



REDUCING CIVILIAN HARM IN URBAN WARFARE

A HANDBOOK FOR ARMED GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

Fighting in urban areas takes place where there are many civilians and civilian objects, causing significant suffering to civilians.

That suffering is often called “civilian harm”, and takes a number of forms:

- death or injury (physical or psychological)
- damage or destruction of homes and shelter
- loss or denial of:
 - essential supplies such as food, water, medical supplies and fuel
 - essential services such as electricity, health, education, water supply, sewerage, food production/distribution and refuse disposal
 - access for agencies to deliver essential supplies and services to civilians
- large numbers of people fleeing, as they fear the harm mentioned above.

There are many reasons for an armed group to avoid harming civilians during its operations:

- this is an obligation under international humanitarian law (IHL)¹
- doing so can generate respect and support from a group’s own fighters, the local population, the global community and other armed groups or partnered forces
- you will be seen as more professional and honourable
- attacks against civilians or objects that are not military objectives:
 - waste resources
 - may be contrary to religious/spiritual beliefs and local values
 - are unlawful under IHL and may result in prosecution and punishment.

You must still comply with IHL, even if the enemy or other groups/forces do not.²

¹ CIHL Rule 15

² CIHL Rule 140

In this document, the term *civilian harm* (along with such synonyms as *harm to civilians* or simply *harm*) includes the consequences listed above – which are directly linked to the fighting/hostilities – but also includes other consequences for civilians, such as:

- extra-judicial killings
- inhumane treatment
- arbitrary deprivation of liberty
- sexual violence
- family separation
- long-term consequences of urban fighting, such as people going missing, loss of income and the presence of mines and explosive remnants of war (unexploded munitions, poorly-secured ammunition stocks, etc.).

For the sake of simplicity, this document often uses the word *civilians* to also include civilian objects, other protected persons and protected objects. In this handbook, “civilian” covers all those not taking part in the fighting, including not only the women, men, boys and girls who make up the civilian population, but also military medical and religious staff and fighters who have laid down their arms or are out of action because they are sick, wounded or have been captured.³

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document explains some ways of reducing harm to civilians during non-international armed conflicts.

It divides the issue into:

- command
- planning
- conduct
- training and equipment.

We shall only talk about the obligations under customary international humanitarian law (CIHL) in this document, but various treaty law obligations also apply. Footnotes direct you to the relevant area of CIHL – rules that come from a general practice accepted as law. Those rules are listed and explained in the “Rules” section of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) *Customary International Humanitarian Law Database*, available online in [Arabic](#), [Chinese](#), [English](#), [French](#), [Portuguese](#), [Russian](#) and [Spanish](#).

Each chapter of the handbook spells out the responsibilities of commanders, fighters, planners and supporting groups, and in boxes such as these makes a number of recommendations. Most of these recommendations are based on good practices that the ICRC has identified by analysing urban fighting, and on extensive consultations with the commanders of non-state armed groups and other fighters. These good practices are not exhaustive and may not suit every situation, but all commanders should consider and apply these measures, together with any others that could prevent or minimize harm to civilians.

COMMAND

Commanders have authority and control over fighters and/or other commanders.

They must provide guidance and direction to those under their command and take responsibility for their actions. Commanders directly affect those actions of the groups they command that could avoid or minimize harm to civilians. They must consider not only what *should* happen, but also what *should not* happen to civilians and civilian objects, and must include this in the planning and conduct of urban operations and in training for such operations.

COMMAND RESPONSIBILITIES

If you are a commander, you are responsible for the behaviour of the commanders and fighters under your command.

Commanders must respect and ensure respect for IHL in all circumstances.⁴ This responsibility continues to apply even when the commander is not present. If a commander knows (or should know) that one of their commanders or fighters is about to commit war crimes, they must prevent them, and must punish the perpetrator(s) if they have committed such crimes.⁵

Commanders:

- should ensure that those under their command fully understand the commander's intent to protect civilians
- must ensure compliance with IHL obligations, including the obligation to avoid or minimize civilian harm
- should promote the moral, ideological and strategic priority of protecting civilians during attacks and other operations
- should monitor the plans and activities of fighters and groups under their command in which civilian harm may occur
- must intervene where unlawful civilian harm is occurring and order the activity causing that harm to cease immediately

⁴ CIHL Rule 139

⁵ CIHL Rule 153

- should establish ways to receive complaints and must investigate allegations of IHL violations
- must punish those responsible for serious violations of IHL and ensure that the punishment is itself lawful.

OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE

Operational guidance consists of the oral or written instructions from commanders that shape the decision-making process, tactics and behaviour of fighters. It may include directives, policies, manuals, codes of conduct and standard operating procedures. Operational guidance related to civilian harm is meaningful only if the commander genuinely intends to avoid harm to civilians and promotes the necessary action. Groups must teach, practise, apply and monitor the content of such guidance.

If you are a commander:

- you must ensure that your group formulates and promotes rules covering the key elements of IHL, and includes those rules in its training – see the end of this document for a selection of rules
- your operational guidance, including oral instructions, must explain the priority of avoiding or minimizing civilian harm and the actions and restrictions necessary to achieve that aim
- your guidance must be in accordance with IHL
- you must enforce compliance with guidance on avoiding and minimizing civilian harm.

PLANNING

Every activity requires planning, from an attack by a small number of fighters to an operation involving several hundred. Steps taken during planning can ensure that armed groups, commanders and fighters are better prepared and able to avoid, minimize and address civilian harm. Those steps include taking measures to understand the civilian environment.

COLLECTION OF INFORMATION

Accurate information regarding the situation is essential, because armed groups must distinguish between:

- civilians and civilian objects – which must not be attacked
- combatants and military objectives – which may be attacked⁶

and must do everything possible to verify that their targets are military objectives.⁷

The paragraphs below define:

- combatants and civilians
- military objectives and civilian objects
- critical civilian infrastructure
- protected persons and objects
- basic information requirements

to ensure that your understanding is consistent with IHL.

COMBATANTS AND CIVILIANS

Civilians are those persons who are not members of the armed forces or the armed wing of an organized armed group.⁸ **You may not attack civilians** unless they are directly participating in hostilities, and even then you may only attack them while they are actually doing so.⁹ In case of doubt, you must presume that a person is a civilian and not attack them.

⁶ CIHL Rules 1 and 7

⁷ CIHL Rule 16

⁸ CIHL Rule 4

⁹ CIHL Rule 6. See also the ICRC's *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*.

MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND CIVILIAN OBJECTS

- **Military objectives** are those objects which, by their nature, location, purpose or use, make an effective contribution to military action and whose partial or total destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.¹⁰
- **Civilian objects** are all objects that are not military objectives.¹¹

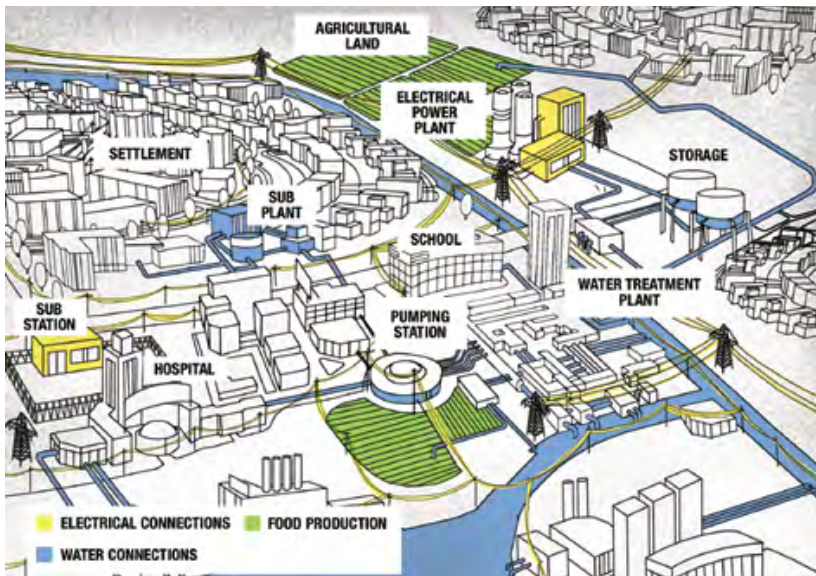
In case of doubt you must presume that an object is civilian and not attack it.

CRITICAL CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Critical civilian infrastructure includes:

- operational facilities (such as water treatment plants, power stations and hospitals)
- locations for the storage of consumables (fuel, spare parts, etc.).

Some storage locations and industrial areas store toxic materials (such as fuel and chemicals) that are hazardous to people and the natural environment if they leak or are ignited.



Critical civilian infrastructure includes networks of essential services such as electricity or water. These interconnect at key points (water pumping stations, electricity substations, etc.), from which they supply hospitals, schools, food production facilities, towns, villages, etc.

¹⁰ CIHL Rule 8

¹¹ CIHL Rule 9

Critical infrastructure that supports the civilian population – such as power stations, water treatment plants or fuel storage areas – may be located outside urban areas.

Some objects enjoy specific, additional protection, such as:

- objects indispensable to the survival of the population (places where food is stored/grown/produced, livestock, facilities that supply drinking water, irrigation works, etc.)
- cultural property
- works and installations containing dangerous forces, such as dams, dikes and nuclear power plants.¹²

PROTECTED PERSONS AND OBJECTS

The following persons and objects must be protected:

- a) civilians
- b) prisoners
- c) sick, wounded and dead combatants
- d) combatants who indicate that they wish to surrender¹³
- e) civilian objects, including all property of civilians¹⁴
- f) medical personnel, facilities and transport, both military and civilian¹⁵
- g) humanitarian relief personnel and objects used for humanitarian relief operations¹⁶
- h) persons and objects displaying the red cross, red crescent or red crystal emblem¹⁷
- i) personnel and objects involved in a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission¹⁸
- j) buildings and institutions dedicated to religion, art, science, education or charitable purposes, plus historic monuments¹⁹
- k) the natural environment²⁰
- l) protected zones such as those established to shelter the wounded, the sick and civilians, agreed demilitarized zones and non-defended localities.²¹

¹² CIHL Rule 42

¹³ CIHL Rule 47

¹⁴ CIHL Rule 52

¹⁵ CIHL Rules 25, 28 and 29

¹⁶ CIHL Rules 31 and 32

¹⁷ CIHL Rule 30

¹⁸ As long as they are entitled to the protection given to civilians and civilian objects under IHL. See CIHL Rule 33

¹⁹ CIHL Rule 38

²⁰ CIHL Rules 43, 44 and 45

²¹ CIHL Rules 35, 36 and 37

Some persons and objects enjoy greater protection because of the vital function they perform. For example, you must not only protect medical personnel and objects from harm but must also actively assist them in the performance of their functions.

If medical personnel or units are involved in acts harmful to you, you may attack them, but only after issuing a clear warning, giving them enough time to comply and verifying that they have ignored your warning.

BASIC INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

To launch an attack or other operation in a way that avoids or minimizes civilian harm, commanders and others involved in planning operations must understand the civilian environment.



If you are a commander, ensure that the information collected includes:

- who are civilians and who are combatants
- which objects are civilian objects and which are military objectives
- the location of objects that are specifically protected or otherwise important, such as:
 - hospitals and other health-care facilities
 - humanitarian facilities
 - places of worship
 - schools or other education facilities
 - historical and cultural sites
 - areas of environmental importance
 - objects essential for the survival of the civilian population (places where food is grown or produced, facilities that supply drinking water, irrigation works, etc.)
- details of the civilian environment close to military objectives, such as:
 - the civilian population density
 - timings, movements and the anticipated behaviour of the civilian population, keeping in mind differing behaviour based on age, disability, gender and culture, e.g. how and when children move to and from school
 - the locations of critical civilian infrastructure and how it connects with essential services for civilians, where an attack on one element may cause widespread indirect harm, e.g. how electricity infrastructure such as powerlines or a sub-station supplies a hospital.

You should also ensure that the information collected:

- is continuously updated to provide an accurate and current understanding of the urban area
- is passed on to other commanders and decision makers
- comes from all available sources, including:
 - reconnaissance teams
 - forward observers
 - other human sources
 - technical sources
 - sources of open-source information such as the internet

- is cross checked between multiple sources to guard against biased or inaccurate information and create a more accurate and complete picture, including the perspectives of vulnerable groups such as women, children and people with disabilities
- is enhanced through the input and analysis of specialists such as:
 - engineers
 - urban planners
 - experts on electrical, water and sewerage systems
 - environmental specialists
 - specialist organizations that represent vulnerable groups, e.g. women, children or people with disabilities.

