with security forces at the Lido Beach in Mogadishu. At least thirty-seven people were killed and more than two hundred were injured, several critically. 'Lido Beach is a popular place for Somalis to spend time with family and friends.... Targeting this location is an abhorrent act that warrants the firmest condemnation', James Swan, Acting Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, declared.³⁷

The attacks on civilians continued in 2025. In May, at the end of a visit to Somalia, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Saul, expressed his deep concern about the killing and maiming of children in the armed conflicts in Somalia.³⁸

ISS also uses violence to generate income, sometimes killing in order to do so. It has targeted pastoralists and businesses, although in July 2025, local pastoralists resisted

the extra payment sought by the group, leading to clashes that resulted in deaths on both sides. Nevertheless, ISS is said to be one of Islamic State's most profitable branches, serving as a financial hub for, and support to, its wider network in Africa and beyond.³⁹

Attacks against humanitarian workers

Humanitarian workers have been particular targets as well as incidental victims of the fighting. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), violence against humanitarian personnel, assets, and facilities rose sharply, with sixty-seven recorded incidents in 2024, compared to forty-seven the previous year.⁴⁰ In addition, eight aid workers were abducted, though they were later released following clan negotiations. Seven vehicles affiliated with humanitarian organisations were carjacked, sometimes along with looting of humanitarian supplies. A number of incidents, however, involved clan-related violence rather than acts of a party to one of the armed conflicts.⁴¹

Humanitarian Outcomes similarly reported that in 2024, Somalia experienced the most individual incidents affecting aid workers in ten years, with nine killed, fourteen wounded, and seven kidnapped. The number of attacks attributed to Al-Shabaab was up eighteen per cent from 2023. Most of the victims were from national NGOs and the Somali Red Crescent Society, with the remainder UN and international NGO personnel.⁴² In June 2025, the detonation of an IED hit a humanitarian convoy delivering food aid in Banadir, killing two humanitarian workers and injuring five security guards who were escorting it.⁴³ All the victims were civilians protected against attack under IHL.

State counterterrorism laws have also obstructed the delivery of aid. In May 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights while countering terrorism warned of the dangers of overreach in counterterrorism financing laws that risked impeding the delivery of independent and impartial humanitarian relief to civilians in acute need.⁴⁴

Use of improvised explosive devices

Most explosive incidents recorded by the United Nations between late September 2024 and late March 2025 continued to be perpetrated by Al-Shabaab using IEDs and indirect fire attacks.⁴⁵ In its Resolution 2776 of 3 March 2025, the UN Security Council decided that 'all States shall, for the purposes of preventing Al-Shabaab and other actors intent on undermining peace and security in Somalia ... take the necessary measures to prevent all deliveries of weapons, ammunition and military equipment' to non-State actors in Somalia, as well as to 'prevent the direct or indirect sale, supply or transfer' of certain items where 'a significant risk exists that they may be used, in the manufacture in Somalia of improvised explosive devices'.⁴⁶

Somalia is a State Party to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which prohibits its forces from using any anti-personnel mine – defined as an explosive munition placed under, on, or near the ground that is designed or adapted to be activated by a person. This disarmament treaty does not bind Al-Shabaab or ISS directly under international law, but the groups are subject to the customary IHL principles of distinction and proportionality in attack, underpinned by the duty to take precautions to protect civilians. Somalia is not a party to Amended Protocol II of 1996 to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which binds all parties to an armed conflict, including non-State armed groups.⁴⁷

The effects of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature employed by the non-State armed groups in Somalia, are very often indiscriminate. Thus,

customary IHL mandates that ‘when landmines are used, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects.’ Somalia is obligated by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to clear and destroy all anti-personnel mines on its territory ‘as soon as possible’.⁴⁸

Use of armed drones

In recent years, Somalia has been procuring Bayraktar TB2 armed drones from Türkiye. Civilian casualties continued to be recorded from their use against Al-Shabaab, with twenty-three reportedly killed in two strikes on the same day in March 2024.⁴⁹

The extent to which civilian casualties continue to result from multiple US drone strikes in the first three months of 2025 is not known.⁵⁰ The United States reported that a single drone operation in February conducted with the UAE had killed sixteen militants affiliated with ISS in northern Somalia. No civilian casualties were reported.⁵¹ In its quarterly civilian harm assessment report for the period ending 31 March 2025, AFRICOM declared that it ‘did not receive any new reports of civilian harm, closed one assessment, and carried over one open report from previous quarters’.⁵²

As noted, in January 2025, ISS conducted drone strikes, its first recorded use of armed drones.⁵³

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Murder of civilians

Violence against civilians by parties to the armed conflicts became even more widespread during the reporting period. There were numerous reports of the government or its agents perpetrating arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. While reliable data were difficult to collect, UNSOM reported that State security personnel had killed seventy-two civilians between January and September 2024. Al-Shabaab, in some cases, conducted targeted killings of civilians. Extrajudicial killings of civilians by ATMIS peacekeepers are also reported to have occurred.⁵⁴

Summary or arbitrary executions

The UN Secretary-General condemned the execution of four young people in Puntland in August 2024 ‘for alleged offences committed while associated with Al-Shabaab as children’ and ‘urgently’ called upon the FGS and Somali states to treat children associated with armed forces and armed groups ‘in line with international juvenile justice standards’.⁵⁵ It is a violation of the right to life, including in a situation of armed conflict, to execute anyone for an offence committed when they were under eighteen years of age.⁵⁶ Although not explicit in the ICRC’s study of customary IHL,⁵⁷ it is also a customary rule that is codified in Additional Protocol II of 1977.⁵⁸

In July 2024, five civilians were reportedly executed in Galgaduud region by Al-Shabaab following a ruling by a self-proclaimed Al-Shabaab ‘court’. The five were accused of espionage and collaboration with the Federal Government and other entities.⁵⁹ The lack of a fair trial is a serious violation of IHL and a war crime.⁶⁰

In May 2025, UN Special Rapporteur, Ben Saul, warned that some terrorism offences in Somalia attract the death penalty even when they do not involve intentional killing, as required under international law. He was particularly concerned about the use of military courts to try terrorist suspects, given the lack sufficient independence and fair-trial safeguards.⁶¹

Child recruitment

IHL sets the minimum age for recruitment at fifteen years of age.⁶² In 2015, Somalia became a party to the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Right of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which raises the age under international human rights law to eighteen years. Nevertheless, the recruitment and use of children by both Al-Shabaab and pro-government forces continues to be documented, indicating persistent violations of the standards set forth in the Protocol.

For 2024, the UN verified the abduction of 887 children (731 boys, 156 girls), 850 of whom were taken by Al-Shabaab.⁶³ Many were deliberately recruited to participate directly in hostilities. In this regard, the UN Secretary-General reported that 643 children were used by Al-Shabaab in the armed conflict with SAF. Six children were recruited and used by the Somali army.⁶⁴ The report does not detail how many of the recruited children were under 15 years of age.

In June 2025, however, despite the recruitment of a small number of children by SAF, the United Nations officially removed Somalia from its list of countries implicated in the recruitment and use of child soldiers, ‘marking a significant milestone in the country’s efforts to comply with international child protection standards’. The Ministry of Defense said in a statement: ‘The removal from the UN list reaffirms Somalia’s dedication to upholding the Constitution and international humanitarian law. The Somali child is not a soldier – they are the future of this nation.’⁶⁵

Nevertheless, children are still being detained by the authorities in connection with their alleged involvement with non-State armed groups. In June 2025, the UN Secretary-General expressed continuing concern at the many children detained for alleged association with armed groups in Somalia, and their prosecution in military courts.⁶⁶

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

The impact of the conflict also has a clear gender-specific element. In 2024, the United Nations recorded the perpetration of sexual violence against 120 children by Al-Shabaab. A further fourteen children suffered at the hands of different government security forces. In eleven of these cases, the Somali National Army was the responsible body.⁶⁷ The UN Secretary-General further reported that in one incident, four women and two girls appeared before the first instance military court in Banaadir on 22 October on allegations of being affiliated with Al-Shabaab. Five of them, including one girl, were said to have been forced to marry fighters. UNTMIS facilitated the transfer of the two girls to child protection actors while awaiting the court’s decision.

Other incidents, at least some of which had a sufficient nexus to the armed conflict to amount to an IHL violation and a war crime, concerned the gang rape of an internally displaced woman, allegedly by members of the security forces in Banaadir region; the rape of two girls aged fourteen and seventeen years by unidentified armed men in Hiraan region; the attempted rape of two women by a member of a clan militia in Shabelle Hoose region; the gang rape of a displaced woman in Shabelle Hoose; and the rape of a fifteen-year-old by clan militia in Banaadir region. No arrests were made in connection with any of these crimes.⁶⁸

Persons with disabilities

It is not known how many people are living with disabilities in Somalia although the UN Development Programme (UNDP) suggested in 2025 that the figure is eleven per cent of

the Somali population of 19 million.⁶⁹ In its National Disability Report 2024, the National Bureau of Statistics said that overall prevalence of disability in the adult population was 11.7 per cent, with women having a higher prevalence of disability (at 12.6 per cent) compared to men (10.5 per cent). With respect to children:

Many children with disabilities do not attend schools and are kept at home, out of sight. Children and adults with disabilities are stigmatized, segregated, and given derogatory and collective names. The conflict exacerbates the barriers that children with disabilities face, and girls and IDPs with disabilities are disproportionately affected.⁷⁰

In its humanitarian needs and response plan for Somalia for 2025, OCHA notes that almost three quarters of persons with disabilities were unable to reach or use humanitarian assistance due to lack of information, physical inaccessibility, and fear of physical or verbal attacks.⁷¹ The draft Disability Strategy for 2025–28 supported by the UN makes scant reference to armed conflicts and their consequences for disability, but does call for ‘an inclusive emergency preparedness and response plan’, and a ‘comprehensive emergency plan that specifically addresses the protection of persons with disabilities during armed conflict’.⁷²

As OCHA noted in January 2025, persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by armed conflict. Persons with disabilities are confronted with

social stigma, inaccessibility, marginalization, and discrimination. They have poorer health, lower educational attainment and fewer economic opportunities due to a lack of access to support services such as access to medical care, assistive devices and other essential services, contributing to a cycle of poverty and marginalization. ... Women and girls with disabilities, particularly when from a minority group, are considered to be in most severe need. The type of disability, displacement status, gender, clan affiliation and family/community support networks shape needs at an individual level.⁷³

Figure 19.1: UN Map of Somalia © United Nations



ENDNOTES

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20. SOUTH SUDAN



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

In 2005, after several decades of civil war in Sudan, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), an armed group aiming to secure the independence of what now is South Sudan. The agreement opened the way to a referendum, the results of which led to the independence of South Sudan in July 2011. In the same month, the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted Resolution 1996, establishing the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), which was tasked with the consolidation of peace and security, among other issues.¹

Upon independence, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) became the national army, while the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) became the ruling party, led by President Salva Kiir from the Dinka community. Riek Machar, from the Nuer community, was appointed the Vice-President of South Sudan. In 2013, power struggles at the top of the government led to a fall-out between the president and vice-president, and clashes erupted between different factions of the SPLA. These events marked the beginning of several armed conflicts in South Sudan, with Riek Machar as the leader of the newly formed Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO).

After several years of fighting and the emergence of new actors – including the National Salvation Front (NAS) in 2017 – the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in October 2018. The Revitalized Agreement bound President Kiir, Mr Machar, and others. Yet, a coalition of groups, including the NAS, refused to sign, claiming that it failed to address the root causes of conflict in South Sudan.² Meanwhile, President Kiir issued a decree changing the name of the SPLA to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF).³

The 2018 Revitalized Agreement aimed at creating a framework for peace and stability. It stipulated an end to hostilities, the creation of a unified national army, and national elections, in December 2024. None of these elements occurred, although Riek Machar was reappointed as First Vice-President of South Sudan in 2020.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

In South Sudan, the reporting period was characterized by an intensification of the existing armed conflicts amid growing political instability. Despite an extension of the transitional period foreseen under the 2018 peace accord, along with a reshuffle of the security sector by South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, the so-called 'Tumaini talks' with exiled opposition leaders stalled. As intercommunal violence persisted in multiple states across the country, tensions with Uganda over its use of force in South Sudan increased, while the armed conflict in Sudan spilled over into its southern neighbour. On 13 September 2024, national elections were postponed to December 2026.

From the beginning of 2025, resurgent political tensions between President Kiir and Vice-President Machar led to an escalation in fighting between the SSPDF and the SPLM/A-IO under Vice-President Machar. The National Salvation Front continued its military operations against the South Sudanese government, while ethnic Nuer militia known as the White Army, which are believed to have loose ties with the SPLM/A-IO, became more prominent.⁴ Intervention by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) in March 2025 in support of President Kiir involved aerial bombing that appeared to mark a turning

point in the conflict. Machar and several SPLM/A-IO ended the year in detention, charged with murder, treason, and crimes against humanity in relation to a March 2025 attack by the White Army in Nasir county.

In May 2025, the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) for a further twelve months, while ‘strongly condemning past and ongoing human rights violations and abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties, including by armed groups and national security forces’.⁵ The Security Council also extended the sanctions regime on South Sudan, although the resolution passed with only nine votes in favour, the minimum necessary for the adoption of any Council resolution.⁶

The Humanitarian Situation

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) declared in June 2025 that 7.7 million people in South Sudan – fifty-seven per cent of the country’s population – would face acute food insecurity (at Phase 3 or above) between April and July. Of these, 83,000 would likely experience catastrophic food insecurity (Phase 5) in four counties in the Greater Pi-bor Administrative Area and Upper Nile state, with Luakpiny/Nasir and Ulang potentially at risk of famine.⁷ The IPC subsequently forecast that between July 2025 and June 2026, 2.11 million children aged 6 to 59 months would be expected to suffer acute malnutrition. Around 1.15 million pregnant and breastfeeding women in South Sudan were expected to be malnourished and in need of treatment in the same period. Around seventy per cent of acute malnutrition cases are concentrated in the five states of Jonglei, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile, Unity, and Warrap.⁸

The escalating violence has caused or maintained massive displacement of civilians, both within and outside the country. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has reportedly reached two million, while more than 300,000 South Sudanese have fled the country, largely due to the violence.⁹

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

Two non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in South Sudan continued throughout the period under review:

- South Sudan (supported from March 2025 by the UPDF) *v* SPLM/A-IO
- South Sudan *v* National Salvation Front (NAS).

The conflicts are regulated by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international humanitarian law (IHL).

South Sudan is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.¹⁰ Clashes between the SSPDF and the SPLM/A-IO underwent a marked escalation in the first half of 2025. Despite several offensives by the SSPDF, the SPLM/A-IO retained control of most of its strongholds. The NIAC between the two parties thus continued also to be governed by the Protocol.

Clashes between the SSPDF and the NAS, albeit not frequent, continued throughout the reporting period. While sufficiently organized to be party to a NIAC, the NAS has wielded only temporary – and unstable – military control over territory, insufficient for Additional Protocol II to apply.

Fighting has also occurred on a number of occasions between the SSPDF and the White Army.¹¹ In 2025, however, the intensity and regularity of the clashes did not reach the threshold required for a NIAC to come into existence.

South Sudan is not a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹²

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

The period under review continued to see manifold serious violations of IHL rules protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure across South Sudan. Civilians, including humanitarian workers and medical personnel, continued to be regularly attacked in serious violation of IHL. Incendiary barrel-bombs were used in populated areas in an indiscriminate manner.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹³ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives¹⁴ and, as such, are protected against attack.¹⁵ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.¹⁶

Attacks against medical facilities

Under IHL, medical units and transports must not be attacked and must be protected.¹⁷ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.¹⁸ UNMISS has verified several instances where hospitals and medical units were attacked by the SSPDF or used for military purposes.¹⁹

On 3 May 2025, two combat helicopters bombed the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital at Old Fangak in Jonglei state; this was the only major medical facility in the area, serving more than 40,000 people. The strike killed at least seven civilians and injured many more, including medical staff; it also destroyed the hospital pharmacy and all the medicines held there.²⁰ In condemning the ‘calculated, unlawful attack on a protected medical facility’, the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan noted that the operation followed a public statement by the SSPDF that it would carry out ‘punitive’ aerial and riverine operations if the SPLM/A-IO did not immediately release certain vessels allegedly hijacked at Adok Port in Leer county.²¹

In the absence of any evidence the hospital was being used to commit hostile acts, the attack appears to have been a serious violation of the principle of distinction and of the special protection afforded by IHL to medical facilities.²² MSF confirmed that the geo-locations of all its facilities in South Sudan had been shared with the parties to the armed conflicts, excluding the possibility of an innocent mistake in targeting.²³ The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan termed the attack a possible war crime.²⁴

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities,²⁵ unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.²⁶ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and

are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians. In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.²⁷ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate, and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at the least to minimize, incidental civilian deaths and injuries to civilians (and damage to civilian objects).²⁸

Attacks directed against civilians

Civilians were deliberately targeted by the parties to the armed conflicts during the reporting period. Indeed, the first quarter of 2025 and – albeit to a lesser extent – the second quarter as well saw the highest number of civilian victims that UNMISS had documented since 2020. The number of both violent incidents and victims (dead and injured) increased significantly.²⁹ Despite the fact that most of the casualties continued to result from acts by community militia or civil defence groups, incidents and victims attributable to unlawful acts by parties to the two armed conflicts also greatly increased.³⁰ The UN Secretary-General listed South Sudan among those countries where ‘civilian death and injury were prominent’ in his May 2025 report to the UN Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.³¹

Air-dropped barrel-bombs

The use of barrel-bombs in aerial attacks on several locations in Nasir county in Upper Nile state has been widely reported. The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and head of UNMISS, Nicholas Haysom, criticized the ‘persistent aerial bombardment using devices, barrel bombs, allegedly containing a highly flammable liquid that acts as an accelerant on explosion, ... causing significant casualties and horrific injuries, especially burns, including to women and children’.³² Similarly, the EU delegation expressed deep concern at reports of attacks ‘potentially using highly flammable substances, inflicting horror on civilians’.³³ That the bombs appear to have been dropped from high altitude,³⁴ coupled with the fact that the ethyl acetate vapour can spread rapidly along the ground ‘intensifying fires’;³⁵ indicates the attacks were indiscriminate.³⁶ A forty-year-old woman who witnessed the attacks said she woke up feeling ‘the earth shaking’ and ran outside to see the village ‘on fire’. She later saw the charred bodies of her neighbours, including two children aged under ten.³⁷

Despite early reports qualifying these weapons as cluster bombs, subsequent investigations determined that the substance used was ethyl acetate, described by multiple sources as ‘a highly flammable chemical compound’.³⁸ The Government of South Sudan has acknowledged mounting military operations in the areas affected by the airstrikes, but has not admitted using this type of weapon. Uganda agreed that it was supporting the SSPDF in Upper Nile state at the time of the attacks,³⁹ but strongly denies dropping barrel-bombs.⁴⁰

The bombs appear to have been ‘improvised air-dropped incendiary weapons’,⁴¹ indicating they would also fall under the specific IHL provisions set forth in Protocol III to the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons. Incendiary weapons are defined under the Protocol as ‘any weapon or munition which is primarily designed to set fire to objects or to cause burn injury to persons through the action of flame, heat, or combination thereof, produced by a chemical reaction of a substance delivered on the target’.⁴² The Protocol prohibits the use of air-dropped incendiary weapons in any area with a ‘concentration of civilians’, irrespective of whether military objectives are being targeted.⁴³ Uganda is a

State Party to the Protocol, but South Sudan is not. The treaty rules reflect customary law, even though the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s 2005 study of customary IHL did not include such a rule at the time.⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch declared that use of the weapons in populated areas by the Government of South Sudan might amount to war crimes.⁴⁵

Attacks against humanitarian workers

Under IHL, humanitarian personnel must not be attacked and must be protected.⁴⁶ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.⁴⁷ But as the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan has recalled, the country continues to be 'extremely dangerous for aid workers'.⁴⁸ Both State and non-State parties to the two armed conflicts in South Sudan have attacked and threatened humanitarian workers.⁴⁹ As a consequence, agencies often felt obliged to pause operations in certain areas despite the overwhelming humanitarian need.

