

Canadian National Statement:

Political declaration on protecting civilians from the effects of armed conflict in populated areas

Canada expresses its gratitude to the Republic of Ireland for its leadership and commitment to increasing the protection of civilians in armed conflict. We are pleased to endorse this *Political Declaration*, and expect that it will help States improve the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Canada is unrelentingly committed to strict and universal compliance with international humanitarian law. However, with that said, we can all do more to protect the most vulnerable during armed conflict.

Recent armed conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Myanmar, and Yemen are characterized by unprecedented levels of civilian harm wrought by actors who fail to comply with IHL. They deploy unlawful means and methods of warfare, commit sexual violence, and engage in indiscriminate targeting practices that result in large scale civilian deaths and injury, destruction to civilian infrastructure, and damage to critical civilian services.

We need only look to the scale of civilian damage caused by Russia's unlawful destruction of Ukrainian cities, attacks on civilians, and attempt to obliterate a sovereign State's way of life to understand the heavy costs of failure to comply with IHL.

At a time when the rules-based international order is under threat, it is more important than ever for us to reaffirm our existing legal obligations and promote compliance with IHL. The Declaration is a critical tool to strengthen IHL implementation and compliance, thereby improving the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

The Declaration, reflecting political commitments of the signatories, describes further measures that States can take to enhance the policies and practices for avoiding harm to civilians and civilian objects during military operations. We interpret these commitments to be consistent with IHL.

We are confident these non-legally binding policy commitments will encourage signatories to consider new ways to:

- implement IHL obligations into their operational practice;
- foster a holistic and gender-sensitive approach to victim assistance;
- improve IHL compliance of their allies and partner forces;
- enhance efforts to record and track civilian casualties; and
- ensure accountability for violations.

While these important political commitments do not modify our existing obligations under IHL, they do demonstrate our resolve to ensure that military operations comply with applicable international law, and to develop new ways to protect civilians in armed conflict.

Canada already takes progressive and forward-looking actions to address the Declaration's political commitments. They are reflected in existing Canadian military policy and practice. But we can do more. The Declaration provides a roadmap to assist in our collective efforts to improve.

This is why, along with the signatories gathered here today, Canada endorses the Declaration.

IHL compliance preserves humanity in warfare, and marks the difference between armed conflict as a tragic but internationally governed reality, and armed conflict as lawless savagery. Canada embraces this Political Declaration as a means of tangibly enhancing compliance with international humanitarian law, and looks forward to engaging with our fellow signatories with the earnest intention of increasing the protection of civilian populations worldwide.

We once again thank the Government of Ireland for its leadership, and equally thank the signatories and Civil Society for your efforts to alleviate the plight of civilians caught up in armed conflict.