GENERAL PLANNING OF URBAN OPERATIONS

Planning must always distinguish between combatants and military objectives, and between civilians and civilian objects.²²

Always take care to avoid harming the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects.²³

Do not use starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare.²⁴

If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an operation:

- consider whether it is necessary to conduct attacks or other operations against the enemy if they are close to civilians, their homes or critical civilian infrastructure
- take all possible measures to reduce fighting in urban areas, including:
 - conducting operations outside urban areas
 - conducting operations, locating military positions, stockpiles, etc. away from civilians and pushing or drawing the enemy away from civilians, e.g. to locations outside urban areas, towards the edges of urban areas or into less populated sectors of an urban area

²² CIHL Rules 1 and 7

²³ CIHL Rule 15

²⁴ CIHL Rule 53

- limiting the duration and scale of attacks and other operations in urban areas as far as possible, e.g. by conducting raids or brief attacks
- negotiating with enemy forces for them to surrender, and leaving exit routes that would allow them to withdraw
- negotiating with enemy forces for urban areas or parts of urban areas to be made demilitarized zones where military personnel and objects must not be located and attacks cannot be directed
- prevent or reduce the presence of civilians near military positions where feasible (see reference below to **warnings** and **evacuations**)
- consider the use of humanitarian pauses, temporary cease-fires and escape routes, either agreed with the enemy or unilaterally declared, to allow the civilian population to flee, evacuate, find better shelter, and/or stock up on food and water
- consider the potential locations and routes of civilians fleeing or passing through the area of operations, bearing in mind that not everyone will be able to flee
- assume that civilians will be present when you are planning operations in urban areas; do not assume that there are no civilians simply because warnings have been issued or evacuations have been ordered or have taken place
- engage with the civilian population to better establish their likely reactions and help shape the plan so that it reduces civilian harm
- seek legal advice to help ensure a planned attack or other operation complies with IHL
- consider only using groups and fighters experienced in (or better trained on) reducing civilian harm in attacks and other operations
- consider dedicating a commander and part of the armed group to protecting civilians by undertaking such tasks as civilian engagement, issuing warnings, arranging evacuations and providing medical support, food and water.

PLANNING AN ATTACK

Attacks may only be directed against combatants and military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilians or civilian objects.²⁵

Indiscriminate attacks are prohibited.²⁶



²⁵ CIHL Rules 1 and 7

²⁶ CIHL Rule 11

Indiscriminate attacks are:

- attacks that are not directed at a specific military objective
- attacks that use tactics or weapons that cannot be directed at a specific military objective or of which the effects cannot be limited as required by IHL, and may therefore affect both military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction²⁷
- attacks by bombardment that treat as a single military objective a number of clearly separated and distinct military objectives within an urban area.²⁸

You must take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize civilian harm, including the incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects. It is important to consider not only the incidental harm caused directly by an attack but also the indirect effects.

You must strike a balance between the anticipated military advantage and the civilian harm expected from the attack. Do not launch an attack that may be expected to cause incidental civilian harm that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.²⁹

In an urban area consisting of both combatants and civilians, the more force you apply to achieve the military aim of the attack (e.g. to destroy, capture or neutralize a target), the higher the risk of civilian harm and the higher the likelihood that the attack may be disproportionate and therefore unlawful. There is no mathematical formula for weighing the anticipated military advantage and the incidental civilian harm, as each attack is unique.

Planning includes selecting weapons and tactics that will avoid or minimize civilian harm.³⁰ When there is a choice between targets that would offer similar military advantage, you must select the one that would cause the least harm to civilians.³¹

²⁷ CIHL Rule 12

²⁸ CIHL Rule 13

²⁹ CIHL Rules 14 and 18

³⁰ CIHL Rule 17

³¹ CIHL Rule 21

INDIRECT EFFECTS

Indirect effects are those consequences not directly and immediately caused by an attack, but which nevertheless result from it.

Examples:

Direct effect	Indirect effects of the direct effect
Damage or risk of damage to civilian homes.	Displacement of civilians.
Damage to critical civilian infrastructure such as water and electrical facilities.	Disruption or interruption of electricity and water supplies, which can lead to the spread of disease and further deaths and prevent the operation of other critical infrastructure such as medical facilities.
Damage to medical facilities such as hospitals or health clinics.	Disruption or interruption of medical services, which in turn is likely to lead to the death of people needing medical assistance.
Damage to school buildings. Injury to or death of teachers.	Disruption or interruption of education.

DANGER AREAS

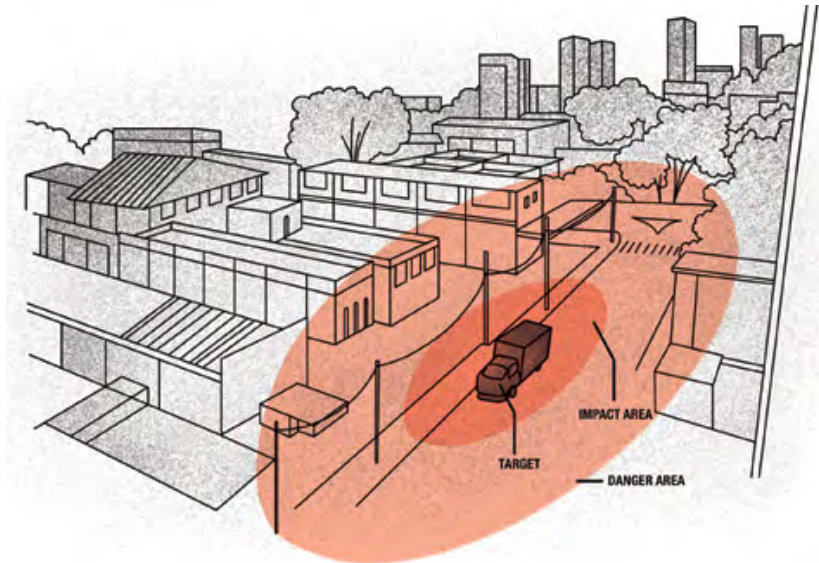
Every type of weapon and ammunition will create a danger area in which harm to civilians can occur. Even if all ammunition is accurately aimed at a target, and even if it all hits the target or lands in the target area, weapons and ammunition can create a danger area that extends beyond the target area.

Factors underlying such danger areas include the following.

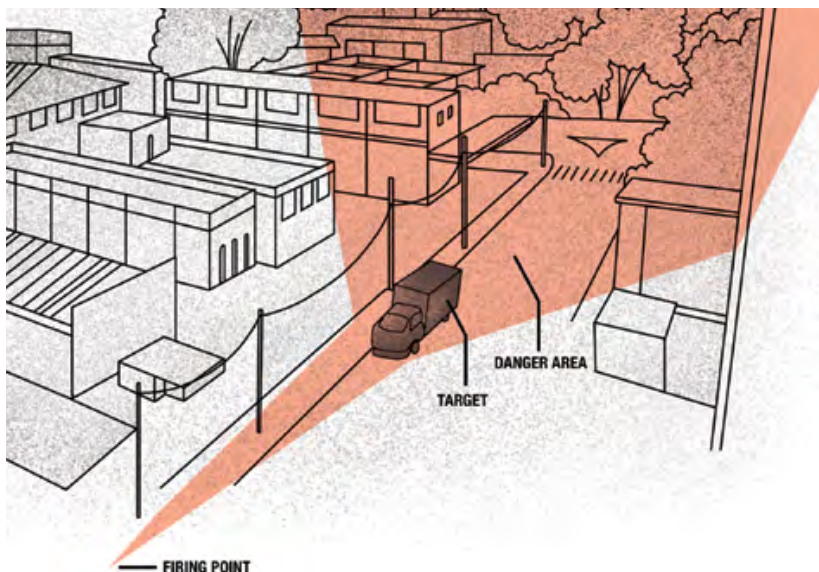
The blast and fragmentation from explosive weapons, including blast and fragmentation from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that extend beyond the immediate vicinity of the device.