In addition to direct attacks, humanitarian workers have sometimes been abducted with a view to obtaining ransom. Both the United Nations and the media have pointed to a marked increase in kidnapping of humanitarian workers in South Sudan, with figures for the first eight months of 2025 already more than twice the number of incidents recorded for the whole of 2024.⁵⁰ While the perpetrators cannot always be identified,⁵¹ the surge in incidents certainly coincides with the escalation in the hostilities between the parties to the two armed conflicts. The UN Secretary-General noted that in just five weeks during the second quarter of 2025, four instances of abduction of humanitarian workers took place in Yei county in Central Equatoria state.⁵²

Forced displacement

Under customary IHL applicable to all armed conflicts, parties are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless it is required for the security of civilians or for imperative military reasons.⁵³ Breaches of these prohibitions are serious violations of IHL.⁵⁴ Such displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁵⁵ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁵⁶

In the areas most affected by the surge in violence in early 2025 (Baliyet, Nasir, and Ulang counties), an estimated 63,500 people had been displaced by April.⁵⁷ To the extent it is provoked by unlawful acts, the displacement of the civilian population may breach IHL.⁵⁸

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Customary and treaty IHL provides fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture, inhumane or degrading treatment, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials. Special protection is afforded to civilians at specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.⁵⁹

Murder and torture of civilians

International bodies have denounced the killing of civilians in the power of the enemy in South Sudan. On the night of 9 October 2024, armed men in military uniform raided a village in Wonduruba in Central Equatoria state and, having abducted several male youths,

killed at least twenty-seven and wounded four others with machetes (firearms may also have been used).⁶⁰ While the NAS was widely blamed,⁶¹ the group accused forces loyal to the SSPDF of being responsible for the atrocity.⁶² The team entrusted by the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAM-VM) to investigate the incident was repeatedly denied access to the area.⁶³ The UN Secretary-General later reported that: 'On 8 February [2025], two civilians were arbitrarily arrested and later killed, when they allegedly witnessed government forces burning and looting civilian homes, including a healthcare facility, in Nagero town'.⁶⁴

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and constitute serious violations of IHL.⁶⁵ International bodies have highlighted the continued and widespread perpetration of sexual violence in South Sudan, including in many instances in acts with sufficient nexus to one of the two NIACs.⁶⁶ The ICRC has noted that: 'Over a decade of conflict and intercommunal violence has led to the normalization of sexual violence among weapon bearers as well as among civilians'.⁶⁷ The violence has taken multiple forms – from rape and gang rape to sexual slavery and forced marriage.⁶⁸

The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan has found that conflict-related sexual violence by members of the SSPDF 'remains widespread in many areas with a significant presence of soldiers'.⁶⁹ The phenomenon, which affects especially (but not only) women and girls, is hugely under-reported. UNMISS has documented that, among the victims of all incidents of conflict-related sexual violence it verified in South Sudan in 2024, 150 acts of sexual violence were against women and 101 were against girls, while seven were against men and two were against boys.⁷⁰ In several cases, victims were abducted before being sexually assaulted.⁷¹

The Government of South Sudan has replied to international criticism concerning its failure to adequately tackle the phenomenon, stressing that despite challenges from the limited number of investigators at its disposal, it has prosecuted dozens of cases of sexual violence through mobile courts, general courts-martial, and the gender-based violence and juvenile courts.⁷² While acknowledging these efforts and noting its support to various initiatives aimed at bolstering accountability for conflict-related sexual violence (including two cases resulting in convictions for rape committed by SSPDF personnel), the UN Secretary-General regretted the fact that: 'Limited resources and insufficient coordination among relevant authorities persisted'.⁷³

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, non-arbitrary, and carried out with appropriate legal safeguards.⁷⁴ Persons deprived of their liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.⁷⁵ Detaining authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care, are held in humane conditions, and are protected from violence or reprisals.⁷⁶

The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan has found that parties to the armed conflicts in South Sudan, including the SSPDF and non-State armed groups, were responsible for frequent acts of arbitrary detention.⁷⁷ The present reporting period saw several cases where opposition leaders were detained arbitrarily or incommunicado, even sometimes being subjected to enforced disappearance.

From early March 2025, an escalation in fighting in Nasir county in Upper Nile led to a wave of arrests of high-ranking officers and senior political figures affiliated with the SPLM/A-IO. This included the SSPDF Deputy Chief of Defence Forces, the Minister for Petroleum, the Minister of Peacebuilding, the Minister of Animal Resources and Fisheries, Vice-President Riek Machar himself and his wife, Angelina Teny, the Minister of the Interior, as well as their bodyguards, family and staff members.⁷⁸ OHCHR has reported that, in three weeks in the month of March 2025, 'at least 55 high-ranking government officials affiliated with the SPLM-IO were arrested across the country.'⁷⁹

South Sudanese officials have sought to justify their actions by alleging that those arrested have committed crimes against the State and conspired against the Government. After arrests in early March, the National Security Service's Director of Public Relations said that the detainees had 'verified links to the escalating military confrontation in Nasir, Ulang, and surrounding areas', and that they had 'been fuelling the ongoing conflict' in those areas'.⁸⁰

Following the placing of Vice-President Machar and Minister Teny under house arrest, South Sudan's Information Minister stated that Mr Machar was being detained for 'agitating [SPLM/A-IO politicians and commanders] to rebel against the Government with the aim of disrupting peace so that elections are not held and South Sudan goes back to war', and for directing SPLA-IO forces to 'attack their colleagues'.⁸¹ In September 2025, Riek Machar and several SPLM/A-IO colleagues were charged with murder, treason, and crimes against humanity in relation to a March 2025 attack by the White Army in Nasir county.⁸²

As of July 2025, two detained officials from Western Bahr el Ghazal state were still being held incommunicado, without access to their families.⁸³ Human Rights Watch found that the fate and whereabouts of several other individuals arrested since March 2025 remained unknown.⁸⁴ It was said that the arrestees had not been brought before a judge for a long time following their initial detention, despite South Sudan's constitution requiring that this occur within twenty-four hours.⁸⁵

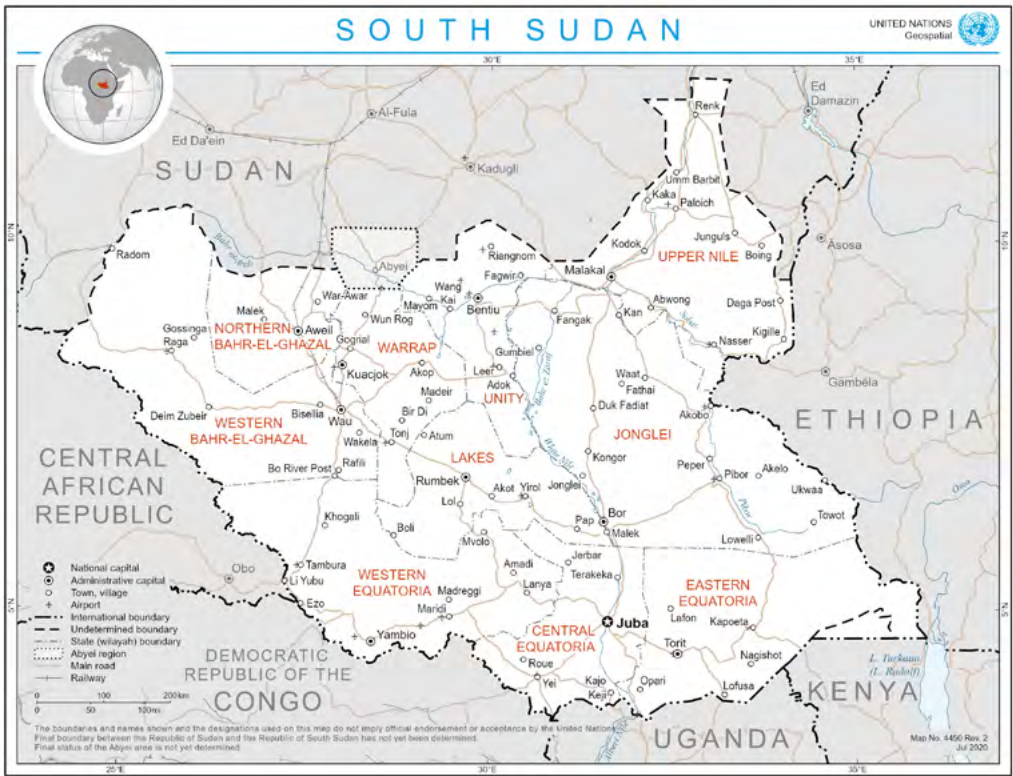
Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under the age of fifteen years, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and these rules further forbid their participation in combat.⁸⁶ Children are also entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees such as access to food, medical care, and education. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.⁸⁷

South Sudan has acceded to several human rights treaties which cover the protection of children, including specifically in situations of armed conflict. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (in 2015) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (in 2018). This latter instrument precludes South Sudan from compulsorily recruiting anyone under eighteen years of years into its armed forces.⁸⁸ When acceding to the Protocol, South Sudan deposited a binding declaration under Article 3 whereby the minimum age for voluntary recruitment of volunteers in its armed forces would be eighteen years.⁸⁹

Despite these obligations, UNMISS has documented several cases of recruitment and use in hostilities of children (girls as well as boys), including as a result of abductions.⁹⁰ In some cases, recruitment resulted in the child being injured or even killed in combat.⁹¹ The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan has found that abductions, recruitment, and use of children remain '[t]he most common violations' against children in South Sudan, and that they have been perpetrated both by the SSPDF and by non-State actors (notably the NAS) in many parts of South Sudan.⁹² The Committee on the Rights of the Child has reached similar findings, stating in 2025 that sixty-eight children (fifty-nine boys and nine girls) had been recruited and used by forces that comprised of, among others, the SSPDF, the South Sudan National Police Service, the SPLM/A-IO, and the NAS.⁹³

Figure 20.1: UN Map of South Sudan © United Nations



ENDNOTES

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21. SUDAN



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has been marked by multiple armed conflicts with frequent and serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL).¹ The conflict that erupted in Darfur in 2003 set State armed forces and Janjaweed militia against rebel groups, notably the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and the Justice and Equality Movement, and was characterized by severe abuses against civilians.² The United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry concluded in 2005 that there was ‘no doubt that some of the objective elements of genocide materialized in Darfur’, while rejecting the existence of a State policy of genocide.³ The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM-N), which split into two factions in 2017, has, for more than a decade, been fighting the Khartoum government in both Kordofan and Blue Nile state.⁴

After President Omar al-Bashir was deposed by the military in April 2019, a transitional government took power,⁵ but divisions between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a paramilitary body of former Janjaweed fighters – over the integration of the RSF into the army⁶ triggered hostilities in Khartoum on 15 April 2023 that quickly spread, especially to Darfur and Kordofan.⁷ The resulting non-international armed conflict between the SAF and the RSF has been intense, with widespread and serious IHL violations by both.⁸ Officially, the Darfur Joint Protection Force remained neutral, but many within it abandoned neutrality to fight with the SAF.

The fact that the RSF is composed of former Janjaweed fighters who played a major role in the crimes against civilians in Darfur in 2003 continues to fuel tensions between Darfuri communities and the RSF.⁹ The acts of the RSF in the aftermath of its capture of El Fasher in late October 2025 (see below) once again raised the spectre of genocide in Sudan. Foreign involvement in the conflict has involved allegations of supply of arms to the RSF by the United Arab Emirates (UAE),¹⁰ with additional support coming from a residual Wagner Group presence,¹¹ Chad,¹² and an – acknowledged – presence of Colombian private military contractors.¹³ In turn, the SAF is said to have received support from Ukrainian special forces.¹⁴

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

During the reporting period, the SAF retook several RSF-held areas,¹⁵ including the main cities in Sennar, Al Gezira, and Khartoum states¹⁶ and in May 2025, Khartoum.¹⁷ Despite significant territorial losses, the RSF continues to hold substantial territory, including most of Darfur and much of Kordofan.¹⁸ El Fasher was the sole locality in Darfur where the SAF had maintained a ground presence alongside the Darfur Joint Protection Force (DJPF).¹⁹ In May 2025, the RSF for the first time attacked Port Sudan, the humanitarian hub previously considered relatively safe.²⁰ This followed the signing by the RSF and its allies in February of a charter on forming a parallel government,²¹ claiming it would ‘represent all of Sudan’.²²

The Fall of El-Fasher

In November 2025, El Fasher fell to the RSF after an eighteen-month siege. The aftermath involved massacres of civilians, including hundreds of patients in a hospital. Videos and witness accounts show trenches filled with bodies, and RSF fighters hunting down civilians as they tried to flee. Blood pools in several locations around the city could be seen

from satellites.²³ At an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, Tom Fletcher, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, criticized Member States for letting the crisis reach this point. 'I have found the limits of my ability and the UN's authority', he said, calling on States to 'stop arming' the RSF, but without naming the responsible party.²⁴

The crimes continued in the days that followed in and around El Fasher. Women and girls who escaped the city described brutal sexual violence by RSF fighters. Five survivors told how they were gang-raped by RSF and affiliated fighters. Some of the abuse lasted for hours or even days, and sometimes occurred in the presence of family members they were fleeing with. 'RSF soldiers took turns on us', said a twenty-year-old woman and mother of four who was kept captive for two days by fighters. 'Each time, a group would arrive in military vehicles, take us to a room, and rape us violently before leaving.' The woman said she was with a group of twelve other women and girls who were also gang-raped, and that she was threatened with being shot.²⁵

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

In the reporting period, three non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) were ongoing in Sudan. Two involved the SAF fighting a non-State armed group:

- Sudan (supported by the Darfur Joint Protection Force, DJPF) *v* RSF
- Sudan *v* SPLM-North (al-Hilu faction).

The third NIAC is between two organized armed groups:

- RSF *v* SPLM-North (al-Hilu faction).

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary IHL apply to all three NIACs. Sudan is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977.²⁶ The two pre-existing Additional Protocol II-type NIACs to which Sudan is a party, fighting against the RSF and the SPLM-North (al-Hilu faction), respectively, continue to meet the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II – notably, that the group in question exercised a level of territorial control that would enable it to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol – and this treaty is applicable. The Protocol does not, however, apply to the NIAC between the RSF and the SPLM-North (al-Hilu faction) as Article 1(1) limits the Protocol's jurisdiction to armed conflict between the State and an organized armed group.²⁷

Sudan is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,²⁸ but the situation in Darfur was referred to the Court in 2005 by the UN Security Council²⁹ and the Court continues to have jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide perpetrated in that region.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the reporting period, serious violations of IHL continued to be committed on a massive scale.³⁰ In particular, the SAF and RSF indiscriminately attacked civilians

and civilian objects, wantonly killing and injuring in bombings and causing extensive damage to infrastructure.³¹ Civilians have been murdered, tortured, raped, forcibly displaced, starved, arbitrarily detained, and subjected to enforced disappearance and forced recruitment.³² As many as 150,000 people have reportedly been killed,³³ and more than 14.2 million people have been uprooted from their homes.³⁴

The RSF has sought to instil fear and consolidate control while the SAF has relied heavily on the DJPF and allied militias, as well as on indiscriminate airstrikes against RSF-held or disputed areas.³⁵ Many violations targeted communities based on ethnicity and/or were committed as reprisals for alleged allegiance,³⁶ particularly amid shifts in territorial control, with internally displaced persons (IDPs) particularly exposed to abuses.

Despite multilateral efforts to protect the civilian population – including the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan signed by the SAF and the RSF on 11 May 2023³⁷ and the UN-mediated negotiations launched on 11 July 2024 to secure a ceasefire and facilitate humanitarian relief³⁸ – the situation after two years of fighting was described by the United Nations as the ‘world’s worst humanitarian crisis’.³⁹ In the words of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): ‘More than a forgotten crisis, Sudan is becoming an ignored crisis ... and the humanitarian crisis in Sudan is first and foremost stemming from the disrespect of the laws of war’.⁴⁰

The scale of atrocities had already prompted the International Criminal Court to open a new investigation in July 2023,⁴¹ and led the United States (US) – among others – to sanction the leaders of both the SAF and the RSF.⁴² In early November 2025, the Court’s Office of the Prosecutor expressed its ‘profound alarm and deepest concern’ over the reports emerging from El-Fasher about crimes allegedly committed by the RSF. Such acts, if substantiated, ‘may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute.’ The Office further recalled that it has jurisdiction over crimes committed in the ongoing conflict in Darfur.⁴³

Civilian Objects under Attack

During the period under review, many attacks by the SAF and RSF indiscriminately hit areas controlled by the enemy, striking homes, schools, mosques, markets, water points, power-generating plants, and medical facilities.⁴⁴ Airstrikes and artillery strikes by both parties hit densely populated areas, including camps for the displaced as well as towns and villages.⁴⁵ In some instances, attacks were targeted on ethnic grounds. Pillage of civilian property was regularly reported.

There were serious violations of the principle of distinction,⁴⁶ including the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks,⁴⁷ the principle of proportionality in attack,⁴⁸ and the underlying rule of precautions in attack.⁴⁹ Also regularly violated were rules specially protecting medical facilities⁵⁰ and objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population,⁵¹ as well as the prohibition of pillage.⁵² Some of the bombardment of towns and villages was sufficiently widespread and systematic to amount to violence intended to spread terror among the civilian population⁵³ – a serious violation of IHL – and crimes against humanity under international criminal law.⁵⁴

Attacks against towns, villages, and IDP camps

After a period of relative calm following a ceasefire that held from April 2023 to January 2024 and divided the city between the SAF, the RSF, and the DJPF, in 2024, El Fasher emerged as the epicentre of the conflict in Darfur. As the only major locality in the region

still with an SAF presence, it became a key battleground for territorial control with the RSF and their allies, who indiscriminately attacked densely populated areas.⁵⁵

Neighbourhoods under the control of the SAF in El Fasher, mainly inhabited by non-Arab communities, as well as nearby villages and towns were repeatedly attacked and shelled by the RSF.⁵⁶ Some, such as al-Wahda and al-Thawra, were destroyed or burned down after intensive shelling in late 2024, or in the case of the village of Borush and Shagra town, in early 2025.⁵⁷ The SAF shelled and bombed neighbourhoods controlled by the RSF, notably in the east of El Fasher. After the violence prompted civilians to flee, the RSF started to occupy homes and schools leading the SAF to bomb entire residential areas.⁵⁸

Camps for IDPs surrounding El Fasher (Abu Shouk, Shagra, and Zamzam) have been repeatedly attacked by the RSF, causing the further displacement of many of their residents.⁵⁹ Since mid-July 2024, the RSF has heavily shelled Abu Shouk, north of El Fasher, with artillery strikes occurring almost daily in 2025.⁶⁰ The shelling destroyed thousands of homes and damaged water sources as well as medical facilities.⁶¹ The Zamzam camp to the south of the city was also increasingly shelled by the RSF from May 2024 and attacks intensified when the DJPF moved towards the camp in late November 2024.⁶² Between 11 and 13 April 2025, the RSF launched a large-scale ground offensive on the camp, destroying shelter, markets, and healthcare facilities, and burning parts of the camp, which has been under its control since then.⁶³ The RSF said the camp was being used for military purposes, a claim denied by humanitarian actors, which noted that the fighting took place fifteen kilometres away.⁶⁴

Other cities and villages across Sudan were also extensively targeted by both parties. Following the capture of an RSF base by the SAF in Bir Maza in early October 2024, the RSF and allies attacked several villages and towns between Kutum town and Anka (in Kutum locality) that they perceived as supporting the SAF. In the course of these attacks, towns and villages were burnt and looted, causing massive displacement.⁶⁵ After RSF commander Abu Aqla Keikel and his forces defected to the SAF on 20 October 2024, the RSF attacked and looted thirty towns and villages in his stronghold east of Al Gezira, reportedly killings hundreds, committing widespread sexual violence, and displacing more than 100,000 people.⁶⁶

In a similar vein, after recapturing Al Gezira in January 2025, the SAF and their allies launched retaliatory attacks against Kanabi villages, accusing the Kanabi community of siding with the RSF. Homes were burnt, and property and livestock looted.⁶⁷ On 10 January 2025, the Sudan Shield Forces, an armed group fighting alongside the SAF, attacked the village of Tayba in Al Gezira, killing at least twenty-six people, including one child, and injuring many more. The attackers systematically looted property, including food supplies, and set fire to houses.⁶⁸ After the launch of a massive offensive to recapture Khartoum by the SAF in September 2024, warring parties were described by the UN Secretary-General as having 'shown little to no regard for civilian lives and property in their attempt to control the capital'.⁶⁹

The SAF often bombed areas controlled by the RSF.⁷⁰ For instance, on 4 August 2024, the SAF conducted two airstrikes in Zamzam displacement camp, damaging at least sixteen homes and injuring an unknown number of civilians, including children.⁷¹ Between November 2024 and February 2025, the SAF dropped powerful unguided bombs on residential and commercial neighbourhoods in Nyala in South Darfur, a city of more than 800,000 inhabitants that had fallen under RSF control in late October 2023. Scores of civilians, including women and children, died as a result. Human Rights Watch reported

that the SAF carried out five airstrikes on 3 February 2025 using (among others) unguided high-explosive munitions. At least thirty-two civilians were killed and dozens more were injured. A strike on a peanut-oil factory on 4 February 2025 killed at least twenty-five and injured twenty-one.⁷²

These consistent violations of the principle of distinction, some amounting to attacks directed against the civilian population and civilian objects and others indiscriminate in nature, are likely to amount to war crimes in many instances, including of terror attacks.

