
HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMANITARIAN CRISES: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PROTECTING VULNERABLE PEOPLE

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Abstract: *Globally, in recent decades, humanity has gone through various crisis situations, testing the ability of states to respond effectively to these dangers and to provide protection to individuals.*

The Cuban missile crisis of the 1960s, the famine of the 1980s, the financial crisis that marked the end of the 2000s, the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and, more recently, the security crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022 are just a few examples of crisis situations to which international bodies have had to respond quickly to protect the population.

This article exposes some aspects regarding the role of international organizations in protecting vulnerable people in the current context of humanitarian crises, which have occurred as a result of events and conflicts that have strongly shaken peace and security at global level.

Keywords: *human rights; international organization; humanitarian crises; vulnerable people; conflict management.*

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have been characterized by many different situations of crisis, such an exemple being the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, followed by the even more recent events in the Israel-Palestine conflict, which are the culmination of a decades-long clash in that very disputed aria of the Middle East. In this context, the statement made by Lawrence (2014, p. 194) seems so true, namely that "[r]ather than being a politics out of the ordinary, crises are, in some sense, politics as usual."

The recent challenges that the international community was facing with, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, as Mbengue and d'Aspremont (2022, p. 1) wrote, test the build-up and the operation of international law and institutions. Undoubtedly, in such situations the capacity of states to protect the rights of individuals is put to a real stress test. The growing complexity of contemporary challenges compels states to balance the protection of individual rights with the broader welfare of society and to formulate new criteria for the allocation of rights and protections in circumstances characterized by restricted access to resources and diminished resource availability.



Thus, the effective intervention of international organizations, in order to protect the human rights, even more so, of vulnerable people, acquires particular importance.

THE ORIGINS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

States bear the primary responsibility for ensuring compliance with international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL) during armed conflicts. In the context of non-international armed conflicts, this obligation extends to both States and organized armed groups, each of which is required to comply with the applicable legal framework.

Also, international organizations contribute to the promotion and implementation of these legal regimes by encouraging parties to armed conflicts to respect their obligations under both IHRL and IHL. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has traditionally played a pivotal role in monitoring and promoting compliance with international humanitarian law in situations of armed conflict. In addition, the ICRC has increasingly invoked international human rights law in contexts of internal disturbances and tensions that fall outside the material scope of international humanitarian law, thereby reinforcing the complementary relationship between these two branches of international law.

The creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and the adoption of the first Geneva Convention the following year mark the birth of modern international humanitarian law and action. As Bernard noted (2012, p. 1195), the ICRC, together with its partners from what has become a universal the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), endeavours to reach out to victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence – from Syria to Afghanistan, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Colombia.

Henry Dunant is widely regarded as one of the principal architects of the modern humanitarian movement and is inextricably linked to the establishment of the Red Cross. His experiences during the Battle of Solferino in 1859 profoundly shaped his humanitarian vision and inspired the publication of *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), a seminal work that laid the intellectual foundations for both the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the subsequent development of international humanitarian law (IHL). In this influential text, Dunant advocated for the creation of voluntary relief societies to assist wounded soldiers irrespective of their nationality and called for the adoption of international legal norms aimed at mitigating the human suffering caused by armed conflict.

Nevertheless, the humanitarian principles advanced by Dunant did not emerge in isolation. Prior to the publication of *A Memory of Solferino*, numerous initiatives had already demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of organized medical relief during wartime. Religious orders, charitable organizations, and pioneering humanitarian figures, most notably Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War and Clara Barton during the American Civil War, had independently developed systems for providing medical care and humanitarian assistance to wounded combatants. These earlier efforts constituted important precedents that informed the evolution of organized humanitarian action and ultimately contributed to the institutionalization of humanitarian protection through the International Red Cross and the development of IHL.

Furthermore, Florence Nightingale, whose pioneering work during the Crimean War (1854–1856) marked a turning point in the development of military nursing, became renowned for organizing medical care for British soldiers at Scutari (Üsküdar) and for introducing sanitary reforms that substantially reduced mortality rates in military hospitals. In addition to these practical achievements, she consistently advocated for the reform and strengthening of military medical services, thereby contributing to the emergence of more organized and effective systems of wartime



medical assistance. So, while Florence Nightingale advocated for the strengthening of military medical services during the Crimean War, Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, pioneered organized medical relief during the American Civil War by mobilizing volunteer corps of nurses and physicians to deliver medical care in conflict-affected areas. Her initiatives demonstrated the critical role of civilian humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts and anticipated many of the principles later institutionalized by the International Red Cross Movement.