The inaccuracy of some weapon systems, especially indirect weapons such as mortars, rounds from which may land across a large area, to which one must add the area affected by blast and fragmentation.

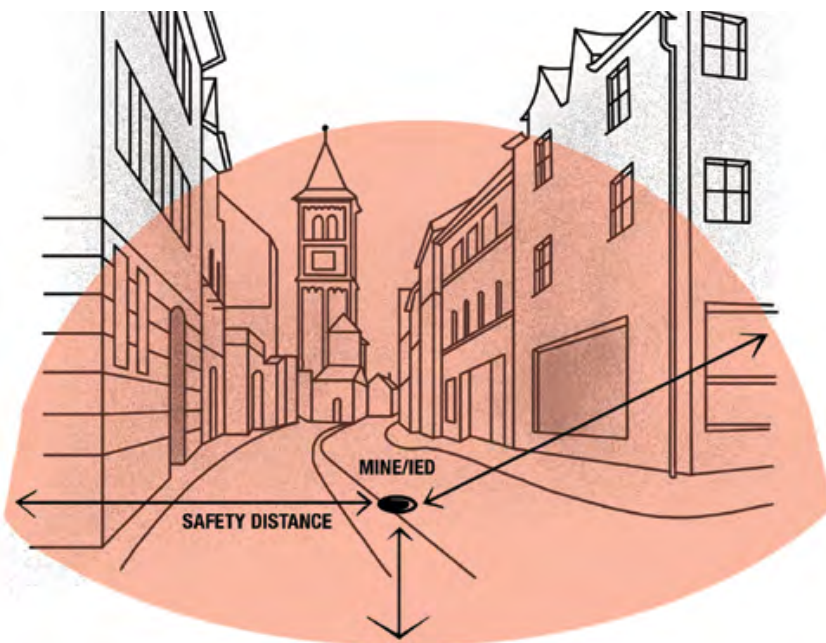


Rounds from direct-fire weapons such as rifles and machine guns, and from direct-fire explosive weapons, ricocheting or passing through/over the target.



The size of the danger area will also be affected by the urban terrain, including building layout and construction methods/materials. Civilians may also suffer harm from unanticipated effects that occur outside the danger area such as secondary explosions, and from malfunctioning weapons and ammunition.

Be mindful of the dangers created by weapons and ammunition. Establishing a safety distance – the distance from the target to the edge of the danger area for each type of weapon and ammunition – can help you understand the extent of the danger area inside which civilians and civilian objects may be affected.



If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an attack:

- verify that the target is indeed a military objective
- assess the anticipated concrete and direct military advantage to be gained by attacking it
- only use weapons, munitions and tactics that can be directed against a specific military objective and of which the effects can be limited

- identify the danger area caused by the weapons and ammunition to be used; this may include consulting weapons experts to better understand the effects of the selected weapons
- predict the likely harm to civilians and civilian objects including critical infrastructure:
 - consider the potential locations and directions of civilians fleeing the area of attack or crossing into or through it
 - consult the civilian population and specialists to better understand the effects that operations will have on civilians and civilian objects
 - consider the immediate and longer-term consequences of attacks, including damage to or destruction of critical civilian infrastructure and the natural environment, including indirect effects.
- avoid or minimize all possible incidental civilian harm by taking measures that include:
 - ensuring there will be no civilians or civilian objects in the danger area of the weapons to be used, e.g. by providing warnings and/or escape routes, and/or temporarily evacuating civilians away from danger
 - using the most appropriate weapons and ammunition (including the most appropriate warheads and fuzes where there is more than one option) to achieve the military objective while simultaneously minimizing civilian harm
 - conducting attacks at times or on days when fewer civilians are present
 - conducting attacks in locations or from directions that reduce civilian presence in the danger area; this includes selecting lines of fire that will eliminate or reduce risk to civilians.

You must not launch an attack if the harm that it will cause to civilians and civilian objects would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.

Consult your commander if there is a risk of harm to civilians.

PLANNING AN ATTACK THAT WILL USE EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

A large proportion of the harm caused to civilians during fighting in urban areas results from attacks with explosive weapons that have a wide impact area. Do not use such weapons in populated areas unless sufficient measures have been taken to limit their danger area and reduce the risk of civilian harm.

Do not use anti-personnel mines or IEDs that are not remotely controlled. If you do use mines or IEDs, ensure they will not have indiscriminate effects and that their locations are recorded as far as possible.³² Do not booby-trap objects that are likely to attract civilians.³³

If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an attack:

- only use weapons or munitions that can be directed against a specific military objective and of which the effects can be limited. Possible measures should include:
 - limiting the types of explosive weapon used in urban areas, especially by avoiding those that are unguided or generally inaccurate, such as indirect weapons, or weapons of which the danger area is significantly larger than the target
 - using alternative weapons and ammunition that have a smaller danger area, e.g. those with a lower explosive yield and less fragmentation, those that are more accurate or direct-fire weapons.
- use forward observers who can see the target and danger area to accurately control the fire of heavy weapons and indirect fire systems and cancel or suspend an attack if it becomes apparent that continued fire would lead to indiscriminate or disproportionate civilian harm
- you must only use mines and IEDs that are remotely controlled by an observer who can see the target and the danger area, and can control the moment of firing or suspend an attack if civilians enter the danger area
- establish and apply safety distances for each type of ammunition and weapon, based on their danger area.

³² CIHL Rules 81 and 82

³³ CIHL Rule 80

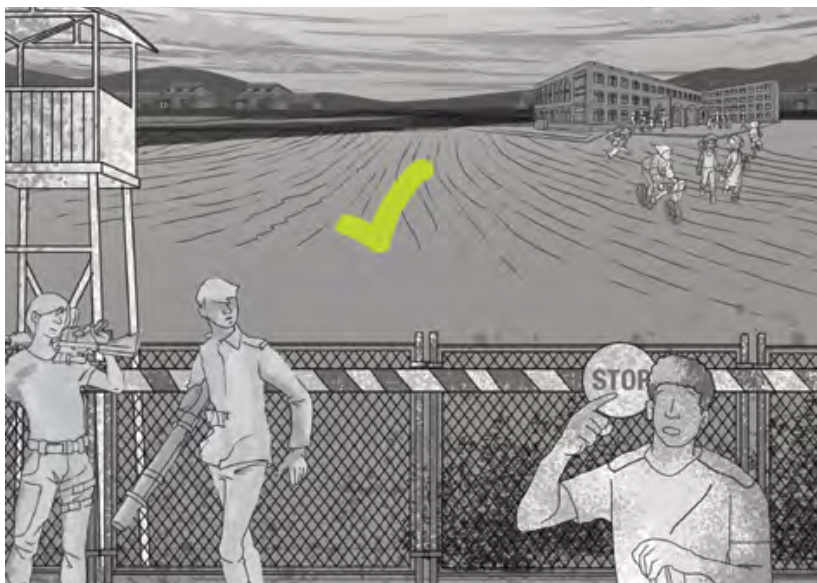
If you are a fighter launching an attack:

- ensure that weapons, especially indirect weapon systems, are placed in the correct positions and are pointing in the right direction, to reduce the risk of rounds landing away from the intended target
- cancel or suspend the attack if it becomes apparent that the target is not military or that the civilian harm from the attack would be excessive, in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage
- if you are using a mine or IED, aim or direct the blast and fragmentation away from areas that contain civilians or civilian objects
- site mines and IEDs, and aim indirect weapon systems, so that natural or man-made terrain will direct the blast and fragmentation away from areas that contain civilians or civilian objects, or shield them from these effects.