Attacks against medical facilities

Sudan's health system has been devastated by the ongoing conflicts.⁷³ The scale of destruction and damage to medical infrastructure, often intentional, by both the SAF and the RSF, coupled with the targeting of medical personnel (see below),⁷⁴ have driven the healthcare system in Sudan to near collapse.⁷⁵ Since the outbreak of the conflict, many hundreds of attacks on health facilities have been recorded and fewer than one in four facilities in affected areas remain operational.⁷⁶ Darfur has been especially impacted. About half of the reported attacks took place during the siege of El Fasher and, by March 2025, more than 200 medical facilities were no longer operational in the city.⁷⁷ At the same time, the health facilities still functioning faced severe shortages of medical equipment, medicine, and staff.⁷⁸ As a result, two in three Sudanese civilians no longer have access to basic health services,⁷⁹ while more than 20 million required medical attention for injury, malnutrition, or disease.⁸⁰

The RSF conducted widespread and systematic attacks against healthcare facilities across Sudan, including Al Gezira, Khartoum, and North Darfur, attacking hospitals and medical centres, killing or harassing medical personnel and patients, and looting medical supplies.⁸¹ In particular, attacks on facilities in and around El Fasher, including those in the surrounding displacement camps, intensified from May 2024 onwards.⁸² By April 2025, only one healthcare facility inside El Fasher remained partly operational and all medical facilities had been destroyed in Abu Shouk camp. In addition, the transfer of patients forced by the closure of medical facilities became more dangerous, as relatives attempting to evacuate patients were sometimes shot and the RSF tightened their control of the roads.⁸³

Despite their denials,⁸⁴ the RSF has repeatedly shelled and raided several hospitals in Khartoum since the beginning of the conflict.⁸⁵ They attacked and looted Al-Hilaliya hospital in Al Gezira in late November 2024, threatening to kill medical staff as they did so.⁸⁶ In January 2025, a drone strike on Al Saudi Hospital – the last functioning civilian hospital in El Fasher – killed around 70 people, including patients, and left the facility severely damaged. Although it was not certain whether the SAF or the RSF had conducted the attack, residents blamed the RSF for the attack.⁸⁷

Attacks on medical facilities or their surroundings were also launched by the SAF, notably in Khartoum, northern Darfur (including El Fasher), and West Kordofan.⁸⁸ Since late August 2024, the SAF's bombing campaign intensified across much of Darfur and central Sudan. Medical facilities, along with other civilian objects, have been struck, with the SAF claiming that military presence at those sites warranted the strikes.⁸⁹ In particular, the SAF mounted several airstrikes on Ed Daein (East Darfur) on 20 August 2024, targeting the teaching hospital and the kidney dialysis centre (which only reopened nine months later),⁹⁰ in addition to the city's Grand Market next to the Grand Mosque and El Khansaa Elementary School for Girls.⁹¹ Reports indicate that the strikes killed a dozen civilians and left many others wounded.⁹²

It is unclear whether the victims were exclusively patients. Notably, however, no RSF personnel were reportedly killed or injured, gainsaying an alleged military presence. Under IHL, medical units must be respected and protected by the parties to the conflict.⁹³ Their special protection may be temporarily lost if they are used to commit 'acts harmful to the enemy' outside their humanitarian duties, after due warning and a time limit have been given and remained unheeded.⁹⁴ In such a case, the rule of proportionality in attack still applies.

Attacks against humanitarian aid

Humanitarian facilities have been also targeted and/or affected in crossfire during the reporting period,⁹⁵ violating the rules on the protection against attack of civilian objects and the duty to protect and respect humanitarian relief. On 19 December 2024, the World Food Programme (WFP) Field Office Compound in Yabus (Blue Nile) was bombed from the air; three staff were killed in the attack.⁹⁶ Although the area was reported to be under the control of the SPLM-North Al-Hilu faction, the Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while condemning the attack, said the SAF were not conducting any military operations in the area at the time.⁹⁷ Despite the UN's call for an investigation,⁹⁸ the perpetrator has not been identified. Although the RSF possess drones, including long-range aircraft, the SAF are the only party with manned combat aircraft.⁹⁹

On 29 May 2025, the RSF shelled a WFP facility in El Fasher, damaging a workshop, an office building and a clinic.¹⁰⁰ On 2 June, a drone strike hit a joint WFP and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) humanitarian convoy. The attack killed five humanitarian workers and injured several others, also damaging several trucks with food supplies destined for El Fasher. The parties to the conflict had been informed of the convoy's route, and the fifteen trucks had WFP and UNICEF markings. The convoy was struck after the RSF reportedly halted it near El Koma while authorization to proceed to El Fasher was pending.¹⁰¹ The UN also called for an urgent investigation and for accountability.¹⁰² While none of WFP, UNICEF, and the UN attributed responsibility, the RSF controlled El Koma and most of northern Darfur at the time of the attack.¹⁰³

Attacks against water and electricity infrastructure

During the reporting period, other critical infrastructure, notably supporting water and the generation of electricity, was targeted or heavily damaged in the course of fighting between the RSF and the SAF.¹⁰⁴ Whereas the RSF relied predominantly on artillery shelling until early 2025 before resorting also to drone strikes, the SAF frequently bombarded sites from the air.¹⁰⁵

The RSF in particular systematically attacked water infrastructure, particularly in areas predominantly inhabited by non-Arab ethnic groups¹⁰⁶ and around El Fasher.¹⁰⁷ For instance, after briefly seizing Golo water reservoir and cutting off its supply of water to El Fasher (its primary water source) and the nearby IDP camps – in February 2025, the RSF damaged water systems in Shagra, aggravating the existing water shortages in the city.¹⁰⁸ A water truck supplying Saudi hospital in El Fasher was destroyed by artillery fire in May, depriving 1,000 patients of water.¹⁰⁹ On multiple occasions, the SAF attacked wells in near-by Mellit once they fell under RSF control.¹¹⁰

On several occasions, electricity infrastructure across Sudan was hit by drone strikes attributed to the RSF. This includes an attack in early April 2025 on Merowe dam, which supplies up to forty per cent of Sudan's electricity. The following month, several

power stations in Omdurman were hit, further disrupting electricity supply and causing large-scale blackouts.¹¹¹ The RSF also frequently targeted El Fasher's grid, interrupting electricity and internet services for prolonged periods of time.¹¹² The blackouts disrupted water systems as well as hospitals and other vital services.¹¹³ In April 2025, fuel shortages in El Fasher and the surrounding camps affected the functioning of wells, meaning it took up to forty-eight hours to fill a single jerrycan in Zamzam camp.¹¹⁴ Attacks on essential infrastructure and resulting water supply breakdowns have sparked a cholera epidemic across Sudan: since the outbreak in July 2024, 83,000 cases and 2,100 deaths have been reported.¹¹⁵

Civilians under Attack

A persistent feature of the Sudan conflicts, particularly the NIAC between the SAF and the RSF, has been the 'continued, coordinated large-scale attacks on civilians'. From July 2024 to April 2025, more than 400 incidents were recorded in which parties to the conflict killed and injured a total of 5,000 civilians through a combination of artillery, airstrikes, and drone attacks.¹¹⁶

Civilians were often targeted based on their ethnicity or because of their real or perceived affiliation with the enemy.¹¹⁷ The violations concern not only war crimes but, given the widespread and systematic nature of the attacks on civilians, also crimes against humanity. The Fact-Finding Mission found, with respect to the RSF, that these crimes include extermination.¹¹⁸ In Kutum locality, for instance, the RSF killed more than fifty inhabitants of villages and town perceived as sympathetic to the SAF. In East Al Gezira, reprisals by the RSF following the desertion of one of their senior commanders saw hundreds of civilians killed, including up to 124 in Al Sireha town alone, with particular targeting of those from the senior commander's tribe. The RSF entered villages and towns firing indiscriminately at residents with heavy machine guns.¹¹⁹

The SAF also engaged in ethnic and retaliatory attacks against unarmed civilians in villages with ethnic Kabani. At least twenty-six civilians including a child were killed in Tayba village and sixteen others in Dar al-Salam al-Hideba village.¹²⁰ The SAF similarly targeted the Arab Rizeigat community in Senmar for perceived support to the RSF.¹²¹ On Christmas Day 2025, an attack on the village of Julud in the Nuba Mountains region of South Kordofan State killed twelve and injured nineteen Christians who were celebrating the day.¹²²

Attacks against markets

The SAF conducted airstrikes on markets in areas controlled by the RSF, often alleging a military presence (that might or might not exist).¹²³ Even if soldiers were present, the attacks may violate the IHL rules of proportionality and precautions in attack. On 1 June 2025, for instance, the SAF hit the main market in Al Koma in North Darfur, near El Fasher, during peak hours, killing dozens of civilians and injuring many others, including market vendors, women, and children. An earlier attack on the same market in October 2024 killed at least forty-five civilians and wounded many hundreds.¹²⁴ The following month, airstrikes in Omdurman, including on Gandahar Markat in Ombada, killed at least 62 civilians and injured 200 others, reportedly with the use of barrel bombs, decimating shops and homes.¹²⁵

In December 2024, a wave of SAF attacks launched on busy markets killed up to 200 civilians. In one, the SAF dropped eight bombs on the market in Kabkabiya on 9 December

2024, killing up to 100 and injuring dozens more. The market was destroyed and several shops were burned down.¹²⁶ The SAF justified these attacks as targeting sites and facilities used by the RSF. In particular, the SAF claimed to have targeted ‘gatherings’ in Kabkabiya, inflicting damage on a combat vehicle with its crew and commander (lieutenant colonel) as well as on a truck carrying weapons and ammunition. According to neutral local sources, most of the victims appeared to be civilian vendors, including women and children. Although RSF fighters are occasionally present in markets, they are mainly frequented by civilians.¹²⁷ Other attacks, such as the one on 24 March 2025 that struck Tora market, north of El Fasher, involved use by the SAF of imprecise barrel-bombs and caused extensive civilian harm and killed livestock, disrupting food access. Sometimes, as was the case in Tora, the market was among the last accessible sources of food in the entire region.¹²⁸

The RSF also attacked markets during the reporting period, in particular shelling Sabreen market in Karari, Omdurman, on 23 September 2024 and again on 1 February 2025. Up to sixty civilians were killed and many others wounded as a result of these attacks.¹²⁹ The RSF also repeatedly shelled local markets in North Darfur, particularly in El Fasher and its surroundings, notably the Al Mawashi livestock market on 3 and 4 July and 26 September 2024, killing more than forty civilians and damaging the livestock market.¹³⁰ Naivasha market in Abu Shouk camp was repeatedly bombed by the RSF – in August, November, and December 2024 and in January, March, May, and June 2025.¹³¹ Similarly, ground offensives launched by the RSF in 2024 and 2025 set ablaze markets and villages. In particular, during February 2025 ground offensive on Zamzam displacement camp (see above), the RSF burned down the majority of the market.¹³² The RSF and its allies destroyed and burned farmland and crops, particularly in eastern Darfur at the end of 2024 and then in the vicinity of El Fasher in April 2025.¹³³

Attacks against medical and humanitarian personnel

Even though both parties to the conflict have deliberately targeted medical personnel, the RSF account for the vast majority of such attacks – 159 were recorded since the beginning of the conflict by September 2025.¹³⁴ In January 2025 alone, four attacks on medical facilities killed a total of seventy medical personnel and wounded twenty-one.¹³⁵ While transferring patients to El Fasher, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) ambulance staff were shot at on 24 December 2024 and again on 10 January 2025.¹³⁶ On 11 April 2025, the RSF killed ten staff of the medical clinic and injured several others in Zamzam camp – it was the only clinic still operating there.¹³⁷ These attacks on civilians are also serious violations of the special protection IHL affords to medical personnel.¹³⁸

From July 2024 to April 2025, the International NGO Safety Organisation recorded 103 incidents impacting humanitarian workers in Sudan, including thirty distinct attacks.¹³⁹ WFP staff were killed by an aerial bombardment that struck the agency’s field office in Yabus on 19 December 2024, and other WFP personnel were among those killed and injured by the drone attack on a joint WFP-UNICEF convoy on 2 June 2025. Responsibility for the December 2024 attack appears to rest with the SAF, while the June 2025 attacks are presumed to be attributable to the RSF who controlled the area and are known to use drones extensive for such operations. In May 2024, a convoy of three ICRC vehicles was attacked in Layba in South Darfur, killing two ICRC drivers and injuring three other staff.¹⁴⁰ According to the ICRC, ‘Sudan has been one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Red Cross/Red Crescent worker’.¹⁴¹

Starvation as a method of warfare

Attacks on food systems, coupled with the impediment of humanitarian relief and the imposition of sieges in certain localities have resulted in the world's largest hunger crisis, with approximately 25 million people – half of Sudan's population – facing acute hunger, and 5 million women and children suffering from malnutrition at the end of the reporting period.¹⁴² People trapped in conflict-affected areas and in displacement camps have been at particular risk of starvation.¹⁴³

On 1 August 2024, the IPC's Famine Review Committee declared that the situation in Zamzam camp – home to hundreds of thousands of IDPs – amounted to famine.¹⁴⁴ Siege-like conditions inside the camp¹⁴⁵ and restrictions on humanitarian aid imposed by the RSF were said to be the main driving forces behind this.¹⁴⁶ By blocking delivery of food, medicine, and other essential supplies, the RSF also prevented the treatment of thousands of children suffering from acute malnutrition in the camp.¹⁴⁷

Since the famine was first confirmed in August 2024, the situation has further deteriorated owing to the active besieging of civilian areas and restrictions on food supplies imposed by parties to the conflict, primarily the RSF but also the SAF. Famine and hunger spread across Darfur, and in December 2024, the IPC assessed that famine had also occurred in Abu Shouk and Al Salam camps, as well as in the Western Nuba mountains in South Kordofan state, and projected this would continue and expand to other localities in North Darfur, including Al Lait, At Tawisha, El Fasher, Melit, and Um Kadadah.¹⁴⁸ The rising food and supply crisis in Dilling (South Kordofan) was caused and exacerbated by intense fighting and siege conditions imposed by the RSF and SPLM-N al-Hilu for more than nine months.¹⁴⁹ With child mortality of two deaths a day, the SAF decided to airdrop aid in late August 2024.¹⁵⁰

The RSF siege of Dilling city also resulted in a sharp increase in malnutrition cases, rising from a reported 190 in June 2024 to 917 by September, although the actual figures were expected to be far higher.¹⁵¹ Residents are reported to have resorted to eating tree leaves, leather, and animal feed to survive.¹⁵² People trapped in El Fasher likewise faced starvation, as all trade routes and supply lines were blocked for over a year, preventing food deliveries. Some families in the city resorted to eating animal fodder and food waste to survive.¹⁵³

Sieges are not per se unlawful under IHL, provided their purpose is only to achieve a military objective and not to starve the civilian population. But the prohibition of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population are enshrined in treaty and custom.¹⁵⁴ Given that the inhabitants were not permitted to leave, and that foodstuffs and other essential supplies were not allowed to enter the besieged areas, the RSF's actions are likely war crimes.

In addition to attacks and insecurity that forced humanitarian organizations repeatedly to suspend or reduce their operations, access restrictions as well as bureaucratic and administrative burdens imposed by both the SAF and the RSF have considerably impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance.¹⁵⁵ Humanitarian agencies have been denied or faced significant delays in securing visas and permission to travel, have been forced to accept armed escorts (at high cost); aid has been diverted (or looted), and efforts were made to interfere in prioritization and beneficiary selection.¹⁵⁶

The SAF prevented trucks loaded with food aid from entering the country through the main crossing from Chad into Sudan at Adré. The Adré crossing was closed from February to August 2024, following an order issued by the Sudanese government that claimed

the measure was to stop weapons smuggling.¹⁵⁷ To comply with the order, trucks were required to take a 200-mile detour to Tine, a crossing controlled by a militia allied with the SAF, through which they could enter Darfur. Since the diversion was both dangerous and expensive and took up to five times longer than transiting through Adré, only a small fraction of the trucks carrying food were getting through (320 instead of the thousands that were needed). During the closure of the Adré crossing, the number of people facing acute malnutrition or starvation rose from 1.7 million to 7 million.¹⁵⁸ Although the re-opening of Adré crossing improved the movement of relief supplies, humanitarian access to Darfur has continued to be impeded. Thus, the same month the crossing reopened, dozens of trucks in Al Gezira, Darfur, and Khartoum were denied access or delayed.¹⁵⁹

Parties to a NIAC are required by IHL to 'allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right of control.'¹⁶⁰ While humanitarian relief is subject to the consent of the parties concerned, that consent may not be withheld arbitrarily.¹⁶¹

Attacks against displaced persons and forced displacement

As a result of the intense shelling and attacks on IDP camps by the RSF, many displaced civilians were killed, injured, or re-displaced.¹⁶² For instance, since early 2025, the RSF intensified artillery strikes on the Abu Shouk camp, which shelters civilians especially from non-Arab communities. The attacks killed more than 300 and injured many others, triggering mass displacement.¹⁶³ Likewise, Zamzam camp was increasingly and repeatedly shelled by the RSF starting in May 2024, apparently on ethnic grounds as the RSF consider certain communities, particularly the Zaghawa, to be allied with the SAF and the Darfur Joint Protection Forces. According to a witness, the RSF 'burned everything. They claimed they only wanted to fight soldiers, but they punished the whole community. It felt like they wanted to remove us because of who we are'. When storming the camp on 11 and 12 February 2025, the RSF killed at least 30 people and injured 21 others.¹⁶⁴

During a ground offensive on the camp from 11 to 13 April 2025, the RSF and their allies fired indiscriminately at residents, killing hundreds. The RSF alleged the camp was being used for military purposes by the SAF, a claim refuted by residents and humanitarian groups.¹⁶⁵ As a result of the attacks, more than 400,000 inhabitants (around eighty-one per cent of the camp's population) were again displaced, fleeing towards Tawilah or back to El Fasher.¹⁶⁶ Abu Shouk camp endured almost daily artillery shelling from the RSF, similarly forcing many of its 190,000 inhabitants to flee.¹⁶⁷ Fleeing civilians were also attacked by the RSF on roads or at checkpoints. For instance, in mid-January 2025, the RSF attacked a civilian convoy of dozens of vehicles close to the Chadian border. Although the convoy had been assured safe passage through areas controlled by the RSF and was escorted by neutral forces, at a checkpoint at the entrance of Kabkabiya, the RSF stopped the convoy and fired at it. Civilians tried to escape, but thirty were murdered.¹⁶⁸

The siege of the city of El Fasher, which started in May 2024, and related attacks caused the displacement of more than 470,000 from the city and its surrounding displacement camps (Abu Shouk, Shagra, and Zamzam camps).¹⁶⁹ The area experienced successive waves of displacement in spring 2025. First, intensified fighting in and around El Fasher in March forced thousands to flee to Zamzam camp.¹⁷⁰ Then, in mid-April 2025, after the RSF seized the Zamzam camp following a four-day assault that left hundreds dead or wounded, tens of thousands of camp residents fled on foot to El Fasher.

At the same time, El Fasher came under heavy shelling and RSF ground attacks. The RSF alleged that the camp had been used for military purposes, denied targeting civilians, and claimed to have organized voluntary evacuations for those fleeing El Fasher and nearby displacement sites.¹⁷¹ However, humanitarian actors and residents reported attacks on and violence against vulnerable civilians, including women, children, and older persons.¹⁷²

Forced displacement in Sudan is thus a dire concern. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the conflict between the SAF and the RSF has caused internal displacement of 10 million and forced a further 4.2 million to seek safety in neighbouring countries by the end of the reporting period.¹⁷³ As a result, Sudan has been described as ‘the largest displacement crisis in the world’.¹⁷⁴ Forced displacement is only permissible under IHL where the security of civilians or imperative military reasons (such as clearing a combat zone) require the temporary evacuation from the area of the civilian population. Under no circumstances can the persecution of the civilian population justify its removal.¹⁷⁵ Once displacement occurs, all possible measures must be taken in order that displaced civilians are provided with satisfactory conditions, for example of shelter and food but also of safety.¹⁷⁶ They must be respected and protected.

Alleged use of chemical weapons

Reports indicate that the SAF used chemical weapons against the RSF in 2023 and 2024, leading the United States to impose sanctions on Sudan on 22 May 2025 under its domestic Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991.¹⁷⁷ According to reports, in addition to using a riot-control and vomiting agent (chloropicrin) as a method of warfare in Omdurman in September 2023, the SAF used chlorine gas against RSF positions on two occasions in late 2024 in remote areas of Sudan.¹⁷⁸ Chlorine can kill and, in survivors, cause lasting damage to human tissue and severe respiratory pain.¹⁷⁹

Use of chlorine gas in warfare against anyone, military or civilian, is similarly prohibited under the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention¹⁸⁰ to which Sudan is a State Party. Few members of the SAF were reportedly aware of the chemical weapons programme in Sudan, but, according to two US officials speaking on condition of anonymity, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the leader of the SAF, authorized the use of chemical weapons.¹⁸¹ Sudan rejected the allegations,¹⁸² instead accusing the RSF of employing chemical weapons. It also criticized the United States for failing to submit the claim to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), while, in Khartoum’s view, ignoring crimes committed by the RSF.¹⁸³

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Persons in the power of the SAF and RSF were subjected to a series of abuses, including executions, torture, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and sexual and gender-based violence. In several cases, these IHL violations were motivated by ethnic considerations and/or alleged affiliations.¹⁸⁴ These amounted to both war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Murder of civilians and persons hors de combat

Murder was prevalent during the reporting period, notably in connection with torture. On 7 March 2025, a mass grave was found at an RSF base near the village of Garri after it was retaken by the SAF. There were at least 550 unmarked burial sites, many of which contained multiple bodies. The detainees had been tortured or starved to death.¹⁸⁵ In 2024,

multiple incidents were documented of unarmed enemy soldiers being summarily executed by both the RSF and the SAF and, in some cases, subsequently mutilated.¹⁸⁶ At the end of April 2025, a group of between fifteen and twenty-five male detainees were beaten with sticks and whips and then shot dead by the RSF in Salha (Omdurman).¹⁸⁷

Numerous incidents involved fleeing civilians, including women and children, being killed on the road or at checkpoints by the RSF. The main victims of these violations were members of non-Arab communities (Fur, Masalit, Tunjur, and Zaghawa).¹⁸⁸ In the course of retaliatory attacks following the defection of the Commander Abu Agla Keikel in late October 2024, the RSF rounded up and executed men and boys in Al Sihera, targeting those it perceived as having been affiliated to him. In videos recorded by the RSF, some detainees appeared with bloodstained clothing or were forced to mimic animal sounds. The fate of the male detainees appearing on the videos remains unknown, but piles of bodies were spotted by fleeing residents, while satellite imagery suggest that new graves had appeared in the village in the aftermath of the attack.¹⁸⁹

Summary execution of IDPs has occurred particularly in RSF-controlled areas. During the ground offensive by the RSF and allies against Zamzam camp in mid-April 2025, which left hundreds, if not thousands, dead (mostly women and children), actual or perceived members and associates of the SAF and their allies were summarily executed by the attackers.¹⁹⁰ On 27 April 2025, the RSF reportedly executed thirty-one civilians, including children, in Omdurman, accusing them of affiliation with the SAF.¹⁹¹

The SAF were involved in similar atrocities. In areas recaptured by the SAF and its allies between September 2024 and January 2025, reports of extrajudicial executions of RSF members and alleged supporters emerged, notably in Al-Dinder and Sinja (Sennar state), and Wad Madani (Al Gezira state).¹⁹² In mid-January 2025, when the SAF retook Wad Madani, a male civilian was beaten and then thrown from a bridge and shot. One of the perpetrators was recorded as saying ‘this is in revenge for all our martyrs’.¹⁹³ Similar incidents occurred when the SAF and allied groups advanced towards and retook Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahri from January to late March 2025. Civilians were beaten, insulted, and killed by the SAF and their allies – accused of being members of the RSF.¹⁹⁴ In some instances, bodies were subsequently mutilated.¹⁹⁵ For instance, on 25 March 2025, in Umbada (south Omdurman), a man in civilian clothes decapitated the body of one of the six individuals executed by soldiers and brandished his head.¹⁹⁶

Torture

Both the SAF and RSF and their allies have engaged in a consistent pattern of torture and other forms of ill-treatment against both civilians and military personnel who were *hors de combat*.¹⁹⁷ The SAF beat and lashed their victims with iron cables, whips, and firearms, slashed their fingers and pulled out their toenails,¹⁹⁸ while the RSF commonly lashed and beat their victims with cables, whips, and firearms.¹⁹⁹ Victims reported being blindfolded and often lost consciousness due to the pain and suffering they endured.²⁰⁰ The torture inside detention centres, operated by both the SAF and RSF, would sometimes be inflicted for hours at a stretch or even in some instances days.²⁰¹

Detainees were held in overcrowded cells (some prisoners had to sleep standing), systematically deprived of food, water, and medical care, sometimes leading to their deaths.²⁰² In 2024, young boys were among the victims, and, in some cases, they were forced to participate in torture themselves.²⁰³ The RSF's Soba prison in Khartoum has been described by detainees as a ‘slaughterhouse’, with at least fifty detainees said to have died from torture

and inhumane conditions between June and October 2024.²⁰⁴ One victim detained by the SAF in Serkab prison (Karari, Omdurman) was hit with a hammer, forced to sit naked on a metal chair, with weights attached to his genitals, and subject to electric shocks.²⁰⁵ Arrests and interrogations by the SAF were typically based on suspicion of collaboration or association with the RSF.²⁰⁶

In several incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (see below), the women and girls were sexually assaulted by RSF soldiers in front of their family members which added to the trauma experienced by family members who witnessed the attacks. This also compounded stigma and other social consequences for survivors' and relatives.²⁰⁷ All these abuses were often committed for the purpose of intimidation, coercion, punishment, or to obtain confessions, as well as on discriminatory bases such as ethnicity, making the ill-treatment punishable as the war crime of torture.²⁰⁸

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty and hostage-taking

During the reporting period, arbitrary deprivation of liberty has continued to be a major concern, with many civilians subjected to these practices by the SAF and RSF. Many instances of hostage-taking have been also recorded.²⁰⁹

In areas under RSF control – particularly Darfur and Khartoum, as well as other localities – civilians were arrested, most often in their homes or at checkpoints. Arrests were made upon allegations of collaboration with the SAF, including on ethnic grounds, on the basis of information obtained from other civilians, whether for personal benefit or through torture, after preventing the RSF from abducting women and girls or looting, or on the basis of accusations of cattle theft or other crimes.²¹⁰ Civilians who remained in Khartoum after it came under the control of the RSF were also targeted while trying to reach markets to buy food.²¹¹ Civilians were detained secretly in various detention facilities, some of which were improvised, and none was charged, appeared before a court, or had access to legal representation or means of communication.²¹²

The SAF released hundreds of military and civilian prisoners from detention facilities previously controlled by the RSF in Khartoum and White Nile state, where around 4,700 prisoners were held in appalling conditions (several dying as a result).²¹³ Similarly, the RSF detained significant numbers of male youths in El Fasher in 2024 upon suspicion of their being informants.²¹⁴ Their fate remains unknown.

In turn, in areas retaken by the SAF or at checkpoints manned by them, people who had been living under the control of the RSF were arrested and detained on the grounds they were associated with the RSF. They were then reportedly held incommunicado without due process or judicial review, with the exception of one individual who appeared before a judge and was subsequently released after more than two months in detention.²¹⁵ In Khartoum, over which the SAF gained full control on 7 April 2025, civilians accused of collaborating with the RSF were subjected to mass arrest with some summarily executed or with their fate unknown.²¹⁶ Since May 2024, the DJPF also conducted widespread arbitrary arrests of people suspected of collaborating with the RSF in El Fasher, notably young males, human rights activists, and journalists. Arab youths were specially targeted.²¹⁷

Reports indicate that in several instances, the RSF and affiliated groups demanded substantial ransom payments (US\$1,000 or more) for the release of detainees (including, on occasion, doctors), who were tortured or otherwise ill-treated until the ransom was paid.²¹⁸ Some detainees were released after giving all their belongings to their captors.²¹⁹ Others were freed after their families paid the ransom.²²⁰ A steady rise in abductions has been observed,

mainly by the RSF and affiliated groups, with displacement camps, particularly in Darfur, becoming regular sites for kidnappings of members of ethnic groups such as the Dajo, Fur, and Zaghawa.²²¹ Ransom payments were sometimes used to acquire weapons or sustain logistical and other military needs.²²² Deprivation of liberty has sometimes been linked to sexual violence or forced recruitment, with some of the victims being teenagers.²²³

As neither grounds for detention nor procedural safeguards were provided, most of these incidents amount to arbitrary deprivation of liberty.²²⁴ The fact that people had been detained and ill-treated until their families paid a ransom, or to compel action in the belligerent's interest, is constitutive of hostage-taking and a serious violation of IHL and a war crime.²²⁵

Enforced disappearance

Incommunicado detention often involved enforced disappearances.²²⁶ As detailed above, the fate of many individuals detained by the SAF and the RSF has remained unknown. In particular, the fate of more than 150 civilians detained by the RSF in Al-Sireha at the end of October 2024 was unknown at the time of writing.²²⁷ Similarly, the fate of male and young people arrested en masse by the RSF in El Fasher in 2024 upon suspicion of being informants remains unknown.²²⁸ Enforced disappearance is prohibited under customary IHL in all armed conflicts.²²⁹

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) – which includes rape, gang rape, forced nudity, abduction, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, and forced marriage²³⁰ – is a defining feature of the conflicts in Sudan.²³¹ It is 'systematic, widespread and used as a weapon of war' – crimes that are enabled by rampant impunity.²³² During the reporting period, the age of SGBV victims ranged from six to seventy-five years.²³³

The RSF and their allies have been the main perpetrators, systematically committing SGBV throughout Sudan's conflict zones and using extreme cruelty in their humiliation and subjugation of women and girls especially in non-Arab communities.²³⁴ In Darfur, the most affected communities were Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa, which the RSF associate with the SAF. Racial slurs and statements that rape would 'improve' the victims' race were used as a means of dehumanization.²³⁵

Rapes were committed in public places, in homes, in abandoned buildings and forested areas; they often involved multiple perpetrators; and they were usually combined with attacks on homes, beatings, and looting.²³⁶ In one incident in June 2025, the victim was stopped at a checkpoint while fleeing El Fasher and the RSF took her and several other women and girls (aged fifteen to seventeen years) to an abandoned building, where they were all raped. Some victims were visibly pregnant at the time of the assault, while others became pregnant as a result.²³⁷

In Al-Sireha, twenty-five cases of rape and gang rape were documented, with ten girls among the victims.²³⁸ As a result, one eleven-year-old girl died due to severe bleeding; three women killed themselves; and other survivors suffered from severe wounds and bleeding.²³⁹ Sexual violence in Sudan has been described by the ICRC as 'both a cause and consequence of forced displacement. Some people reported they immediately fled their homes because of sexual violence, while others were targeted as they were trying to reach safety.'²⁴⁰

Another recurring pattern is abduction for sexual exploitation and/or enslavement by the RSF in areas under their control, notably in south and north Darfur, Khartoum, and

El Fasher. Victims were raped over extended periods; some were sold or taken to the perpetrator's home; and many were reported missing.²⁴¹ In addition, the RSF specifically targeted nurses and medical workers with sexual violence, after forcing them to treat injured RSF soldiers. In cases of refusal (or inability to treat the RSF soldier), women were beaten, raped, gang raped, and sexually enslaved. Those who resisted being raped were tortured and killed.²⁴² Women human rights defenders and frontline workers have been raped and sometimes killed for assisting victims and documenting cases of sexual violence.²⁴³

Some incidents involving members of the SAF have also been also reported, notably in White Nile, Blue Nile, Khartoum, and Northern state.²⁴⁴ SGBV committed by the SAF includes rape, and sexualized torture of female and male detainees, or upon those fleeing.²⁴⁵ In 2024, rapes committed by the DJPF were reported in El Fasher.²⁴⁶

A particularly worrying trend is the increased number of incidents of sexual violence committed against children, with 221 rape cases and 77 cases of sexual assault recorded by UNICEF in 2024. Among the victims, two thirds were girls and the remainder were boys, with sixteen victims under five years of age, including four one-year-olds.²⁴⁷ A rise in SGBV committed against IDPs in shelters and informal displacement sites was recorded in 2024. Displaced women and girls have been especially vulnerable owing to overcrowded camps, separation from male relatives during flight, accommodation by strangers, or the need to walk long distance to access essential services such as water or toilets.²⁴⁸ Shortage of food and water compelled women and girls to go to remote areas to fetch water or seek livelihoods, thereby exposing them more often to sexual violence, including rape and gang rape. Abuses were mainly committed by the RSF and allied militias, and, at times, by herders from Arab communities.²⁴⁹

The true scale of sexual violence in Sudan is severely underreported and reported cases are therefore not representative of the true magnitude of sexual violence in Sudan.²⁵⁰ Significant underreporting is driven by stigma, shame, fear of reprisal related to incidents of sexual violence, lack of access to health facilities, displacement of the victims and limited trust in national institutions.²⁵¹ More specifically, survivors of SGBV – notably when committed by the RSF – have had limited access to support services because of the collapse of healthcare in Sudan.²⁵² Moreover, the RSF repeatedly intimidated medical personnel with a view to preventing them from reporting SGBV.²⁵³ When committed by the SAF, acts of SGBV have been also under-reported for fear of retaliation and perceived sympathy for the SAF in some areas.²⁵⁴ In any case, SGBV, particularly when committed against men and boys, has been under-reported because of the particular stigma associated with it.²⁵⁵

Sexual violence is prohibited under IHL as violence to life and person, and outrages upon personal dignity.²⁵⁶ The prohibition encompasses rape, enforced prostitution, and other forms of sexual violence, as well as cruel or degrading treatment. These prohibitions are enshrined in treaty and customary law, and serious violations are war crimes.²⁵⁷

Child recruitment

Neither the SAF nor the RSF appears to be concerned about the age of their recruits.²⁵⁸ In 2024, parties to the conflicts have recruited, trained, armed and used children in various capacities, including as bodyguards, informers, and members of combat units. While the RSF and allied militias are known for systematically recruiting and using children in hostilities, including through tribal leaders or with promises of weapons, salaries, and 'spoils of war', the SAF have also recruited children under the guise of popular mobilization. These children have been tasked with conducting patrols, manning checkpoints,

conducting searches, carrying weapons, monitoring detainees, undertaking acts of pillage, committing arson, and even perpetrating acts of torture in detention centres.²⁵⁹ Children were also abducted by the RSF, including for the purposes of recruitment and use.²⁶⁰

Although information regarding the age of recruits is scarce, some of the victims prior to the reporting period were undoubtedly under fifteen years of age – the minimum permissible under IHL. In particular, claims emerged that the RSF had recruited children aged fourteen as prison guards,²⁶¹ and that the SAF had provided automatic rifles and bullets to others as young as ten.²⁶² Hundreds of children between the ages of twelve and fourteen years were enrolled in military camps near Shendi in River Nile state through ‘popular resistance’. For example, thirteen-year-old Mohammad told how he had been conscripted – being instructed to fight ‘to prove his manhood’.²⁶³

Persons with disabilities

According to a 2008 census, more than 1.85 million people – 4.8 per cent of Sudan’s population – were living with disabilities, with rural areas over-represented in this figure.²⁶⁴ Other sources, however, estimate between 1.9 million and 3.8 million (10–15 per cent of the total population).²⁶⁵ Inevitably, the conflict is increasing the number of persons with disabilities. Injuries from bullets, shelling, and bombings often lead to amputations and severe burns.²⁶⁶ Horrific treatment inflicted on detainees, notably by the RSF, have resulted in permanent physical and psychological disabilities. For instance, after being freed from Garri military base in March 2025, some civilians were so traumatized that they could not walk or speak, while others whose serious injuries had not been treated, had permanent impairments. One detainee was beaten so frequently that he adopted a prolonged foetal position to protect himself and he has since been unable to straighten his legs to walk.²⁶⁷ Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence likewise endure long-term physical and psychological consequences.²⁶⁸

In addition, starvation and chronic malnutrition, especially among children, can cause lasting damage, including stunted growth; gut and body inflammation; cardiovascular disease; hypertension; impaired cognitive development; and metabolic disorders.²⁶⁹ People exposed to famine while in utero, particularly during the first half of pregnancy, are more likely to have shorter life expectancy or to develop health problems such as cardiovascular disease or obesity.²⁷⁰ These phenomena are exacerbated by the destruction of and lack of access to health facilities, which prevent millions from receiving adequate treatment and rehabilitation.²⁷¹

Figure 21.1: UN Map of Sudan © United Nations



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22. SYRIA



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

In the aftermath of the pro-democracy uprisings known as the Arab Spring that swept nations in North Africa and the Middle East from December 2010, protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad broke out in March 2011. The protests were brutally suppressed by the Syrian security forces. By January 2012, civil unrest had escalated into multiple non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) across much of the country, opposing the Syrian government, led by Bashar Al-Assad, and a number of non-State armed groups. The Syrian Armed Forces were supported by the Russian armed forces and Iranian-backed militia, in particular Hezbollah. The hostilities had devastating humanitarian consequences with each of the many armed conflicts involving systematic violations of international humanitarian law (IHL). Chemical weapons were used by both the Syrian armed forces and certain non-State armed groups.

During thirteen years of armed conflict in Syria, there were also multiple international armed conflicts (IACs). The emergence in 2013 of Islamic State (also called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, or Da'esh) led to the formation of an international coalition in 2015 ('Operation Inherent Resolve'). Led by the United States and involving more than seventy States, the coalition sought to contain the influence of Islamic State in the region and beyond. As a result, much of the territory that had been under the control of Islamic State from 2013 to 2019 was retaken by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with support from the international coalition. The coalition's military intervention in Syria took place without the consent of the Syrian Government, meaning that it constituted an IAC.

From 2016, Turkish armed forces carried out air and ground operations against both Islamic State and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) along the border between Türkiye and Syria. In so doing, it acted with the help of the Syrian opposition armed group, the Free Syrian Army – and later the Syrian National Army. Türkiye considers the YPG and the SDF as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Türkiye has conducted a series of major military operations that saw it establish control over a part of northern Syria and a belligerent occupation that are part of an IAC with Syria.

Part of Syrian territory, the Golan Heights, has been occupied by Israel since 1967. Israel has also carried out airstrikes on Syrian territory without the consent of the Syrian government, a trend that has continued into the current reporting period. These constitute separate forms of the IAC between Syria and Israel. The situation in Gaza also saw a rise in violent clashes in Syria between United States (US) forces and Iranian-linked militia groups operating under the banner of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI), and reaching the threshold for a NIAC.¹ Although clashes declined after February 2024, with no incidents since December of that year, warnings issued by IRI factions suggest the situation remains highly volatile.

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

The period under review was characterized by a sharp escalation in violence across Syria, resulting in profound, widespread impacts on civilians. Following a large-scale offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), one of Syria's most powerful armed opposition groups, on 27 November 2024, a coalition of armed groups led by HTS launched the 'Repelling the Aggression' campaign against government forces in Aleppo. Simultaneously, Turkish-backed factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) initiated separate offensives targeting SDF-controlled areas in northern Aleppo.

President al-Assad's government fell on 8 December 2024. The incoming government led by HTS² has been engaged in new armed conflicts that have seen further serious violations of IHL. This decisive event transformed the dynamics of armed groups operating in Syria. The operational capacity of Iranian-backed militias significantly degraded, suffering from both persistent Israeli attacks and the loss of their strategic alliance with the Syrian government.³

But peace and stability in Syria remain elusive fifteen years after the outbreak of major armed violence. The interim government under HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa has sought to unify the fragmented armed opposition throughout the country, with varying degrees of success. Persistent divisions among the different groups present in Syria have led to regular clashes, particularly between factions affiliated with the new government and 'remnants' of the former government.