ADDITIONAL PRECAUTIONS

The high population density in urban areas means that you must take additional precautions when launching attacks and conducting defensive operations. Take all feasible measures to protect the civilian population and civilian objects in areas that you control and at locations you wish to attack.³⁴



³⁴ CIHL Rules 15 and 22

If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an attack or other operation, you must take all possible measures to:

- reduce the density of civilian presence in populated areas where attacks or other operations may be carried out
- avoid locating military objectives in or near densely-populated areas.³⁵

These measures may include issuing warnings³⁶ and carrying out temporary evacuations where required.

WARNINGS

One way to significantly reduce civilian harm during urban operations is to issue effective advance warnings to the civilian population using a method that they can access and understand, such as:

- public messages through television, radio, newspapers, leaflets and social media
- direct communication via telephone calls, personal visits, letters, etc.
- marking areas to be avoided.

You can also issue warnings to authorities, enemy military and security forces or the media. However, issuing warnings does not shift the responsibility of protection to those who were warned, and any group conducting an attack or other operation must still take care to avoid harm to civilians and civilian objects.

In addition to accurate location and time, such warnings should contain information on the size of the area to be affected and identify escape routes so that those areas can be evacuated temporarily or civilians can flee.

Assess the effectiveness of a warning from the perspective of the civilian population to which it is directed. It should reach and be understood by as many civilians as possible among those who may be affected by the attack and it should give them time to leave, find shelter or take other measures to protect themselves.

Warnings can include information that allows civilians to reduce risks to themselves if they remain in the area, such as:

³⁵ CIHL Rule 23

³⁶ CIHL Rule 20

- how to identify and avoid unexploded ordnance
- how to protect homes
- how to go about stockpiling food, water, medicine and other essential supplies.

Even if you have issued a warning, civilians may not be free, able or willing to respond or to leave an area. Civilians remain protected in all cases, even if they do not act on a warning.



If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an attack:

- you must, wherever possible, provide effective advance warning of attacks that may affect civilians that gives them time to leave, find shelter or take other measures to protect themselves
- you must not use warnings to unnecessarily scare the local population
- ensure that subordinate commanders and fighters know that warnings have been issued and know how to act, such as by allowing civilians to leave.

Formulate and issue warnings with the diversity of the civilian population in mind, in particular considering factors such as age, gender, disability and literacy levels. Make sure you consider the following points:

- **How** – Issue warnings in such a manner that they reach, and are understood by, as many people as possible. Some people may have no means of receiving electronic warnings sent by television, phone, etc. Some may not be able to read written warnings and others may not hear audible warnings such as shouting, loudspeakers or radio, so use a combination of different warning methods. Using a combination of warnings, rather than just one type, can improve the effectiveness of warnings issued to different groups.
- **When** – Issue warnings in enough time for as many people as possible to receive them, prepare and react. For example, a warning that requires people to stock up on food and water will require more time than a warning for people to stay off a certain street. Consider that some civilians, such as older people, people with disabilities, wounded or sick civilians and children, may take longer to leave an area or may be unable to do so.
- **What** – Warnings must be clear, simple, easy to understand and easily repeated to those who did not receive the original warning. They must also be consistent, to prevent mixed messages or confusion.

EVACUATIONS

If it is not possible to keep fighting out of urban areas, a commander may have to temporarily evacuate civilians from an urban area where an attack or other operation is taking place or is expected to take place (e.g. during siege or encirclement). Evacuations are the deliberate, organized movement of people away from where fighting is taking place – or may take place – through designated escape routes. When civilians flee fighting spontaneously and without the involvement of those fighting, that is not an “evacuation”. Evacuation may be voluntary or may be carried out against the will of the civilians involved. However, you must not direct or order civilians to evacuate, unless this is necessary for their security or for imperative military reasons.³⁷

As far as possible you should remove civilian persons, and objects under their control, from the vicinity of military objectives.³⁸ Do not take hostages or use people as human shields³⁹ and if civilians wish to leave for safer areas, you must always allow them to do so.

When civilians are displaced – regardless of whether they have fled or been evacuated – all possible measures must be taken to ensure that they enjoy adequate conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety, food and water, and that families remain together.⁴⁰ Creating “adequate” conditions includes taking account of people’s age, gender and any disabilities they may have. Displaced people have a right to voluntarily return to their homes – in safety – as soon as the reason for their displacement ceases to exist.⁴¹

If you are a commander or otherwise involved in planning an evacuation, you should:

- identify the best way to coordinate and communicate the evacuation with:
 - those being evacuated
 - those who might support, accompany or oversee the evacuees, such as humanitarian organizations and the department of health
 - enemy commanders, if possible

³⁷ CIHL Rule 129

³⁸ CIHL Rule 24

³⁹ CIHL Rules 96 and 97

⁴⁰ CIHL Rule 131

⁴¹ CIHL Rule 132

- assign someone responsible to coordinate and oversee the evacuation
- communicate the following points to evacuees in advance as far as possible so that they can prepare effectively:
 - when the evacuation will begin and for how long it will last
 - the method of movement – on foot or by vehicle, whether transport will be provided, etc.
 - what baggage they can carry with them including identification documents, valuables or objects essential for their survival, such as medicines, food, water, hygiene items or assistive devices such as wheelchairs or crutches
 - how evacuees and their vehicles should be marked to clearly indicate their status
 - the escape route(s) to be used and any dangerous area(s) to be avoided, and how they are marked
 - the destination site and any reception procedures
 - measures to prevent families or people who need support becoming separated from their caregivers, e.g. tags for children
 - how changes to the evacuation plan will be communicated if the situation changes
 - action the evacuees can take if attacked
 - who will provide medical care, food, water and shelter and where people can obtain these services
- consider a delay or pause in attacks or other military operations to enable evacuations and to allow people to flee
- remember that many people may be forced to remain in the “evacuated” area because of a disability, injury or for other reasons, or may decide to do so; do not assume that those who remain are associated with the enemy – they retain their protected status as civilians.