In early March 2025, these tensions led to mass killings of civilians, particularly among the Alawi community, as well as attacks against civilian infrastructure.⁴ Between 28 and 30 April, a further series of violent incidents between supporters of the new government and Druze militias in the predominantly Druze areas of the country involved the killing of many civilians and extensive destruction of buildings. This highlights the difficulties the interim government faces in trying to establish centralized control over diverse factions.⁵

The current reporting period also saw a resurgence in activity by Islamic State. In 2024, reported attacks by the group more than tripled (to around 700) compared to the previous year, involving the killing of a total of 750 soldiers and civilians.⁶ Islamic State maintained a strong operational presence in the first half of 2025.⁷

Türkiye and the SNA have progressively increased the number and extent of their military operations in Syria through to March 2025. In late 2024, the SDF seized control of several towns that had been controlled by the former Syrian government. The SNA launched an offensive against SDF-controlled areas, including Manbij, Kobani, and the east of Aleppo.⁸ As part of this offensive, Türkiye conducted airstrikes that killed and injured many SDF fighters and civilians, and destroyed critical infrastructure within SDF-controlled territory, provoking widespread displacement. The conflict between the SDF and Türkiye, as well as Turkish-backed SNA factions, continued despite the interim government's efforts to unify Syrian opposition groups under its banner.⁹

Following the situation in Gaza from October 2023, Israel intensified its campaign of airstrikes targeting Iranian, Syrian, and Hezbollah positions in Syria, including beyond the 1974 disengagement line. With the change of government in Syria, Israel's attacks increased further, with regular airstrikes targeting military airfields, anti-aircraft batteries, missiles, drones, fighter jets, tanks, arms depots and production sites, and naval facilities.¹⁰ A number of airstrikes seemingly sought to protect Druze communities that had been fighting the new governmental forces.¹¹ As of early 2025, Israel had declared an indefinite military presence on Mount Hermon, sent its troops to the demilitarization areas in southern Syria, and announced plans to expand settlements beyond the occupied Golan Heights. By March 2025, Israel had seized control over key strategic terrain from the new Syrian armed forces.¹²

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

During the reporting period, multiple international and non-international armed conflicts occurred on the territory of Syria. The ongoing IACs were the following:

- Syria (supported by Russia until December 2024) *v* Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR)
- Israel *v* Iran
- Syria *v* Israel
- Syria *v* Türkiye.

Belligerent occupation persisted given that certain parts of the territory claimed by Syria remain under occupation:

- The Golan Heights are under military occupation by Israel
- Parts of northern Syria are under military occupation by Türkiye.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary IHL, in particular on the conduct of hostilities, apply to the four IACs in Syria. While Syria is a State Party to Additional Protocol I of 1977,¹³ Iran, Israel, Türkiye, and the United States are not.

Additionally, multiple NIACs occurred during the reporting period:

- CJTF-OIR operating alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) *v* Islamic State
- Syria (supported until December 2024 by Shia militias, Hezbollah, Russia, and the Wagner Group) *v* Islamic State
- Türkiye (operating alongside the Syrian National Army) *v* SDF
- Israel *v* Hezbollah
- Syria (new government) *v* Pro-Former Government Forces (PFGF).

The establishment of the new government under the HTS leadership of al-Sharaa satisfies the effective control criterion so as to be considered the new governmental authority of Syria. As a result, the HTS ceased to exist as a non-State armed group, leading to the termination of two NIACs to which the HTS was a party: between the HTS and the former Syrian government (supported by Shia militias, Hezbollah, Russia, and the Wagner Group until December 2024) and between the HTS and Islamic State.

The NIACs are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary IHL, in particular on the conduct of hostilities. Since Syria is not a party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,¹⁴ this treaty does not apply.

Syria is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁵ Iran has signed but not ratified the Statute. Although Israel has signed the Statute, it subsequently notified the depositary (the UN Secretary-General) it did not intend to become a party to it.¹⁶ Türkiye is also a State not party and has not signed the Statute.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

Syria continued to witness sustained levels of violence over the course of the second half of 2024 and the first half of 2025, with grave consequences for the civilian population.

Heightened regional tensions, in particular those linked to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, contributed to an escalation of hostilities across Syria. In the lead-up to the flight of President al-Assad to Moscow, the situation deteriorated markedly, with frequent attacks in densely populated urban areas putting civilians at ever greater risk.

The change of government also brought to light further compelling evidence of widespread and systematic murder, arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances, particular in detention facilities that had been under the former government's control. Following the establishment of an interim government, the security landscape remained volatile. Efforts to dismantle remnants of the former government led to renewed clashes, particularly in coastal areas. Targeted and indiscriminate air and ground operations by multiple State and non-State actors in areas under foreign occupation further contributed to persistent civilian harm throughout the reporting period.

These overlapping and intensified hostilities across Syrian territory resulted in a grave deterioration in the protection afforded to civilian infrastructure across the Syrian territory, including specially protected civilian objects such as medical facilities and dams. Airstrikes in populated areas or the vicinity of civilian infrastructure often involved civilian casualties and significant destruction. Patterns of civilian harm from direct, indiscriminate, and disproportionate attacks by armed groups, government forces, and external State actors have all been reported. Landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and explosive remnants of war (ERW) continue to endanger civilian lives, obstruct the population's safe movement and access to services and affect land cultivation and cattle farming.

Concerns were raised regarding the forcible displacement of civilians, especially in the coastal areas of Syria, as well as in the areas under foreign occupation. Looting and destruction of private property were frequently reported, especially in coastal areas and areas under Israeli and Turkish control. Children continued to be recruited by a range of armed groups in Syria, and the absence of effective protection left women and other at-risk populations disproportionately exposed to abuse and discrimination.

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.¹⁷ Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives¹⁸ and, as such, are protected against attack.¹⁹ Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.²⁰

Attacks against medical facilities

Under IHL, medical units and transports must not be attacked and must be protected.²¹ Violations of these obligations may amount to war crimes.²²

In the context of the NIAC between HTS and the former government, most instances of violence against medical units were reported in Idlib and Aleppo governorates, many of which were attributed to former Syrian government forces and the Russian forces operating either jointly with them or on their own. Between 30 November and 3 December 2024, at least fourteen attacks by Russian armed forces on healthcare facilities were recorded.²³ On 1 December 2025, an airstrike by either the Russian military or Syrian armed forces struck key civilian infrastructure in Aleppo city, including the University Hospital, and led to significant civilian harm.²⁴ The following day, further airstrikes struck several medical facilities, significantly damaging the building as well as ambulances and civilian

cars, and causing a power outage.²⁵ The cumulative effect of these strikes was to render inoperable most of the region's healthcare facilities, with fewer than eight of around one hundred remaining functional in the aftermath.²⁶

In the context of the NIAC involving Türkiye and the SNA against the SDF, attacks on medical facilities were also reported. On 18 January 2025, a drone strike seemingly conducted by Turkish armed forces or the SNA hit a Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance marked with protective emblems. The ambulance was carrying civilians wounded by an earlier attack near the Tishre Dam to Tabqa hospital.²⁷ In skirmishes in December 2025 between the Syrian army and the SDF, Syrian Civil Defence said two of its rescuers were injured after the vehicle in which they were travelling was fired upon by the SDF, while two children also suffered 'various injuries' from SDF gunfire at a major roundabout in Aleppo. The fighting occurred in advance of a deadline to integrate the SDF into the national army.²⁸

In the NIAC between the interim Syrian government and the PFGF, at least six hospitals in Latakia and Tartus governorates were also affected in the context of the broader PFGF attack in the Jablah area. In one notable incident on 7 March 2025, the PFGF stormed Al Nour private hospital and prohibited medical staff inside from leaving the facility.²⁹ They then forced medical staff to treat their injured fighters and stored ammunition inside the facility in violation of IHL, disrupting medical services for several days.³⁰

The attacks against or near hospitals led to the suspension of medical operations for several days, with a significant impact on the treatment of individuals affected by the attacks during the violent clashes in the area.³¹ Use of medical units for military purposes appears to have occurred solely by the PFGF. In this context, although the hospital may have lost its protection from direct attack by enemy forces, it would still necessitate the issuance of an effective warning,³² and the rule of proportionality in attack would still apply.

Attacks against cultural property

Under customary IHL, cultural and religious property, including places of worship, holy sites, and objects of spiritual significance, is afforded special protection against attack.³³

On 22 June 2025, an Islamist group conducted a suicide attack on St Elias Church in Damascus, which killed at least twenty-two civilians and wounded more than sixty others. The Syrian authorities ascribed the attack to Islamic State, its first in Syria in years. Testimonies describe how an individual 'was shooting at the church ... he then went inside the church and blew himself up'.³⁴ A little known group, Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, issued a statement claiming the attack and explaining its motive.³⁵ It said the operation came 'after provocation' by Damascus Christians 'against the call and the people of the faith'.³⁶ It is questionable whether Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, which is said to have formed after President al-Assad was ousted, meets the criterion of intensity and regularity of attacks that would make the attack part of a NIAC and a war crime.³⁷

But among other violent actions, the group followed the attack on the church in June with another deadly attack on a place of religion in December 2025. At least eight people were killed and eighteen were wounded in a blast that struck a mosque in an Alawite neighbourhood of Homs province. The blast, which reportedly involved the detonation of several explosive devices, took place during Friday noon prayers. Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah later claimed responsibility for the attack via a statement on social media platform Telegram.³⁸

Attacks against works and installations containing dangerous forces

Under IHL, dams are afforded special protection due to the severe humanitarian risks posed by their destruction. The law imposes a heightened obligation on parties to a conflict to exercise particular care when conducting operations near such installations, even where military objectives may be present.³⁹ In the NIAC involving Türkiye and the SNA against the SDF, in late November 2024, after SNA forces captured Manbij during its Operation Dawn of Freedom, clashes intensified between Turkish armed forces with the SNA and the SDF. These occurred particularly near Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates river close to Manbij in Aleppo governorate.

Reports document the daily use of heavy weaponry, including Turkish combat aircraft, drones, artillery, and rocket fire in the first half of December 2024.⁴⁰ This sustained bombardment caused structural damage to the dam, rendering it non-operational for several weeks. As of late January 2025, it was reported that more than 413,000 individuals residing in and around Manbij and Kobane had been deprived of both water and electricity, rendering essential facilities, including hospitals, inoperable for millions of people.⁴¹

Although reporting does not conclusively attribute the damage to the dam to any single party, it is undisputed that the damage resulted directly from armed confrontations in its immediate vicinity. There is no evidence demonstrating that any party to the NIAC used the dam for any purpose other than its intended function.⁴² Thus, the extensive military activity in close proximity to the Tishrin dam offers reasonable grounds to suggest that all parties present, including the SNA, SDF, and the Turkish Armed Forces, did not comply with their IHL obligations on the conduct of hostilities. Especially, given the foreseeable deprivation of water and electricity to hundreds of thousands of civilians, these attacks may amount to violations of the principles of proportionality and precautions in attack, as well as the specific duty to exercise special care when conducting operations near such installations under IHL.⁴³

Attacks in densely populated areas

The fundamental rules and principles of IHL, in particular the obligations of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack, apply equally when hostilities are conducted in densely populated areas. These environments present heightened risks of incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects, and may result in reverberating effects that significantly impact the civilian population and their access to essential services.⁴⁴

In the context of the NIAC between HTS and the former Syrian government, widely documented incidents provide reasonable grounds to believe that the parties to this conflict have violated their IHL obligations in the conduct of hostilities, particularly through airstrikes and artillery in urban centres. Such incidents were particularly acute during the events leading up to the fall of the Assad government in December 2024. On 15 October, two airstrikes by the then governmental forces struck a power station west of Idlib, disabling two water stations that serve 30,000 civilians and severely impacting their access to clean water.⁴⁵ On 28 November, a rocket attack by HTS factions struck a university dormitory in Aleppo, causing civilian casualties and significant damage to civilian infrastructure.⁴⁶ On 1 December, a local market in Idlib was struck by several airstrikes from pro-government forces, killing and injuring civilians, destroying homes and causing severe damage to the marketplace.

Attacks against civilian airports

Israel attacked airports in Syria on multiple occasions during the reporting period, allegedly targeting Iranian militia and then, after the fall of al-Assad's government, the HTS. On 9 December 2024, for instance, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) struck Qamishli airbase in northern Syria as well as Aqrba airport south-west of Damascus.⁴⁷ In early April 2025, the IDF issued a statement in which it confirmed striking 'military capabilities' at Syrian military bases in Hama city and Homs' Tiyas military airbase, along with alleged military infrastructure sites in Damascus. The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the strikes resulted in the 'near-total destruction' of the military airbase in Hama and wounded dozens of civilians and soldiers.⁴⁸ The Ministry accused Israel of waging a campaign against 'the stability of the country'.⁴⁹

The attacks continued into July 2025 with Mazzeh military airport one of the targets. Mohammed al-Hariri, a building caretaker, told *Le Monde* that in 'fourteen years of war, we've never seen anything like this here.' Israeli jets bomb as they please because we have no air defences', he said. 'And it's civilians who pay the price.'⁵⁰ Targeting military airbases is not per se unlawful as it is by nature a military objective (as long as its partial or total destruction or neutralization, 'in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage').⁵¹ Nevertheless, an attack on a lawful military objective must also not be expected to cause excessive incidental civilian harm compared to the anticipated military advantage, otherwise it will be disproportionate and thus unlawful.⁵²

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.⁵³ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.⁵⁴ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.⁵⁵ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate,⁵⁶ and all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid, or in any event to minimize, incidental civilian impact.⁵⁷

Attacks directed against civilians

Civilians were deliberately targeted by the parties to the different armed conflicts. Direct attacks against civilians, as well as acts of violence aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population, are strictly prohibited under IHL, and can constitute war crimes.⁵⁸ Where such acts form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack, they may also constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law.⁵⁹

THE NIAC BETWEEN TÜRKIYE AND THE SNA AGAINST THE SDF

Deliberate attacks against civilians were reported in the context of the NIAC between Turkish armed forces backing the SNA and the SDF. Notably, on 18 January 2025, Turkish forces or the SNA forces they support conducted airstrikes against civilian protestors performing a traditional Kurdish dance near the Tishrin dam.⁶⁰ The attack killed six civilians and injured sixteen others. The Turkish government accused the SDF of using civilians as human shields in the Tishrin dam region, which it describes as a 'strategically important point' and the 'last line of defence' of the SDF.⁶¹

Footage verified by Human Rights Watch shows how two small air-dropped munitions explode in a crowd of unarmed men and women at the dam. A journalist present

at the scene explained that the attack occurred without prior warning.⁶² Taken together, the factual evidence provides reasonable grounds to suggest that Türkiye violated its obligation not to target civilians directly. At the very least, it failed to adhere to the principle of precaution, as no measures appeared to be taken to prevent or minimize civilian harm.

THE NIAC BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISLAMIC STATE (BEFORE DECEMBER 2024)

As part of Islamic State's increasing presence in Syria, a rise in attacks against civilians was reported during the period. These attacks often targeted shepherds in the region of Homs, Deir Ez Zor, and Raqqa. For instance, on 28 August 2024, two shepherds were killed by Islamic State fighters and hundreds of their sheep were stolen near the town of Ma'adan.⁶³ Similarly, a day after, near Qasr Halabat, Islamic State fighters attacked a group of shepherds, killing three and wounding five, and killing as many as 1,000 of their sheep (live-stock being civilian objects under IHL).⁶⁴ Absent evidence these individuals were directly participating in hostilities, they are civilians protected as such.⁶⁵ Therefore, Islamic State fighters' use of lethal force against them likely amounts to a war crime.⁶⁶

THE IAC BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL

The reporting period documented incidents indicating that the IDF may have directly targeted civilians in the context of the international armed conflict with Syria. On 20 December 2024, Israeli soldiers reportedly fired on unarmed protesters in Maariya.⁶⁷ In April 2025, approximately 2,000 residents of Nawa mobilized to prevent Israeli forces from seizing the Jabiliya Dam and Tel al-Jomaa, the principal water source for Nawa and six surrounding villages. Although several participants may have been carrying hunting rifles, the IDF responded with drone strikes, killing at least seven and injuring twelve others.⁶⁸

Use of improvised explosive devices

Throughout the reporting period, IEDs, landmines, and ERW continued to pose a grave and persistent threat to civilians across Syria.⁶⁹ When deployed in populated areas or locations frequently accessed by civilians, landmines may have indiscriminate effects.⁷⁰ If they are not directed at specific military objectives, this renders their use a violation of the principle of distinction. Where measures are not taken to limit their impact on civilians, this may also violate the principle of precautions in attack.⁷¹

Former frontlines and areas that witnessed intense hostilities remained heavily contaminated, while ongoing conflict, particularly in parts of northeastern Syria, further exacerbated the scale and complexity of contamination. The United Nations recorded near-daily incidents involving explosive ordnance, with more than 600 civilian deaths and injuries reported between December 2024 and April 2025.⁷² Children were disproportionately affected, accounting for a significant share of casualties. For instance, between 1 January and 17 February 2025 alone, 33 children were killed and another 103 were wounded.⁷³

There is often, however, little or inconsistent publicly available evidence about the actors who deployed these landmines and other munitions. Most reported incidents are concentrated in areas controlled by the Syrian government, with the following most incidents occurring in Turkish-controlled regions. Some incidents of indiscriminate remotely controlled IEDs were reported in the context of the NIAC between Türkiye, backed by SNA, and the SDF.

Following SNA's taking of control over Manbij in late 2024, several car bombings were reported, resulting in significant civilian harm. Notably, on 3 February 2025, a car

bomb killed fifteen – eleven women, three children, and one man.⁷⁴ An individual present claimed that the bombing was aimed ‘to kill as many civilians as possible, since it detonated the moment the truck passed by’.⁷⁵ It was also said that the place where the car exploded was a road known for being used by trucks that carry large numbers of civilians.⁷⁶ Reports are contradictory as to the perpetrator, with SDF and SNA fighters accusing each other of responsibility.⁷⁷ Reports suggest that this was the seventh car bombing attack in Manbij since the SNA had seized control in December 2024.⁷⁸

Airstrikes on densely populated areas

The use of airstrikes in densely populated areas was of particular concern in the situations of armed conflict mentioned above. The most concerning incidents related to the armed conflict between Türkiye and the SDF have been addressed in the section above, ‘Deliberate Attacks on Civilians’. Considered below are the armed conflicts between the HTS and the former Syrian government and the NIAC between Israel and Hezbollah.

Between November 2024 and early 2025, civilian casualties rose sharply due to increased fighting between HTS and Syrian government forces supported by Russia. By 3 December, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported 69 civilians killed, including 26 children and 11 women, and 228 injured.⁷⁹

On 1 December, twenty-two civilians were killed, including three women and seven children, and at least forty other civilians were injured, reportedly as a result of multiple airstrikes by the then Syrian government forces in Idlib. According to information received, multiple airstrikes hit a local market and five residential areas in the city. Most of the victims were in the streets near their homes and in the market at the time of the airstrikes.⁸⁰ On 2 December, Syrian armed forces and/or the Russian military conducted an airstrike on a residential area in Idlib city, reportedly killing between five and six civilians and injuring at least thirty more, including children and women.⁸¹

In the context of the NIAC between Israel and Hezbollah, Israeli armed forces conducted numerous airstrikes in residential areas. On 8 October 2024, an Israeli airstrike hit residential areas in Damascus, killing seven civilians, including children and women.⁸² In early November, Israeli airstrikes hit several populated sites south of Damascus.⁸³ According to Syrian State media, the attacks killed at least fifteen and wounded sixteen others, again including women and children.⁸⁴ Israel’s military chief of staff explained that their armed forces were ‘conducting deep strikes and striking frequently in Syria and along the Syria-Lebanon border to prevent weapons transfers to Hezbollah’ and that the attack had ‘inflicted significant damage’ on a command centre allegedly belonging to an Iranian-backed militia.⁸⁵ These claims could not be verified.

Forced displacement

The armed conflicts in Syria have continued to generate significant displacement. Especially the events in November 2024 led to a new wave of displacement, with almost 696,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) newly recorded as of 12 June 2025.⁸⁶ The violent incidents during the NIAC between the Syrian government and the PFGF in coastal Syria, such as Latakia, Tartus, Homs, and Hama, have caused around 10,000 Alawis to flee, including to Lebanon.⁸⁷ The significant increase in violence during March 2025 has resulted in elevated feelings of insecurity among Alawite communities, as they have consistently been subjected to kidnappings and other forms of violence.⁸⁸

Under customary IHL, in both IAC and NIAC, parties are prohibited from ordering the displacement of the civilian population in relation to the conflict unless it is required

for their security or for imperative military reasons.⁸⁹ Breaches of these prohibitions are considered to constitute serious violations of IHL.⁹⁰ Such displacement must be temporary, with all possible measures taken to ensure proper shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.⁹¹ The prohibition aims to protect civilian populations from arbitrary or punitive displacement and to uphold their rights to remain in or return to their homes.⁹²

THE NIAC INVOLVING TÜRKIYE AND THE SNA AGAINST THE SDF

Intensified hostilities between the SDF and the Turkish-backed SNA have compelled approximately 100,000 people to seek refuge as clashes escalated in December 2024 between the conflicting parties.⁹³ Individuals residing in the Manbij region described a violent environment that engendered fear and insecurity among the civilian population. Personal accounts detail encounters with armed individuals who ordered residents to vacate their homes, with those refusing reportedly facing lethal consequences.⁹⁴ Testimonies further reveal that the perpetrators, who engaged in intimidation, threats, and harassment, were predominantly affiliated with the SNA, and regularly targeted the civilian community, chiefly Kurds.⁹⁵

THE IAC BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL

Many civilians living in territory under Israeli occupation fled as the Israeli military intensified its presence, resulting in the destruction of homes and farmlands and the establishment of several new military bases.⁹⁶ Individuals describe how Israeli forces approached during the night, compelling residents to evacuate their homes before demolition: 'We left with only our personal belongings', explained one person displaced from his home in Hamidiyah.⁹⁷ Farmers attempting to access their land have been obstructed by Israeli armed forces.⁹⁸

The evidence reveals that the displacement of civilians was caused by the acts of parties to an armed conflict, including the interim Syrian government, Israel, and Türkiye-backed SNA fighters. There is no available evidence to suggest that the orders to vacate were justified by military necessity.⁹⁹ In particular, acts compelling individuals to vacate their residences and employing violence and threats to accomplish this suggest breaches of the rules governing forced displacement.

The incidents of forced displacement documented above involve violations of IHL by at least Israel and the SNA. Considering the significant extent to which Türkiye is supporting the SNA, even if its armed forces were not directly involved in the unlawful conduct, it is obligated to take positive steps to prevent and suppress violations by others it supports or which are under its jurisdiction.

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Under customary IHL, special protection is afforded to 'protected persons', including several categories of civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, it provides for certain fundamental guarantees for anyone in the power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting acts such as torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, collective punishments, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials.

Murder of civilians

THE NIAC BETWEEN THE NEW SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE PFGF

In the context of the NIAC between the interim government and the PFGF, there is *prima facie* evidence that these two actors have failed to uphold these obligations. Multiple reports suggest that individuals and groups affiliated with the interim government have perpetrated acts of violence against civilians and minority groups perceived to be associated with the PFGF. Of particular concern are the events that occurred between 7 and 9 March 2025. Evidence demonstrates that interim government armed forces, PFGF fighters, and private individuals conducted systematic and targeted killings of Alawi civilians along Syria's coastal regions. Investigative findings, including those reported by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, point to coordinated acts of violence at more than forty locations, killing up to 1,500 men, women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

Witnesses described how individuals would first be identified as Alawi before being taken outside their houses to be shot and killed.¹⁰¹ Victims were referred to as 'Alawi pigs' that had to be killed.¹⁰² Additionally, the presence of lists of names, public humiliations, and video evidence of atrocities strongly indicates that these acts were deliberate and directed against the Alawi community.¹⁰³

The interim president publicly condemned the attacks against the Alawi community in March and announced the formation of an investigative commission to determine responsibility.¹⁰⁴ A report was submitted on 13 July, and a press conference presented the main findings on 22 July 2025.¹⁰⁵ The National Inquiry reported having preliminarily identified 298 alleged perpetrators from military factions and 265 linked to armed groups associated with the former government, referring their names to the Attorney General.¹⁰⁶ Such investigations must, however, be consistent with the obligation to ensure accountability for serious violations of IHL by all concerned.¹⁰⁷

Looting and pillage

IHL prohibits pillage and unlawful destruction of property during all armed conflict. Pillage consists of the systematic and violent appropriation by members of the armed forces of movable public or private property that belongs either to protected persons or to the adverse party to an armed conflict and constitutes a war crime.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the wanton destruction of property not justified by military necessity is forbidden.¹⁰⁹ In occupied territory, private property must be respected and it may not be confiscated or destroyed unless required by imperative military necessity.¹¹⁰

Evidence was gathered during the reporting period, providing reasonable grounds to believe that various parties to the armed conflicts in Syria have failed to comply with these obligations. The following incidents illustrate patterns of violations.

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED AREAS (BEFORE DECEMBER 2024)

The December 2024 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria documents persistent large-scale pillage, destruction of property, and appropriation of homes by former government forces.¹¹¹ Evidence shows a consistent pattern, beginning in 2011 and continuing until the change of government, whereby civilians forced to flee their homes were systematically dispossessed. Properties were seized, looted, and subsequently rented to members or supporters of the authorities. Legislation enacted by the former Syrian

government facilitated and formalized these practices, reflecting a deliberate policy to dispossess displaced persons perceived as linked to opposition forces and consolidate control over abandoned property.¹¹²

HTS-CONTROLLED AREAS (BEFORE DECEMBER 2024)

The Commission of Inquiry report also found that members of the HTS had seized private property in Idlib and western Aleppo, mainly belonging to IDPs and perceived opponents. Minority groups, such as Christians, were particularly targeted. Also, the HTS reportedly tasked ‘Green Company’,¹¹³ a Syrian agriculture investment entity located in Idlib, to identify and seize the lands of individuals who had left and redistribute them through auctions, where the HTS collected taxes from those winning the auctions, including in November 2024.¹¹⁴

TURKISH-OCCUPIED TERRITORY

In the Afrin region, the reporting period documented evidence of widespread looting and appropriation of private and public property of Kurdish owners by SNA members, including homes, schools and medical facilities, as part of the offensive launched in November 2024.¹¹⁵ Returnees were detained and forced to pay fees to recover property.¹¹⁶ Others found their homes destroyed or occupied by SNA fighters and their families.¹¹⁷

ISRAELI-OCCUPIED TERRITORY

Multiple accounts indicate that the property of civilian residents was looted and unlawfully appropriated by Israeli armed forces throughout the Syrian Golan Heights and Mount Hermon region. In December 2024, Israeli forces declared agricultural lands to be closed military zones, warning residents to remain indoors. Testimonies describe demolitions of residences, uprooting of trees, and forcible expulsions of civilians, sometimes under the threat of immediate destruction of their property by tanks.¹¹⁸ A resident from al-Jazira, a military point previously controlled by the Syrian army and which was seized by Israeli forces on 9 December, describes how his house was raided: ‘There is terror because they would enter our homes and terrorize the children. They entered my home in the middle of the night.’¹¹⁹ Such practices continued in subsequent months.¹²⁰ In June 2025, Israeli raids in Quneitra led to the demolition of entire neighbourhoods and the forced displacement of residents near military bases.¹²¹

COASTAL AREAS OF SYRIA (AFTER DECEMBER 2024)

Widespread accounts in March 2025 described the looting of houses and religious artefacts belonging to the Alawi community by armed groups in coastal regions.¹²² The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria found substantial evidence to believe that members of the interim government participated in such acts.

Victims across various locations in these areas described how armed factions looted everything, including money, gold, electronic devices, and other valuables from civilians or in shops, and set houses on fire.¹²³ Individuals were forced to give everything they possessed under threat of being killed or their family members being killed. A witness reportedly overheard an exchange between two armed men stating that ‘even if you set all the houses on fire, they won’t get out of their hiding place.’¹²⁴ The multiple testimonies demonstrate that these acts were deliberately targeting the Alawi community. Armed fighters would raid

civilian homes, ask individuals whether they are Alawi and treat them as ‘infidel pigs’, ‘children of animals’, their women as ‘prostitutes’, who all deserved to be killed.¹²⁵

The overall evidence reveals a consistent pattern of looting, appropriation, and deliberate destruction of civilian property by a range of State and non-State armed actors. In none of the above incidents did the evidence suggest these measures were justified by imperative military necessity. Given their scale, persistence, and systematic character, especially the extensive numbers of acts deliberately targeting Alawi communities in March, there are reasonable grounds to conclude that the former Syrian government, the interim Syrian government, Israeli forces, HTS, and SNA have violated the prohibition of pillage under IHL.¹²⁶ Such acts may also constitute war crimes.¹²⁷ Moreover, the systematic nature of these violations created conditions that forced large numbers of civilians to flee their homes and prevented their return.¹²⁸ This is particularly concerning considering the lack of protection of housing, land, and property rights in Syria.¹²⁹

In situations of occupation, Israel has an additional obligation under IHL to respect private property and refrain from confiscation except where strictly required by military necessity.¹³⁰ The scale and persistence of the destruction, combined with official statements indicating long-term territorial consolidation, suggest that such acts were not militarily necessary but aimed at altering the demographic and territorial status of the occupied area.¹³¹ These measures may therefore constitute grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions¹³² and war crimes.¹³³

As regards acts committed by the SNA in areas under Turkish control, there are reasonable grounds to believe that Türkiye failed to discharge its duty, as an occupying power, to ensure the protection of civilian property.¹³⁴ Credible allegations indicate that Turkish forces were aware of the violations perpetrated by armed groups they supported, yet failed to prevent or suppress them.¹³⁵

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, and death in detention

Under IHL, any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, non-arbitrary, and carried out with appropriate legal safeguards.¹³⁶ Persons deprived of liberty must be treated humanely at all times, with absolute prohibitions on torture and other ill-treatment.¹³⁷ Detaining authorities must ensure detainees have access to medical care, are held in humane conditions, and are protected from violence or reprisals. The death of a detainee in custody, particularly under suspicious or abusive conditions, may constitute a war crime.¹³⁸ Furthermore, enforced disappearance, which involves secret detention or the failure to disclose the fate or whereabouts of a detainee, violates IHL’s prohibition of the practice as well as the requirement to register detainees and the right of families to know the fate of their relatives.¹³⁹

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT (BEFORE DECEMBER 2024)

Testimonies and photographic evidence have emerged during and after the fall of the Assad government, revealing a long-standing and systematic pattern of arbitrary arrests, torture, murder and enforced disappearances. Individuals were frequently detained based on intelligence lists alleging links to opposition groups, without being informed of the reasons for their arrest.¹⁴⁰ Survivors of Saydnaya prison described years of brutal daily beatings, torture, and forced confessions by prison guards.¹⁴¹ Some recall having been stripped naked and told to pose for a photograph before being beaten, having their fingers chopped off, being deprived of food, drink, and sleep, and subjected to rape, electric shocks, and more. Some experienced this violence over lengthy periods, even years. Many detain-

ees died under torture or were summarily executed.¹⁴² The fate of an estimated 100,000 Syrians remains unknown, with evidence suggesting burial in mass graves and details concealed in secret archives.¹⁴³

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE HTS (BEFORE DECEMBER 2024)

HTS systematically enforced its ideology through arbitrary detention, torture, and executions of dissenters. Detainees were subjected to cruel and degrading treatment, with many families denied information about the fate of their relatives.¹⁴⁴

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE SNA BACKED BY TÜRKIYE

In Ra's al-Ayn and Afrin, civilians, predominantly of Kurdish origin, were arbitrarily detained by the SNA, often for alleged past links to the self-administration.¹⁴⁵ Detainees were beaten, tortured, denied food or water, and interrogated about their ethnicity. A Shahba resident recounted their treatment in prisons under SNA and Turkish control, including beating, removal of fingernails, toenails, and teeth, as well as being burned.¹⁴⁶ Some were released only after ransom payments were made; in other cases, their fate remains unknown.¹⁴⁷

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE SDF

The reporting period also evidenced persistent patterns of prolonged and arbitrary detention of tens of thousands of individuals in SDF-held detention facilities and Al-Hol and Roj camps, including women and children allegedly affiliated with Islamic State.¹⁴⁸ Recent reports reveal that thousands of men suspected of links to Islamic State, are being detained without trial – 5,400 Syrians, 1,600 Iraqis, and 1,500 from fifty other nations. In total, around 42,500 people are being held in those two camps, many of whom are either relatives of Islamic State suspects or those displaced by ongoing violence.¹⁴⁹ As of 17 March 2025, approximately 23,000 of those individuals in the camps were foreigners, and more than sixty per cent were children, the majority under twelve years of age, with most of the remainder women.¹⁵⁰

While Iraq has expedited the repatriation of thousands of its nationals held in those camps, many other States have largely refused to do so, contending that they should be prosecuted in Syria or Iraq, or citing security challenges or even refusing to recognize their nationality.¹⁵¹ The conditions in which these individuals have been held, often for more than seven years, are dire.¹⁵² Reports indicate a lack of legal process, inadequate conditions, and denial of essential services.¹⁵³ UN agencies have repeatedly called for urgent reforms, while the abrupt withdrawal of external funding, especially the sudden US cuts in January and February 2025, has further exacerbated humanitarian conditions.¹⁵⁴ As one of the camp directors, Jihan Hanan, describes: 'Nobody was prepared. Four hundred workers had their employment halted. Deliveries of bread and fuel stopped. Warehouses were left with no guards.'¹⁵⁵

International law does not obligate States to repatriate their nationals, and thus the individuals held in those camps cannot claim a right to repatriation.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, people have a right to enter the State of their nationality.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, as the European Court of Human Rights has held, in exceptional circumstances where the life and physical well-being of nationals are at risk, a denial of repatriation requires appropriate safeguards against arbitrariness.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, based on the principle of the best interests of the child and the right to family life under international human rights law, children should not be separated from their mothers.¹⁵⁹

Responses have markedly differed among States. While some States have intensified repatriation efforts, others, including some European States, continue to delay or even

impede attempts at repatriation.¹⁶⁰ Certain European States have revoked individuals' nationality on the grounds that these individuals engaged in 'acts seriously prejudicial to the vital interests of the State', thereby denying the right to return.¹⁶¹ Others have recognised an individual's right to return but refused to take the necessary action to repatriate them.¹⁶²

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE IDF

Evidence of potential violation of the salient IHL rules emerged in Israeli-occupied territories. As part of Israeli raids and arrest campaigns in Syrian villages, including Maariya, civilians were seemingly detained without disclosure of their fate or whereabouts. In one case, a farmer was reportedly held incommunicado, raising concerns of enforced disappearance.¹⁶³

INDIVIDUALS IN THE HANDS OF THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT (AFTER DECEMBER 2024)

During the reporting period, the UN Commission of Inquiry documented an increase in abductions and enforced disappearances of members of the Alawi minority, particularly women and girls.¹⁶⁴ Victims were often seized in public areas, questioned about their sectarian identity, and forcibly abducted. While many of these incidents appear to involve criminal gangs, reports and testimonies suggest the involvement of a number of local commanders and fighters affiliated with the interim government.¹⁶⁵

Evidence also indicates that members of the former Syrian government, the SNA, the SDF, and HTS (prior to December 2024) committed serious violations of IHL. These include arbitrary detention, torture, and inhumane or degrading treatment, all of which are strictly prohibited under IHL and are likely to amount to war crimes.¹⁶⁶ In many instances, detainees were held without due process or legitimate security grounds over a prolonged period of time. Conditions in detention facilities and camps were so poor as to amount to inhuman treatment. Testimonies from many former detainees attest to widespread violent treatment amounting to torture and sometimes leading to death in detention.¹⁶⁷

In numerous cases, the fate and whereabouts of detainees were concealed, amounting to violations of IHL provisions aimed at preventing enforced disappearance,¹⁶⁸ including the requirements concerning registration, visits and transmission of information with respect to persons deprived of their liberty in IAC,¹⁶⁹ and the obligation to register persons deprived of their liberty in NIAC.¹⁷⁰ These acts may violate the IHL obligation to respect family life¹⁷¹ and to take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and to provide their family members with information held on their fate.¹⁷²

Protection of children

Under IHL, children are afforded special protection in armed conflicts, recognizing their particular vulnerability. Core rules prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of fifteen years in hostilities, whether in State armed forces or non-State armed groups, and forbid their use in combat. Children are entitled to general protection as civilians, including against direct attack, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and ill-treatment, as well as specific guarantees such as access to food, medical care, and education. If detained, they must be held separately from adults (unless with their family) and treated in a manner appropriate to their age. Evacuation and reunification of separated children with their families are also prioritized.

During the reporting period, children have continued to be disproportionately affected by the ongoing hostilities in Syria. Incidents of killing, maiming, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and recruitment have been widely documented. As of November 2024, at least 5,298 children had been reportedly either detained or forcibly disappeared by various parties to the conflict.¹⁷³ Reports further indicate that at least 225 children have died as a result of torture, 216 of whom died in government-run detention centres.¹⁷⁴ These acts constitute serious violations of IHL and are likely war crimes.

Although the overall incidence of child recruitment has reportedly decreased, continued cases were documented during the period under review. Most concern abduction and recruitment of children attributable to SDF forces.¹⁷⁵ The reported ages of the recruited children ranged from twelve to seventeen years and concern both boys and girls.¹⁷⁶

In territories under the effective control of foreign powers, such as those under Turkish control in northern Syria, Türkiye bears obligations under IHL to take all measures within its capacity to ensure that the special protection of children is afforded.¹⁷⁷

Positive developments include the signing of action plans in 2024 by the SNA and the SDF, committing to end the recruitment and use of children.¹⁷⁸ These steps are in line with international obligations and are to be welcomed. However, in light of ongoing violations, additional measures are required to ensure full compliance with IHL and the protection of children from recruitment and use in hostilities.

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in connection with armed conflict are prohibited and are considered to constitute serious violations of IHL.¹⁷⁹ The conflicts in Syria have been marked by severe incidents of gender-based violence, with women and girls disproportionately exposed to harm exacerbated by ongoing hostilities, displacement, and economic instability.

Special focus should be placed on women from minority groups, who face compounded vulnerabilities. For example, Kurdish women in the regions of Afrin and Ra's al-Ayn have been subject to intimidation and coercion by members of the SNA, resulting in a pervasive climate of fear that has effectively confined many to their homes.¹⁸⁰ Alawi women have been disproportionately targeted for kidnapping, often in broad daylight in public spaces such as markets or routes to work and school.¹⁸¹ Testimonies indicate that abductors frequently interrogate victims about their sectarian affiliation prior to abduction, underscoring the targeted nature of these crimes.¹⁸²

Furthermore, documented cases reveal that women and girls detained by parties to the armed conflicts, including the former Syrian government¹⁸³ and the SNA,¹⁸⁴ were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Treatment of the dead

IHL contains explicit provisions on the respectful treatment of the dead in armed conflict, aimed at preserving human dignity and alleviating suffering for families of the deceased. It requires parties to a conflict to search for, collect, and evacuate the dead without delay,¹⁸⁵ and to prevent their despoilment or mutilation.¹⁸⁶ Bodies must be treated with respect and correctly identified whenever possible. IHL also obliges parties to record information on the dead and transmit it to the relevant authorities or agencies to help ensure families know the fate of their relatives.¹⁸⁷ Burial or cremation must be conducted in a dignified manner, preferably according to the religious rites of the deceased, and graves must be respected and maintained.¹⁸⁸

The reporting period evidenced grave concerns over the treatment of dead bodies, especially in the context of the NIAC between the interim Syrian government and the PFGF. During the violent attacks against the Alawi community, witnesses described how dead bodies were left in the street and burned by armed members. Verified video footage also showed how armed men dressed in black 'were celebrating the burning of dead bodies, stepping on them and calling them Alawi pigs and dogs'.¹⁸⁹

Bodies were often left in the street or houses for several days, and in various cases, buried without documentation and without death certificates being provided to family members. The accumulated evidence provides substantial grounds to assert that military forces associated with the interim Syrian government have breached their IHL and human rights obligations, including those requiring humane treatment of the deceased, as well as the duty to inform families of the fate of their relatives.