Plan and coordinate evacuations in such a way that routes and means of movement are safe, families stay together and evacuees have such essentials as food, water and medical attention.

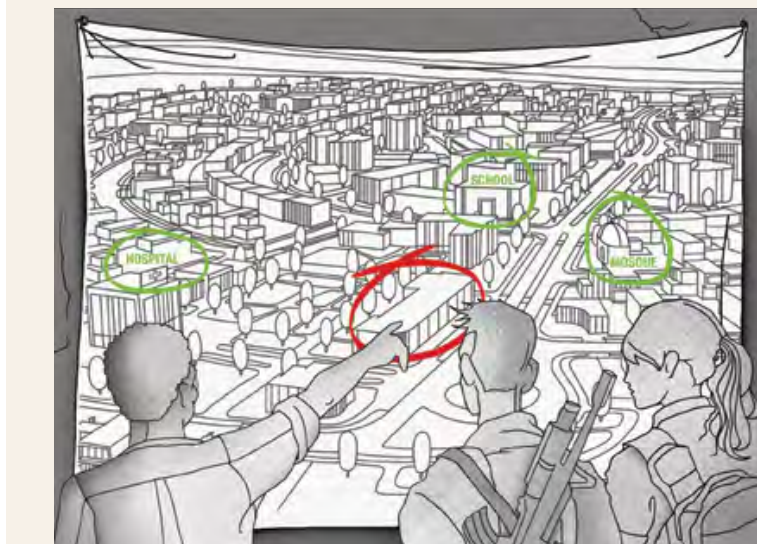
ORDERS AND REHEARSALS

While a genuine intent on a commander's part to reduce civilian harm is essential, the accurate communication of their plans to other commanders and fighters plays a vital role in ensuring clarity regarding the priority of reducing harm to civilians and the related activities and tasks.

If you are a commander, you should allow yourself sufficient time to prepare and deliver your orders properly and then give your fighters/commanders enough time to do likewise. Rehearsals of the plan are always helpful, to ensure that all fighters understand their roles, particularly as they relate to protecting civilians from the dangers of hostilities.

If you are a commander:

- you must ensure that orders and directions comply with IHL
- your written and oral orders should include sections on:
 - the civilian situation
 - the commander's intent to protect civilians
 - the actions to be taken and restrictions to be applied to reduce civilian harm during an attack or other operation
- ensure that civilian objects – including critical civilian infrastructure – are marked and included on maps, diagrams or models that accompany orders or are used in rehearsals



- ensure that your personnel rehearse such elements of the operation as how to react if they encounter an unexpected civilian presence and how to handle civilian and enemy wounded and enemy who surrender.

Do not carry out orders that are manifestly unlawful.⁴²

⁴² CIHL Rule 154

CONDUCT

URBAN FIGHTING

Commanders and fighters must do everything feasible to cancel or suspend an attack if it becomes apparent that the target is not a military objective or that the attack may be expected to cause civilian harm that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.⁴³

Do not use tactics or weapons that cause injury or suffering beyond what is necessary to render the enemy unable to fight.

Assume that civilians are present when you are operating in urban areas. Be constantly on the lookout for civilians and aware of their presence in and around the area of operations.

If you are a commander:

- conduct a final surveillance or reconnaissance immediately before the target is attacked or the operation is launched, in case the situation has changed – e.g. there are more civilians than expected
- post guards to prevent civilians entering an area of attack or other operations
- post sentries or lookouts to provide information to commanders and fighters that civilians are entering an area of operations
- ensure sentries or lookouts have a way of communicating the fact that an attack or other operation should cease.

If you are a fighter:

- do not fire into civilian populated areas, buildings or property unless absolutely necessary
- avoid or at least minimize civilian harm if force is used when the enemy is present in or near civilian areas or is using civilian objects

⁴³ CIHL Rule 19

- exercise patience, to reduce civilian harm by taking additional time to reconfirm a target before engaging it or returning fire
- deliver attacks through methods that discriminate, such as well-aimed single shots from rifles or short bursts from machine guns
- consider weapon danger areas, including areas that could be rendered dangerous by ricochets and by rounds that pass through the target and strike areas behind it.

PRISONERS

An armed group will possibly take prisoners on some occasions. To prevent people from being detained arbitrarily, IHL requires anyone detaining a person to have grounds for doing so and proper procedures. It also prohibits the taking of hostages.⁴⁴

If you hold prisoners – be they enemy fighters or civilians – you:

- are responsible for their well-being
- must treat them humanely
- must preserve their lives, well-being and dignity
- must respect their political, religious and other convictions.

As soon as an individual prisoner no longer poses a threat, you must release them immediately. You must also release them immediately at the end of active hostilities.

⁴⁴ CIHL Rule 99



Enemy personnel who have surrendered, or are wounded and no longer fighting, must be protected from harm and treated humanely. Prisoners must receive adequate food, water, clothing, shelter and medical attention, plus visits from the ICRC.

If you hold prisoners, you must:

- protect them against all types of violence or reprisal; this means you must remove them from the combat zone and keep them away from it⁴⁵
- provide them with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter and medical attention⁴⁶ appropriate to their age and gender
- record their personal details and allow them to communicate with their families⁴⁷
- keep women and children separate from men, unless they are from the same family⁴⁸
- ensure female prisoners are guarded by female guards
- allow the ICRC to visit them.⁴⁹

THE DEAD, SICK AND WOUNDED

If you are a commander or fighter, you must:

- search for, collect and give medical assistance to all the sick and wounded, including those of the enemy⁵⁰
- ensure that health-care facilities can continue to function, that health personnel can work unimpeded and that the sick, wounded and other patients have access to those facilities and personnel⁵¹
- search for, collect and remove the dead, including dead enemy fighters, record all available information to aid future identification and where possible return bodies to next of kin⁵²
- treat all dead, sick and wounded with respect.⁵³

⁴⁵ CIHL Rule 121

⁴⁶ CIHL Rule 118

⁴⁷ CIHL Rules 123 and 125

⁴⁸ CIHL Rules 119 and 120

⁴⁹ CIHL Rule 124

⁵⁰ CIHL Rules 109 and 110

⁵¹ CIHL Rules 25, 28, 29 and 31

⁵² CIHL Rules 112 and 116

⁵³ CIHL Rules 111 and 113

TREATMENT OF CIVILIANS

In many situations, armed groups control urban areas where civilians live and work. In such situations, fighters have power and exert control over them.