Moreover, the reporting period attests to the discovery and continued presence of mass graves across Syrian territory.¹⁹⁰ Among the sites discovered after the change of government in December are mass graves estimated to contain bodies of at least 100,000 men, women, and children killed by the former Syrian government, and are associated with serious violations of IHL.¹⁹¹ The existence of mass graves engages Syria's duties to investigate allegations of serious IHL violations, uncover the truth, prosecute those responsible, and ensure justice and reparations for the victims.

Transitional justice

Amid the instability of the HTS-led government, the crimes of al-Assad and his forces continue to loom large. Calls for a transitional justice approach led to the new Syrian government establishing a 'National Commission for Transitional Justice' (NCTJ) and a 'National Commission for the Missing' in May 2025. The NCTJ's mandate focuses on documenting violations and seeking justice for victims from the actions of the Assad government, thereby promoting accountability and reconciliation. The National Commission for the Missing is mandated with investigating the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared, establishing a national database and providing legal and humanitarian support to affected families.¹⁹²

The work of the Commission should, however, encompass all parties involved in the multiple armed conflicts, some of which continue to this day. At the time, Human Rights Watch described the narrow mandate as 'a missed opportunity for victim-led justice'.¹⁹³ In welcoming the establishment of the two commissions, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) urged the authorities to ensure close collaboration with, and representation of, victims, civil society, and affected communities from the outset and for clear coordination between the two bodies.¹⁹⁴

The signs over the coming months were not positive. Writing in September 2025, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, a Syrian body headquartered in Washington DC, said that the NCTJ had been 'slow to act', declaring that:

The repercussions of neglecting transitional justice are already clear, as the country sees repeated outbreaks of conflict as well as individual acts of retribution against alleged former Assad affiliates. Pursuing a comprehensive transitional justice process would allow the government to address many of the underlying grievances fueling ongoing violence, establishing the foundation for a peaceful future.¹⁹⁵

Figure 22.2: Yarmouk Camp school bombed by Syrian Armed Forces

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23. YEMEN



CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Conflict History

Yemen has been effectively split between the Houthis, an armed group that controls the north of the country, including the capital, Sana'a, and the internationally recognized government (IRG) that largely controlled the remainder (aside from a portion of the south under the control of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Although the situation may change in the future, for the purpose of this reporting period, the IRG is considered the authority representing the State of Yemen.

The armed conflict began in 2014 when Houthi rebels with links to Iran and a history of rising up against the government took control of Yemen's capital, demanding lower fuel prices and a new government. The rebels seized the presidential palace in January 2015, leading the then president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and his government to resign. In March 2015, a coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and with significant UAE involvement launched airstrikes against the Houthis.¹

With the tacit renewal of the United Nations (UN)-brokered truce agreed in 2022, the NIAC between the Houthis and the IRG continued to be relatively quiet during the reporting period. Despite sporadic exchanges of fire, drone strikes, and physical incursions, the frontlines remained relatively stable.² Operations in the Red Sea and retaliatory operations by Israel and the United States (US), however, led to a suspension of peace talks between the Houthis and the IRG, preventing progress towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict and even threatening a resumption of major hostilities.³

Key Events Since 1 July 2024

Houthi attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and on Israeli territory led, for the first time, to Israel's direct involvement in Yemen, with drone strikes mainly targeting Red Sea port infrastructure, Sana'a International Airport, and power stations. The first Israeli attacks on Yemen in July 2024 marked a key development in the conflicts in the Middle East. On 30 July, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) addressed to all parties to the conflicts in the region a rare call for de-escalation and the protection of civilians.⁴ Although Houthi attacks halted for nearly two months during the temporary ceasefire agreed between Israel and Hamas, they resumed in March 2025, breaking the truce when Israel suspended humanitarian access for Gaza.⁵

An intense campaign of United Kingdom (UK) and US airstrikes, which the two States termed 'Operation Poseidon Archer', took place in late 2024.⁶ The frequency and intensity of the strikes significantly intensified in the second quarter of 2025, during 'Operation Rough Rider', causing an unprecedented peak in civilian casualties, until agreement was reached on 6 May 2025 between the United States and the Houthis as a result of mediation by Oman.⁷

Beginning on 15 March 2025, there was a claimed shift in US policy away from the targeting of Houthi infrastructure (as had been the case under President Joe Biden) to direct targeting of Houthi leaders.⁸ Military experts argued that Israeli and UK/US airstrikes had 'limited impact' on the military capabilities of the Houthis.⁹ Indeed, the group had managed to deploy hypersonic ballistic missiles capable of penetrating Israeli air defences by the end of 2024.¹⁰ The Panel of Experts on Yemen established by the UN Security Council concluded that the Houthis had improved the accuracy of their attacks against shipping in the Red Sea.¹¹

As the year was ending, the IRG's grip on the south had weakened. In late December 2025, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), seized large swathes of territory in Hadramawt and Al-Mahrah provinces. The STC is seeking to revive the former State of South Yemen.¹² Following an offensive in early January 2026, however, the IRG claimed it had recaptured the south and east of the country from the STC, even as thousands of people rallied in the city of Aden in support of the group.¹³

The Humanitarian Situation

The economic and humanitarian situation in Yemen remained critical throughout the reporting period – and arguably even worsened.¹⁴ The UN Panel of Experts reported that gross domestic product per capita had more than halved since the conflict first erupted in 2015.¹⁵ According to Oxfam, the country is facing 'economic collapse', with the price of basic commodities rising dramatically in recent years.¹⁶ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that 19.5 million Yemenis were in need of humanitarian aid and protection in 2025.¹⁷

For May to August 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) had predicted that nearly half of the Yemeni population – 17.1 million of almost 35 million – were facing acute food insecurity (at IPC Phase 3 or above), with more than five million in a situation of emergency (IPC Phase 4).¹⁸ Projections for May 2025–February 2026 indicated a worsening trend, with more than 40,000 people facing famine (IPC Phase 5) in the governorates of Hajjah and Hudaydah, both of which are under Houthi control.¹⁹ According to UNICEF, half of all children under five are acutely malnourished in Yemen, with more than 537,000 suffering from severe acute malnutrition.²⁰ The first half of 2025 also saw a rise in cases of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea.²¹

The causes of food insecurity are diverse, but include conflict-related insecurity and displacement, economic collapse, frequent climate shocks, and a dramatic decrease in humanitarian assistance. Airstrikes against critical civilian infrastructure, including ports in the Red Sea and Sana'a International Airport, have disrupted trade and humanitarian relief, lowering the number of essential goods that can be imported.²² The US government's designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization in early 2025 further diverted shipping away from Houthi-controlled ports to the port of Aden, making it more difficult to adequately supply the population in the north.²³

US funding cuts have shut down many life-saving assistance and protection services, including treatment for malnourished children.²⁴ In May 2025, OCHA issued an emergency funding call for its Yemen 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, having received only nine per cent of the total US\$2.5 billion it was seeking.²⁵ It stressed that, without adequate support, six million more Yemenis would experience emergency levels of food insecurity and that 771 health facilities 'would stop functioning', meaning 6.9 million people would not have access to primary and secondary healthcare.²⁶

CONFLICT CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICABLE LAW

An international armed conflict (IAC) existed between Israel and Yemen during the reporting period owing to the lack of consent from the IRG (the Presidential Leadership Council) for Israel to use force on the territory of Yemen against the Houthis. This IAC was

regulated by customary international humanitarian law (IHL), in particular Hague Law rules governing the conduct of hostilities.

Five non-international armed conflicts occurred during the reporting period:

- IRG and affiliated forces (including militias composing the Joint Forces on the Western Coast) *v* Houthis.²⁷
- IRG *v* Southern Transitional Council (STC)
- IRG (and supporting forces) *v* AQAP.
- United States and United Kingdom *v* Houthis.
- Israel *v* Houthis.

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other rules of customary IHL apply to all four NIACs. Yemen is also a State Party to Additional Protocol II of 1977,²⁸ which also applies to its NIAC against the Houthis and the STC as the groups meet the additional requirements of Article 1(1) of the Protocol – specifically the need for a level of territorial control that would enable them to sustain military operations and implement the Protocol.

The Protocol also applies to the armed conflict with AQAP. Although the group suffered leadership losses in 2024, it continued to attack southern forces and expanded its operational capabilities. The Houthis had been accused of collaborating with AQAP in May 2024 by providing weapons and releasing imprisoned members of AQAP, allegedly with the shared goal of taking control of southern Yemen.²⁹ In November 2025, AQAP attacks were said to have ‘surged’.³⁰

The Houthis mounted numerous attacks against ships travelling in the Red Sea. The attacks were directed against ships flagged to various States, not only to Israel, the United Kingdom, or the United States. It does not seem that the intensity threshold for separate NIACs was reached between the Houthis and any of the other flag States, but since the Houthis view their attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea as the implementation of a naval blockade against Israeli ports,³¹ they present a sufficient nexus with the armed conflict with Israel for them to be governed by IHL.³²

Both the Houthi authorities who control the north and the IRG, which is based in Aden, claim the right to represent the Republic of Yemen in its international relations. In terms of surface area, the Houthis control approximately one third of the nation's territory, while until December 2025, the IRG controlled most of the remainder.³³ The areas under Houthi control hold more than two thirds of the Yemeni population.³⁴

The policy of most States and international organizations has been to recognize the authorities based in Aden as the *de jure* Government of Yemen. While not determinative, most recently in July 2025, the UN Security Council once again referred to the IRG as the ‘Government of Yemen’ in the preamble to a resolution it adopted unanimously.³⁵ While some States have informally engaged with the Houthis, only Iran appears explicitly to recognize them as Yemen's *de jure* sovereign.³⁶

Under general international law, the State is effectively represented by the authority that is in effective control of the national territory and institutions. As the ICRC observed in its commentary on Article 2 of Geneva Convention III: ‘Under international law, the key condition for the existence of a government is its effectiveness, that is, its ability to exercise effectively functions usually assigned to a government within the confines of a State's territory.’³⁷ It is a long-standing rule of international law that this is so irrespective of the international recognition of that authority – a reality reflected in Article 4(3) of Geneva Convention III.³⁸

With respect to IHL, as the ICRC states: ‘The very fact that the said government is effective and in control of most of the territory of the State concerned means that it is the de facto government and its actions have to be treated as the actions of the State it represents with all the consequences this entails for determining the existence of an international armed conflict.’³⁹ Unless and until a new authority gains control of the overwhelming majority of territory in the course of a NIAC or as a result of an internal coup, there is a presumption that the existing government remains sovereign.⁴⁰

Thus, the IRG is the authority representing Yemen for the purpose of the application of IHL. That said, in the course of a lightning offensive in December 2025, the STC took over control of most of the south-east of Yemen in pursuit of southern independence.⁴¹ The prospect of conflict between Saudi Arabia and the UAE receded as the UAE withdrew its troops from Yemen, though as the year ended the STC had ignored a Saudi order to relinquish control of Hadramaut and al-Mahra provinces.⁴²

Yemen has signed but not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

COMPLIANCE WITH IHL

Overview

During the period under review, IHL violations in Yemen continued to occur daily, in a prevailing climate of impunity. Within Yemen, due to restrictions on press freedom and crackdowns on civil society organizations by all parties to the conflict, independent reporting on violations of IHL has become difficult.⁴³ As has been said: ‘There has been virtually no accountability for violations committed by parties to the conflict.’⁴⁴ Following the decision by the UN Human Rights Council in October 2021 to end the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, only the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen provided a degree of international monitoring of the human rights and IHL situation (until it submitted its final report in October 2025).

Accountability attempts in domestic jurisdictions that might promote better compliance by some of the parties to the country’s multiple armed conflicts have similarly proved ineffective.⁴⁵ For instance, efforts by NGOs to address the export of arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE stalled before French tribunals due to judicial decisions that treat the granting of export permits as acts of State subject to State secrecy laws.⁴⁶ On 19 July 2024, the administrative court of Montreuil rejected a request from several NGOs to overturn a decision by the customs administration denying the applicants access to administrative documents pertaining to the export of weapons to the States bombing Yemen.⁴⁷

In Germany, a combination of a lack of transparency by authorities regarding the granting of arms licences, a high evidentiary threshold, and the financial costs led four plaintiffs who had sought judicial review of German arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to discontinue proceedings they had initiated in 2021.⁴⁸ Amnesty International reported that Germany authorized arms and military equipment to Saudi Arabia in 2024, ‘despite a lack of accountability for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in relation to the Yemen conflict’.⁴⁹

Civilian Objects under Attack

Under customary IHL, attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects.⁵⁰ Civilian objects are all objects that are not

military objectives⁵¹ and, as such, are protected against attack.⁵² Military objectives are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action.⁵³

Hostilities inside Yemen continued to damage or destroy civilian objects and critical civilian infrastructure.⁵⁴ Repeated attacks on electrical-generating stations caused electricity outages. The UN Secretary-General also noted that the capacity of vital port facilities was 'impaired, jeopardizing the humanitarian and commercial imports on which the country depended'.⁵⁵ Houthi missile strikes into Israel damaged residential buildings while attacks against commercial shipping harmed the marine environment due to resulting oil spills.⁵⁶

Houthi attacks against commercial shipping

According to Amnesty International, Houthi armed forces attacked at least fifty-seven commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean in 2024, claiming they were linked to Israel, the United Kingdom, or the United States.⁵⁷ The UN Panel of Experts reported at least twenty-five attacks between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025, nine of which targeted merchant vessels.⁵⁸ According to figures provided by the Houthis, the number of attacks since 7 October 2023 rose from 166 as at 11 July 2024 to 228 as at 2 October 2025.⁵⁹

Attacks directed at merchant vessels flying the flag of neutral States are generally considered direct attacks against civilian objects, in violation of the IHL principle of distinction.⁶⁰ The Houthis' claim that it exercises belligerent rights by imposing a blockade on Israeli ports must be rejected.⁶¹ In customary international law, the right to resort to naval blockade is generally reserved for States involved in IACs.⁶² While the use of force by Israel on Yemen did trigger an IAC between Israel and Yemen, the non-State status of the Houthis does not entitle them to interfere with the rights of navigation of neutral States.⁶³ It also appears that the Houthis regularly targeted ships not even heading for Israeli ports, which they wrongly qualified as 'Israeli' ships.⁶⁴

According to the UN Panel of Experts, eight of the nine attacks against merchant vessels targeted ships carrying oil, liquid petroleum, gas, or chemical products, thereby creating considerable environmental risks.⁶⁵ Houthi strikes on tankers and cargo vessels, including the drone attack on 15 July 2024 against the Liberian-flagged oil tanker *Chios Lion*, caused oil spills in the Red Sea covering hundreds of square kilometres and posing a serious threat to marine life and ecosystems.⁶⁶ On 21 and 23 August 2024, the Houthi attacked the *MV Delta Sounion*, a Greek-flagged oil tanker carrying one million barrels (150,000 tons) of crude oil. The resultant fire, which lasted for several weeks until it was successfully towed to safety and salvaged, risked a massive oil spill.⁶⁷

In addition to a manifest breach of the principle of distinction due to the civilian character of these oil tankers,⁶⁸ these attacks demonstrated reckless disregard for potentially devastating environmental damage that they could have caused. This breaches the duty on parties to armed conflict to employ means and methods of warfare with due regard for the protection and preservation of the environment.⁶⁹

Indiscriminate Houthi airstrikes against Israel

Between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025, the Houthis launched more than 220 missile and drone attacks against Israel.⁷⁰ Although most were intercepted by Israel's air defence systems,⁷¹ some passed through, damaging infrastructure and/or killing and in-

juring civilians. On 19 July 2024, a Houthi Samad-3 drone struck a residential building in Tel Aviv, killing one civilian and wounding several others.⁷² As Human Rights Watch has observed, the Samad-3's 'guidance and targeting capabilities are unclear, and the Houthi's target was uncertain, making it difficult to determine whether the strike hit its intended target'.⁷³

On 9 December 2024, a Houthi drone hit a residential building in the town of Yavne in central Israel.⁷⁴ On 20 December, a Houthi drone damaged an elementary school, also in central Israel.⁷⁵ The following day, a missile hit a playground in a residential area in Tel Aviv, lightly injuring at least 16 civilians and causing some material damage.⁷⁶ As there was little sign that a military objective was being targeted, the strikes were indiscriminate and a serious violation of IHL.⁷⁷

Disproportionate Israeli and US airstrikes against Yemen

On 20 July 2024, Israeli aircraft bombed locations in Hodeida, resulting in damage to the city's main power station, shipping cranes, and gas and oil depots in the port. According to Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, the Israeli military spokesman, alongside their civilian function, the sites were being used by the Houthis for weapons supply.⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch has, however, questioned the reliability of the claim, noting that inspectors from the UN Mission to Support the Hdaydah Agreement (UNMHA) had not seen any military presence in the port.⁷⁹ That said, due to impediments imposed by the Houthis on the free movement of UNMHA inspectors,⁸⁰ it cannot be excluded that port infrastructure was indeed used to transport weapons.

The fire triggered by the bombing, which lasted for several days, caused extensive material damage, raising concerns about the ability of the port – a major point of entry for humanitarian aid – to continue to function. The attack on the power station resulted in a twelve-hour cut to electricity. Human Rights Watch quoted a World Food Programme (WFP) official who claimed that WFP had lost 780,000 litres of fuel in the attack, which it was using to support hospital generators and water and sanitation infrastructure across Yemen.⁸¹ NGO Mwatana for Human Rights similarly stressed the vital character of the infrastructure, noting that the port handled more than eighty per cent of Yemen's entire humanitarian aid.⁸²

In a closed briefing at the UN Security Council, retired Major General Michael Beary, the head of UNMHA, called upon 'all concerned' to 'avoid attacks that could harm civilians and damage civilian infrastructure'.⁸³ Human Rights Watch stressed the lack of any information in the public domain to underpin the claim of military use of the Hodeida power station and port infrastructure. It concluded that the attack was an 'indiscriminate or disproportionate attack on civilians' and possibly a war crime.⁸⁴ Indeed, in light of the significant and predictable humanitarian consequences that resulted, the attack appears to have been at the least disproportionate.⁸⁵

Further Israeli and US attacks on port infrastructure followed. On 29 September 2024, Israel again attacked Hodeida along with Ras Issa, another Red Sea port, as well as al-Hali and Ras Kathnib electrical-generating stations.⁸⁶ On 19 and 26 December 2024, repeated airstrikes were launched on ports and power stations in Al Hudaydah and Sana'a governorates, as well as Sana'a International Airport.⁸⁷ According to the UN Secretary-General, the airstrikes of 19 December 2024 caused considerable damage to the Red Sea ports' infrastructure, leading to 'the immediate and significant reduction in port capacity'.⁸⁸ The 26 December airstrike destroyed the airport's air traffic control tower and damaged the runway while the Director-General

of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and the UN Resident Coordinator in Yemen, Julien Harneis, were awaiting their flight, on their way out of Yemen.⁸⁹ The strikes also killed four civilians and injured twenty-one others.⁹⁰ Further Israeli airstrikes against Red Sea port infrastructure took place on 10 January⁹¹ and on 5 May 2025.⁹²

Further airstrikes on Sana'a International Airport on 5 May destroyed several civilian aircraft.⁹³ Israeli officials declared that the airport had been attacked because the Houthis had used it to smuggle weapons.⁹⁴ On 28 May, another airstrike destroyed the last remaining commercial passenger aircraft operating from the airport.⁹⁵ Mr Harneis said that the airport was 'absolutely vital' to the continuation of humanitarian aid for Yemen.⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch considered the strikes to be either indiscriminate or disproportionate.⁹⁷

In July 2025, the UN Secretary-General informed the UN Security Council that UNMHA's patrols were able to witness the damage caused by the multiple airstrikes conducted by Israel and the United States.⁹⁸ He told the Council that the damage to port infrastructure had affected the flow of vital fuel, food, medicine and other basic goods through the ports.⁹⁹ This followed a report in *The New York Times* two months earlier that strikes against oil installations had triggered a fuel crisis in Yemen, driving up the price of food.¹⁰⁰

Israeli and US airstrikes against economic assets

On 5 May 2025, the Israeli Air Force bombed the Bajel cement factory in Hudaydah governorate.¹⁰¹ Two reasons were given for selecting the plant as a target. First, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) declared that the factory 'functions as a significant economic resource for the Houthis'.¹⁰² Second, the IDF claimed that the factory was 'used for the construction of underground tunnels and terrorist infrastructure for the terrorist regime'.¹⁰³ The day that followed the attack on the Bajel cement factory, Israel bombed another cement factory in Sana'a governorate, seeking to justify it on the same basis.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the objective of a deadly US bombing of the oil port of Ras Issa, on 17 April 2025, was 'to degrade the economic source of power of the Houthis, who continue to exploit and bring great pain upon their fellow countrymen'.¹⁰⁵

As Human Rights Watch has remarked, a test that would accept making the port fuel depot a legitimate military objective 'because it is an "economic source of power of the Houthis" or provides them revenue' would render almost anything that offered economic benefit subject to military attack.¹⁰⁶ Concerning the second reason advanced by Israel, while cement or concrete produced in the factory can of course be used to build tunnels and other military infrastructure, the contribution to military action is indirect and remote. Thus, the attack appears to have been directed against a civilian object in violation of IHL.¹⁰⁷

Attacks against schools and medical facilities

The UN Panel of Experts noted that schools and places of worship were sometimes occupied, including in one case where a school served as a military base for the Houthis.¹⁰⁸ Military use of schools (forty-six cases) and hospitals (eight cases) in 2024 was primarily by the Houthis (30 cases), followed by the Yemen Armed Forces and affiliated forces (24 cases).¹⁰⁹

Four attacks on schools and eleven on hospitals were also recorded by the UN, which attributed them to the Yemen Armed Forces (eight cases), the Houthis (four cases), AQAP (one case), and unidentified perpetrators (two cases).¹¹⁰

While the military use of schools for military purposes is not formally prohibited by IHL, it may violate the principle of precaution against the effects of attacks and related

rules.¹¹¹ The UN Secretary-General called on the Government of Yemen to implement the Safe Schools Declaration and avoid using schools for military purposes.¹¹²

Civilians under Attack

Under customary IHL, civilians enjoy general protection from the effects of hostilities, unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.¹¹³ Accordingly, parties to armed conflicts must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and are prohibited from directing attacks against civilians.¹¹⁴ In case of doubt, persons should be treated as civilians.¹¹⁵ Civilians may be incidentally affected by attacks against lawful targets. However, such attacks must not be disproportionate,¹¹⁶ and the attacker must take all feasible precautions to avoid or, in any event to minimize, incidental civilian impact.¹¹⁷

According to the Civilian Impact Monitoring Project (CIMP), 1,201 civilians were killed or injured by armed violence in 2024, with more than 200 children among the dead.¹¹⁸ While noting that the figures were less than in 2023, the CIMP also remarked that more ‘mass casualty incidents’ were reported in 2024. Thus, in 2024, sixteen incidents involved at least ten civilian casualties, while in five, more than thirty civilian casualties were reported.¹¹⁹ CIMP attributes this trend to the resumption of airstrikes in Yemen.¹²⁰

In the first half of 2025, civilian casualties dramatically increased, especially between March and May. Between January and the end of June, 1,380 civilians were killed or injured in Yemen, an upward trend that continued in the months that followed.¹²¹ With 648 civilians killed or injured, April was ‘the fourth-highest civilian casualty total’ for a single month since CIMP began monitoring the situation in Yemen in 2018.¹²² According to figures released by the Houthis, between October 2023 and 9 October 2025, Israeli and US airstrikes killed 319 civilians and wounded 1,357.¹²³ Relying on CIMP data, OCHA reported 970 civilian casualties between January and April 2025, of whom 667 had been killed or injured in airstrikes.¹²⁴

Civilian casualties from Israeli airstrikes

Israeli airstrikes on 20 July 2024 against several locations in Hodeida killed a reported six civilians and injured more than eighty others, in many cases inflicting severe burns on the victims.¹²⁵ Based on information from local media, *The New York Times* reported that, as a result of the airstrike of 29 September, at least four people were killed in Hodeida – a port worker and three engineers at the Al-Hali power station – and at least 33 people were injured. The information came from Al-Masirah, the Houthi-run television channel.¹²⁶ In a subsequent report, Airwars raised its calculation of civilian casualties to six killed and between forty-four and fifty-seven injured.¹²⁷ According to the UN Secretary-General, the airstrikes of 19 December 2024 killed nine civilians and wounded three others.¹²⁸ The unlawful attacks on the cement factories on 5 and 6 May killed up to ten civilians and injured up to another seventy-seven.¹²⁹

Civilian casualties from US airstrikes

The resumption of US airstrikes in the second quarter of 2025 contributed materially to the dramatic increase in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. On 27 April 2025, the US Department of Defense Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that it had struck more than 800 targets since 15 March 2025. CENTCOM said that the strikes had killed ‘hundreds of Houthi fighters and numerous Houthi leaders, including

senior Houthi missile and UAV [aerial drone] officials' and had been 'executed using detailed and comprehensive intelligence ensuring lethal effects against the Houthis while minimizing risk to civilians'.¹³⁰

The UN Panel of Experts reported that Operation Rough Rider involved more than 1,000 coordinated strikes.¹³¹ It quoted US government claims that the strikes resulted in 'a major drop in ballistic missile launches and a decrease in the launching of one-way attack drones'.¹³² Despite the public announcements, however, it was reported that, in private, US officials questioned the military effectiveness of the operations.¹³³

Although the US government occasionally communicated information about specific operations,¹³⁴ it did not usually disclose the results of its assessment of civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure caused by US attacks.¹³⁵ On 17 March 2025, two days after the initiation of the operation, a US official explicitly denied there were 'credible indications' of 'any civilian casualties'.¹³⁶ In contrast, Airwars identified four US attacks that had caused civilian casualties during only the first two days of the Operation – on 15 and 16 March 2025 – with a total potentially as high as forty-six civilians killed and thirty-seven injured.¹³⁷ On 16 March 2025, the Houthis claimed that the US attacks had already killed at least fifty-three civilians.¹³⁸

The Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) issued a statement expressing its concerns about reports of civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, especially in light of projected budget cuts in the US civilian harm mitigation and response programme.¹³⁹ After the conclusion of the ceasefire, Airwars remarked that in a matter of weeks, President Trump's administration had killed almost as many civilians as the previous twenty-three years of US military operations in Yemen.¹⁴⁰ It also noted that during Operation Rough Rider, it documented more incidents with high numbers of casualties per strike than in any other US campaign.¹⁴¹

The 17 April 2025 airstrikes against oil tankers in the port of Ras Issa triggered a fire that severely burned many. In total, the airstrikes killed at least eighty-four civilians, many of them port workers, but also three children. At least 150 other civilians were injured.¹⁴² The airstrikes came in two waves, with the second launched after emergency services had arrived on the scene and which killed one first responder and injured another.¹⁴³ In addition to a manifest breach of the principle of distinction and precautions in attack, the second wave seemingly breached the duty to respect and protect medical personnel and medical units in all circumstances.¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch said the attack should be investigated as a possible war crime.¹⁴⁵

A US strike close to Sana'a on 28 April 2025 killed another eight civilians. No combatants were injured or killed and no military objects were destroyed as a result. It appears that the attack was the result of a targeting error. According to press reports, the location had been designated as a possible site for a Houthi weapons cache by an anonymous account on social media platform X. The account publishes information on Yemen based on open-source intelligence.¹⁴⁶ This raises serious concerns about compliance with the principles of distinction and precautions in attack, especially when it comes to the duty to verify that a target is indeed a military objective.¹⁴⁷

On 28 April 2025, a prison in the city of Sa'ada, which was being used as a detention centre for irregular migrants, mostly Ethiopians, was hit at least three times by US bombs.¹⁴⁸ Although the ICRC and the Yemen Red Crescent Society assisted the evacuation and provided medical care to the wounded,¹⁴⁹ the humanitarian response was insufficient, in part as a result of the United Nations having suspended its activities in the governorate

on 10 February.¹⁵⁰ According to the Houthis, the attack killed sixty-eight civilians and wounded forty-seven others.¹⁵¹ Airwars corroborated these figures.¹⁵²

The US Department of Defense announced that it was conducting a damage assessment.¹⁵³ As of the time of writing, no information about this planned assessment – including whether it has been done – has been made publicly available. While the Houthis are said to have sometimes recruited African migrants, including by force,¹⁵⁴ there is no indication that this had been the case in this location at the time of the attack. Survivors interviewed by *The New York Times* and Amnesty International affirmed that no Houthi fighters were present in the facility.¹⁵⁵ It therefore appears that the attack was directed at a civilian object and a serious violation of the principle of distinction.¹⁵⁶ The United States failed to do everything feasible to verify that the intended target was a military objective.¹⁵⁷

Houthi attacks on civilians in the NIAC with the IRG and affiliated forces

Intermittent confrontations between Houthi and IRG and affiliated forces caused civilian casualties particularly in villages on the frontlines.¹⁵⁸ Because ceasefire violations ‘were predominantly the result of small-arms fire’ and were only ‘occasionally supported by heavier-calibre weapons’,¹⁵⁹ few mass-casualty incidents seem to have occurred. On 1 December 2024, however, Houthi shelling of a marketplace in Taiz governorate is reported to have killed several civilians and wounded eight.¹⁶⁰

According to the UN Panel of Experts, between 1 January and 22 July 2025, the Houthis targeted civilians and civilian objects on 35 occasions, killing eight civilians and wounding twenty-nine others, as well as destroying civilian property.¹⁶¹ Between 5 and 12 January, for instance, the Houthis raided a village and attacked homes and other civilian objects, killing nineteen civilians and injuring fifteen others.¹⁶² These are *prima facie* war crimes.¹⁶³

Denial of humanitarian access and attacks against humanitarian workers

In 2024, the UN recorded numerous incidents of denial of humanitarian access and threats or attacks against humanitarian workers, most (52 cases) attributed to unidentified perpetrators; with three attributed to the Houthis.¹⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch reported that all parties had denied access to humanitarian workers, and that obstructionism by the Houthi authorities in particular, taking the form of unjustified bureaucratic requirements, had a worsening effect on the spread of a cholera outbreak.¹⁶⁵ In government-controlled areas, power struggles between different factions and agencies affiliated with the central government have also reportedly resulted in obstruction of access for humanitarian agencies.¹⁶⁶

On 3 August 2024, the Houthis raided the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Sana’a, confiscating property and documents.¹⁶⁷ According to the UN Secretary-General, humanitarian access denial, in the form of arbitrary detention of UN personnel and movement restrictions on female staff of UN entities and international NGOs, resulted in limitations in the provision of life-saving services, including healthcare for victims of sexual violence.¹⁶⁸

Protection of Persons in the Power of the Enemy

Under customary IHL, special protection is afforded to ‘protected persons’, including several categories of civilians who face a specific risk of harm, such as women, children, refugees, and IDPs.¹⁶⁹ IHL provides certain fundamental guarantees for anyone who is in the

power of a party to a conflict, prohibiting torture, other inhumane or degrading treatment, all forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and unfair trials.

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance

According to Human Rights Watch and Mwatana for Human Rights, most actors in Yemen, including the Houthis, governmental authorities, and affiliated forces, have perpetrated enforced disappearances and arbitrarily detained civilians.¹⁷⁰ Imprisonment was sometimes accompanied by torture or other ill-treatment.¹⁷¹ In a report issued in August 2025, Mwatana for Human Rights stated that enforced disappearance had become ‘a persistent pattern in the conduct of all parties to the Yemeni conflict’, affirming that the violations ‘went beyond isolated incidents to become a deliberate and generalized policy through which public life was managed by the logic of force, with each authority acting as an independent entity imposing laws and carrying out judgments without any legal accountability’.¹⁷² This indicates the possible commission of crimes against humanity as well as war crimes.

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of perceived political opponents were widespread and/or systematic in both Houthi- and STC-controlled areas.¹⁷³ In October 2024, an official from the Ministry of Education who had been abducted by the Houthis in June died in custody, allegedly as a result of the torture inflicted on him.¹⁷⁴ In areas under Houthi control, civilians were sometimes coerced into confessing they had spied for Israel or the United States.¹⁷⁵ The Houthis have held detainees incommunicado for long periods of time and have failed to provide information to relatives as to the fate of detained persons,¹⁷⁶ turning such arrests into enforced disappearance, a war crime under customary IHL.¹⁷⁷ Fair-trial guarantees were not complied with, with victims denied legal counsel and access to evidence,¹⁷⁸ in breach of fundamental IHL guarantees.¹⁷⁹

Arbitrary detention of humanitarian workers by the Houthis continued during the reporting period. Repeated calls were made for the immediate and unconditional release of all humanitarian workers unlawfully held in custody, including thirteen UN humanitarian workers abducted in June 2024, but with little effect. The overwhelming majority of those in custody were being held in unknown locations.¹⁸⁰ From 17 July 2024 onwards, Houthi authorities imposed the obligation that their approval be obtained before international organizations recruited staff.¹⁸¹

Another eight UN staff members were abducted between 23 and 25 January 2025, resulting in a pause in all UN activities in Sa’ada governorate on 10 February 2025.¹⁸² That day, a WFP staff member who had been abducted and held incommunicado died while in captivity.¹⁸³ According to the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights, he was tortured to death.¹⁸⁴ Mwatana for Human Rights note the direct causal link between enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention of humanitarian workers and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen.¹⁸⁵

Child recruitment and use in hostilities

According to an October 2025 report by the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, girls and children with disabilities are especially impacted.¹⁸⁶ The authors noted that violations in areas controlled by the Houthis ‘have taken on a systematic and institutionalized character’ in particular because of the widespread practice of child recruitment.¹⁸⁷

In 2024, the UN verified 182 cases of recruitment of children in Yemen, most by the Houthis (85 cases), followed by the Yemen Armed Forces (23) and affiliated armed forces and

groups (74). Reportedly, children served in combat roles in fifty-nine cases.¹⁸⁸ The Houthis reportedly recruited children as young as seven years old.¹⁸⁹ This is a war crime under customary IHL.¹⁹⁰ The National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights reported that a 15 year-old boy recruited by the Houthis was killed in combat in January 2025.¹⁹¹

Forced recruitment of girls into the female security wing of the Houthis (the ‘Zaynabiyat’) increased during the reporting period.¹⁹² The UN Panel of Experts thus reported that girls had been trained by the Houthis ‘to search homes, disperse crowds and use small arms’.¹⁹³ In 2024, two boys were reportedly abducted by the armed forces and groups affiliated with the Yemen Armed Forces.¹⁹⁴ Yemen is a State Party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which prohibits all compulsory recruitment of children under 18 years of age and requires each State Party to take all feasible measures to ensure that members of its armed forces under 18 years of age do not take a direct part in hostilities.¹⁹⁵

Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

The UN Secretary-General has reported that in 2024, women and girls in Yemen continued to be ‘exposed to heightened risks of conflict-related sexual violence which, due to harmful social norms, the fear of reprisals and stigma, remained dramatically underreported’.¹⁹⁶ Eleven cases of sexual violence (against six boys and five girls) were verified by the UN.¹⁹⁷ In some cases, torture of those detained by the Houthis involved sexual violence or the threat thereof, including cases of rape of men or boys.¹⁹⁸ The Panel of Experts recounts the testimony of a woman detainee who witnessed twenty-five cases of rape through a hole in the wall of her cell.¹⁹⁹

There were also reports of acts of sexual violence against children, including rape, in ‘summer camps’ where the Houthis indoctrinate children,²⁰⁰ as well as sexual exploitation of girls recruited into the Zaynabiyat.²⁰¹ The UN Secretary-General also reported that forced marriage of children was ‘incentivized to secure loyalty to the Houthis’ cause’.²⁰²

Murder and torture of journalists

Recurrent violations against journalists were reported, including their arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance, torture, ill-treatment, and murder. These crimes occurred in government-controlled, STC-controlled, and Houthi-controlled areas.²⁰³ On 28 December 2024, AQAP reportedly executed journalist Mohammed Qaed Al-Maqri, who had been abducted in 2015 due to his press coverage of anti-AQAP protests.²⁰⁴

The extent to which these acts were motivated by the journalists’ reporting on the armed conflicts in Yemen is not always evident from the limited information publicly available. Moreover, reasons for the deprivation of liberty are not always communicated to the victims.²⁰⁵ What is certain is that numerous violations of the freedom of the press have created a climate where reporting on the armed conflict has become dangerous due to fear of reprisals, at least in Houthi-controlled areas.

The UN Panel of Experts has observed that: ‘The ideology of the Houthis is spread through systematic propaganda. Houthi control of the media and Internet access prevent the people from gaining access to impartial information’.²⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch also reported that ‘the Houthis have threatened and reportedly arrested people from areas hit by US strikes for speaking to the media or nongovernmental organizations’.²⁰⁷ The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that: ‘It has proven nearly impossible for Yemeni journalists to report on the aftermath of recent Israeli and US attacks due to

Houthi authorities' strict censorship'.²⁰⁸ Parties to the conflict appear to be using repression of free speech and propaganda as a tool for consolidating their power over the areas and people they control.²⁰⁹

Figure 23.1: UN Map of Yemen © United Nations



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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

3R	Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation
AAKG	Azande Ani Kpi Gbe
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project
ADF	Allied Democratic Forces (DRC)
ADF	Africa Defense Forum
AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AFC	Alliance Fleuve Congo (DRC)
AFF	Afghanistan Freedom Front
AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AJH	Association des Journalistes Haitiens
AI	Artificial intelligence
ANDSF	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Nations
ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
AUSSOM	African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia
BSAP	Brigade de Sécurité des Aires Protégées (Haiti)
BRN	Barisan Revolusi Nasional
CAR	Central African Republic
CCW	UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons
CENTCOM	US Department of Defense Central Command
CEP	Circular error probable
CIA	US Central Intelligence Agency
CIMP	Civilian Impact Monitoring Project
CIVIC	Center for Civilians in Conflict
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad
CNDF	Chin National Defence Force
CODECO	Cooperative for Development of the Congo
CPC	Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CAR)
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CSP-DPA	Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad
CTSAMVM	Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DJPF	Darfur Joint Protection Force
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECHO	European Commission Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EGC	Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (also known as the Gulf Clan)
EHRC	Ethiopia Human Rights Commission
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Forces

ERW	Explosive remnants of war
FABF	Burkina Faso Armed Forces
FADM	Mozambican Armed Forces
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FLA	Front de Libération de l'Azawad
GBVIMS	Gender-Based Violence Information Management System
GHF	Gaza Humanitarian Foundation
GSF	Gang Suppression Force (Haiti)
HI	Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International)
HRANA	Human Rights Activists News Agency
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IAC	International armed conflict
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICBL	International Campaign to Ban Landmines
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
ICTR	International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IDF	Israel Defence Forces
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally displaced person
IED	Improvised explosive device
IHL	International humanitarian law, also referred to as the law of armed conflict or the law of war
IIMM	Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IRG	Internationally Recognized Government (Yemen)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRI	Islamic Resistance in Iraq
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force (Afghanistan)
IS-KP	Islamic State-Khorasan Province
ISM	Islamic State Mozambique
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISSP	Islamic State in the Sahel Province (previously, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, ISGS)
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JNIM	Jama'a Nusra al-Islam wa al-Muslimin

KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
LNG	Liquified natural gas
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer and other identities
M23	Mouvement du 23 mars (DRC)
MDY-PDF	Mandalay People's Defence Forces
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR
MLRS	Multiple-launch rocket system
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
MOP	GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator
MRBM	Medium-range ballistic missile
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
MSS	Multinational Security Support (Haiti)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIAC	Non-international armed conflict
NRF	National Resistance Front (Afghanistan)
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODIHR	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PDF	People's Defence Forces
PFGF	Pro-Former Government Forces
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PNH	Haitian National Police
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RDF	Rwanda Defence Force
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAF	Somali Armed Forces
SAMIDRC	Southern African Development Community Mission in the DRC
SAMIM	Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique
SAS	Special Air Service (UK)
SCC	Special Criminal Court (CAR)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition
SPLM-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North
SSC	Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn regions
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
STC	Southern Transitional Council (Yemen)

TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNITAD	UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
UNMHA	UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOSAT	United Nations Satellite Centre
UNPROFOR	UN Protection Force (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency
UNSOH	UN Support Office in Haiti
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
UPC	Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (CAR)
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force
US	United States
VDPs	Volunteers for Defence of the Homeland (Burkina Faso)
WHO	World Health Organization
WTA	Wagner Ti Azande (CAR)
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Units



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