In these locations, proximity and interaction at locations such as checkpoints mean that there is a risk that authority will be misused, e.g. through theft or harassment. Commanders must give clear direction to their subordinates regarding the importance of treating civilians and their property with respect and dignity.⁵⁴

In particular:

- Give particular respect and protection to children.⁵⁵ Do not recruit them into armed groups or allow them to take part in fighting.⁵⁶
- Do not take hostages.⁵⁷
- Do not steal civilian property (including vehicles).⁵⁸
- Do not commit rape or any other form of sexual violence (including but not limited to sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy or forced stripping).⁵⁹
- Avoid putting health-care facilities or personnel at risk. This means you must respect and protect medical personnel, transport and facilities in all circumstances.⁶⁰
- Do not attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable for the survival of the population, such as:
 - places where food is grown or produced
 - livestock
 - facilities that supply drinking water
 - irrigation works.⁶¹
- Do not starve the civilian population as a method of warfare.⁶²
- Allow humanitarian personnel to do their work:
 - Ensure that humanitarian personnel and vehicles can move as required.

⁵⁴ CIHL Rule 87

⁵⁵ CIHL Rule 135

⁵⁶ CIHL Rules 136 and 137

⁵⁷ CIHL Rule 96

⁵⁸ CIHL Rule 52

⁵⁹ CIHL Rule 93

⁶⁰ CIHL Rules 25, 28 and 29

⁶¹ CIHL Rule 54

⁶² CIHL Rule 53

- Allow the rapid passage of humanitarian aid, regardless of who will be receiving it.⁶³
- Remember that you are only allowed to restrict their movements temporarily, in case of urgent military necessity, in specific locations.
- You must respect and protect humanitarian personnel and the objects they use, in all circumstances.⁶⁴
- At the end of fighting, those who have used ammunition, mines or IEDs that have not exploded must remove them, make them harmless, mark their locations or provide information on their locations to mine clearance experts to assist in their removal.⁶⁵

If you are a commander:

- produce and promote internal rules that prohibit ill-treatment of the civilian population, including those outlined above
- closely monitor the behaviour of fighters who live and operate near the civilian population
- where unlawful civilian harm is occurring, you must step in and order the activity causing that harm to cease immediately
- ensure that fighters have enough food and supplies to prevent them taking them from civilians
- ensure that children under 18 are not able to join or fight with an armed group, even if they ask to, and release any children who may already be serving
- investigate and where required punish those who mistreat civilians
- protect and facilitate the work of medical personnel, transport and facilities, e.g. give access to medical staff and ambulances as quickly as possible and take steps to help them get through checkpoints
- establish methods of liaising with humanitarian organizations, and facilitate the passage of humanitarian supplies, including food, water and medical goods
- create the capability to detect, mark or clear unexploded ordnance and, if unable to clear unexploded ordnance, mark the location of such items and liaise with/notify others who can assist, such as mine-action organizations.

⁶³ CIHL Rules 55 and 56

⁶⁴ CIHL Rules 31 and 32

⁶⁵ CIHL Rule 83



You must treat all civilians with respect and dignity, and protect them against ill-treatment.
You must not steal their property and you must allow them to obtain essential supplies and services.

POST-OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES

It is important to track civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects for all military operations. Use such information to support future planning, to conduct investigations and make reparations. Efforts to create transparency and take remedial action in response to civilian harm will enhance discipline within the armed group and show civilians that you are committed to protecting them.

If you are a commander, you should:

- review all operations, to:
 - identify practices that prevented or minimized harm to civilians
 - find ways of preventing recurrences of any civilian harm that occurred
- create a method to track, assess and investigate all instances of civilian harm:
 - establish points of contact and information requirements such as exact location, date and time and description of every alleged incident, and communicate those to civilians and other organizations such as the ICRC or other humanitarian or human rights organizations that may wish to contribute information
 - use other sources, both internal and external, to cross-check information to ensure an accurate account of incidents, and break this down by age, gender and disability
 - where the information collected shows that civilians have been harmed, investigate the alleged incidents to determine the causes
 - where necessary, punish those who have caused civilian harm
- make amends for harm caused
- include positive practices and mitigation measures in training, planning and the conduct of future attacks and other operations
- publicize the results of assessments of civilian harm, together with the steps you are taking to minimize such harm during future operations.

TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT

Before fighting starts, a number of preparatory activities must take place to ensure that commanders and fighters will conduct themselves correctly. Proper training and equipment are important in influencing the conduct of fighting and in ensuring that you avoid or minimize harm to civilians.

IHL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

All members of any armed group must receive basic instruction in IHL, to promote compliance with that body of law.⁶⁶

If you are a commander, you must provide IHL instruction. Instruction might include:

- IHL *education*, which provides subordinate commanders and fighters with a theoretical knowledge of IHL
- IHL *training*, which gives subordinate commanders and fighters the opportunity to practice the application of that theoretical knowledge in scenarios that allow them to develop the correct habits
- refresher IHL education and training, conducted as frequently as possible, including as part of pre-deployment training and briefing
- discussion of lessons learned from mistakes made in previous operations and how to do better next time.

Assistance with the design and delivery of IHL training is available from organizations such as the ICRC.

⁶⁶ CIHL Rule 142

TACTICAL TRAINING

If you are a commander or trainer, you should:

- incorporate practical techniques to prevent or reduce civilian harm, such as those in this handbook, in all aspects of tactical training
- incorporate realistic civilian harm scenarios (such as the presence of civilians in the immediate area of fighting) in group discussions and training exercises, and review those scenarios during training debriefs
- use training scenarios and facilities which, as far as possible, replicate the characteristics of urban areas, including buildings and the presence of civilians (of different ages and genders and those with disabilities), to ensure training reflects the real-life challenges that commanders and fighters will face
- ensure those involved in the planning of attacks and other military operations, those tasked with collecting information and those directing attacks such as forward observers (persons who direct fire from indirect systems such as mortars and rockets) are trained to identify and avoid civilians and civilian objects, including critical civilian infrastructure
- regularly review education and training material and exercise or discussion scenarios that consider lessons learned from previous engagements and reinforce how to better reduce civilian harm next time.

Training should include lessons learned and other good practices that reduce civilian harm based on input from groups and fighters on the ground, civilians and organizations such as the ICRC that focus on the protection of civilians. Pay careful attention to the perspectives of groups that may be overlooked or marginalized, such as women, children and people with disabilities.

WEAPON TRAINING

If you are a commander or trainer, you should:

- ensure that all fighters can handle their weapons safely and are familiar with different weapon states (unloaded, loaded, made ready) and how to change the weapon state safely
- ensure all fighters are trained and continually practice how to accurately direct the effects of all weapons they might be required to use and to apply the principle of discrimination in doing so
- ensure that all commanders, planners and fighters are trained to know and understand the effects of all the weapons they will use, including their danger areas and any limitations on their use
- ensure that there are enough forward observers or fighters who are trained in how to direct and adjust the fire of indirect systems onto military targets using procedures that minimize civilian harm, e.g. by adjusting fire onto targets using single rounds, the initial round or rounds being aimed to land in open or unpopulated areas

Weapon training must emphasize techniques that make firing more accurate, including:

- how to zero a weapon's sights and conduct other calibration techniques as appropriate before operations begin
- firing only at a clearly identified military target
- how to steady the weapon before firing, including the use of stable firing positions, surrounding objects or bipods, tripods, base plates or firing platforms
- only firing well-aimed single shots from rifles, or short bursts from machine guns.

Fighters should not be allowed to operate a weapon unless they can do so accurately and in a manner that allows them to exercise discrimination (i.e. only to attack legitimate targets, while avoiding harm to civilians).

EQUIPMENT

You must not use a weapon that:

- is indiscriminate by its very nature, e.g. a weapon that is not capable of being directed at a specific military objective, or of which the effects cannot be limited as required by IHL⁶⁷
- will cause injuries or suffering beyond what is necessary to render the enemy unable to fight⁶⁸
- is prohibited by treaty and/or customary law, including:
 - exploding bullets
 - expanding bullets
 - poison
 - biological weapons
 - chemical weapons
 - weapons injuring primarily by non-detectable fragments
 - blinding laser weapons
 - anti-personnel mines
 - cluster munitions
 - nuclear weapons.⁶⁹

To avoid or minimize harm to civilians, commanders should:

- limit the types of weapon used in urban areas, especially by avoiding those explosive weapons that have wide-area effects, and in particular those that are unguided or whose area of impact and the danger area that they create through blast and fragmentation are significantly larger than the target
- develop, manufacture or procure weapons and ammunition that are more accurate and have a lower explosive yield and reduced fragmentation
- undertake efforts, such as testing in unpopulated areas and standardization of manufacture, to render the effects of weapons and ammunition more predictable and more consistent, and to ensure that their effects can be more accurately incorporated into planning and conduct

⁶⁷ CIHL Rule 71

⁶⁸ CIHL Rule 70

⁶⁹ CIHL Rules 72–79 and 86

- ensure that the right ammunition is used with each weapon and that weapons and ammunition are used in the manner and for the purposes for which they were designed
- ensure that ammunition is kept dry and protected from extreme temperatures
- ensure that heavy weapons and indirect fire systems have purpose-made bipods, tripods or firing platforms to increase their accuracy and reduce malfunctioning
- ensure that sights and other devices for aiming weapons are available, serviceable and used
- enhance the accuracy of fire-control processes, e.g. by using global positioning systems, and improve methods of calculating firing data for indirect fire weapons, etc.

PEERS, PARTNERS AND OTHER INFLUENCERS

Fighters and armed groups can be strongly influenced by:

- other fighters from the same armed group
- partners from states, multinational forces and other armed groups providing support
- civilian influencers.

Members of the community, tribes, clans, families, religious and spiritual leaders, political and economic personalities, women's organizations, organizations of people with disabilities, trade unions, student groups, social media influencers and platforms, international organizations, human rights and humanitarian organizations can all exert a positive influence on an armed group. However, they can also exert a negative influence, e.g. by illegally encouraging acts that would amount to violations of IHL.

Armed groups must comply with IHL despite such influences.

When a positive approach towards civilians is advocated and supported by peers, partners and other influencers it is more likely to be internalized and become part of the fighter's identity – the "right thing to do". Armed groups can also seek support from their partners in their efforts to fulfil their obligations under IHL.

Partner forces and groups, and other influencers, must not only refrain from abetting or otherwise encouraging the commission of IHL violations but must also ensure respect for IHL by promoting a positive approach that enhances the protection of civilians. They must prevent any approach or practice that violates IHL protections for the civilian population, the sick and wounded or prisoners.

Partner forces/groups should:

- assess the intent, capacity and leadership of the armed group to protect civilians, the sick, the wounded and prisoners
- agree with each other that respecting IHL and protecting those not taking part in the fighting is a priority
- ensure that IHL responsibilities and practical advice on how to fulfil those responsibilities are included in the education curriculum, practical training activities and the conduct of exercises
- monitor the use of information, logistics and combat support that they provide to ensure that it is not misused
- take meaningful action to address any allegations of IHL violations or other problematic behaviour
- agree upon and rehearse clear and robust means of delivering combat support (including targeting processes), that prevent miscommunication and errors that may result in harm to civilians
- where possible, send trainers, advisors or liaison staff to advise and mentor the partner force, especially when their presence would enhance the protection of civilians.
- share lessons learned on processes that prevent or reduce civilian harm from operations conducted in partnerships, to improve future training efforts and operations.

Commanders, fighters and partnered forces/groups should set an example as regards minimizing harm to civilians.

Local commanders and fighters with closer ties to communities can raise awareness of potential or actual harm to civilians from military operations.

EXAMPLE RULES FOR FIGHTERS

The following list provides a concise set of IHL rules that armed groups can integrate into their operational guidance as a minimum standard.

These rules are not an exhaustive list of the IHL rules that apply to armed groups. In addition to other IHL rules, groups must also take account of rules from other bodies of law, including human rights law, and other international standards and ethics, when drafting operational guidance.

1. Only fight combatants and only attack military objectives.
2. Do not attack civilians, combatants who are wounded, sick or surrendering, or civilian objects.
3. Do not damage or steal civilian property.
4. Limit destruction to what your mission requires.
5. Do not use weapons or tactics that cause unnecessary suffering or injuries, or may have indiscriminate or disproportionate effects. Do not use prohibited weapons.
6. Take care to avoid harm to the civilian population.
7. Take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects and to protect civilians from the danger of military operations.
8. Do not starve the civilian population or deprive them of objects essential to their survival.
9. Collect and provide medical care for the sick and wounded, whether friend or enemy.
10. Collect and respect the dead. Keep any information that will help identify them.
11. Do not fight or harm enemies who have surrendered or who are captured. Protect them and treat them humanely.
12. Treat civilians in your power humanely.
13. Protect civilians against all forms of ill-treatment.
14. Do not take hostages or use human shields.
15. Do not commit or permit rape or sexual violence against anyone.

16. Do not forcibly displace civilians unless this is necessary for their own safety or for imperative military reasons.
17. Do not recruit children into your armed group and do not use them in fighting.
18. Respect and protect all medical and humanitarian personnel, facilities and transport. Do not use medical facilities or transport for military purposes.
19. Do not attack personnel or objects bearing the red cross, red crescent or red crystal emblem. Do not misuse the emblems.
20. Allow humanitarian aid to reach civilians in need as quickly as possible and take steps to help it get through to them. Do not create obstacles or delays.
21. Respect all cultural objects, education facilities, places of worship and the natural environment.
22. Apply these rules even if the enemy does not. Do not commit acts of revenge.
23. Do everything possible to prevent any breach of the above rules. Report any violation to your commander.

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on the ICRC to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. The organization's experience and expertise enables it to respond quickly and effectively, without taking sides.

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