Acknowledging the inadequacy of existing mechanisms for the provision of medical assistance during armed conflict, Henry Dunant, together with the other founders of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), sought to mobilize international support for the realization of two interrelated objectives. The first consisted in the establishment of a permanent humanitarian institution, operating independently of state authorities and mandated to provide impartial and neutral assistance to wounded combatants irrespective of their nationality. The second aimed at the formulation and codification of binding international legal obligations requiring states to ensure the humane treatment of wounded and sick members of enemy armed forces, as well as the protection of medical personnel and civilians engaged in humanitarian relief activities. The establishment of the ICRC and the first National Red Cross Societies, followed by the adoption of the First Geneva Convention in 1864, represented a defining moment in the institutionalization of international humanitarian action and the emergence of international humanitarian law as a distinct branch of public international law.

THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS: SAFEGUARDING PERSONS FROM CATASTROPHIC SUFFERING

For more than eight decades, since 1945, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has consistently maintained that the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are incompatible with the fundamental principles of humanity. The Movement has therefore advocated the prohibition and eventual elimination of such weapons. This position was shaped by the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, where delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) directly witnessed the unprecedented human suffering caused by the detonation of a nuclear weapon while assisting the Japanese Red Cross in providing medical care to tens of thousands of wounded and dying civilians. The experience profoundly influenced the institutional outlook of the ICRC and the Movement as a whole, laying the foundation for its long-standing humanitarian and legal advocacy in favour of the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

In the subsequent decades, the Movement consistently reiterated its calls for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. This advocacy was further reinforced by an increasing body of evidence indicating that the provision of any meaningful humanitarian response in the event of the use of nuclear weapons would be effectively impossible (see Borrie, J. and Caughley, T., 2014). In the event of a nuclear weapon detonation in or near a populated area, it would result in an overwhelming number of casualties, while the destruction of most local medical infrastructure would leave vast numbers of individuals in need of urgent medical care. At the same time, humanitarian assistance providers would be exposed to severe operational constraints, including significant risks related to radiation exposure.

In view of their extraordinary and catastrophic destructive potential, nuclear weapons have been the object of sustained international political and legal attention since their development and first use in 1945. More recent developments have further reinforced the urgency of this issue and have highlighted the continuing relevance of international humanitarian law (IHL) as a normative framework for its assessment and regulation.



In the current international context, the risk of nuclear weapon use is currently assessed as having reached its highest level since the most acute phases of the Cold War. This deterioration in the strategic environment is reflected in intensifying international and regional tensions, accompanied by an increase in nuclear rhetoric, including both explicit and implicit threats of nuclear weapon employment. Concurrently, nuclear deterrence theory has regained prominence in strategic discourse, while the role of nuclear weapons within contemporary military doctrines and national security policies appears to be expanding rather than contracting. Ongoing modernization programmes of nuclear arsenals further reinforce this trajectory, including the development of lower-yield systems that are increasingly framed as “more usable” and intended for limited or tactical application. In addition, emerging technological developments, particularly the prospective integration of artificial intelligence into nuclear command-and-control architectures, have generated further concerns regarding escalation risks, system reliability, and strategic stability.

The nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime has experienced progressive erosion, with several instruments being terminated, weakened, or left under significant strain. Although the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) remains the central pillar of the global non-proliferation and disarmament architecture, implementation of its disarmament obligations has stagnated, and consensus on further measures has proven elusive among States Parties. In this context, international humanitarian law (IHL) plays a crucial role in sustaining the normative prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons and in informing the development of additional legal instruments aimed at their eventual elimination, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

So, it should be noted that on 7 July 2017, a number of 122 states adopted the TPNW, which entered into force on 22 January 2021. As the preamble to the treaty makes clear, the TPNW is explicitly based on the principles and rules of IHL. The preamble states that “*any use of nuclear weapons would be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, in particular the principles and rules of international humanitarian law*”. (preamble, para. 10, United Nations, Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons).

In this way, the TPNW establishes a comprehensive prohibition on nuclear weapons, representing a significant step towards their complete elimination. It further reinforces the normative stigma against their proliferation and use. In addition, this treaty reaffirms the intrinsic relationship between humanitarian imperatives and security considerations, emphasizing that the risks associated with nuclear weapons “*concern the security of all humanity*”, that preventing any use of nuclear weapons is the responsibility of all states, and that nuclear disarmament serves “*both national and collective security interests*” (paras 3 and 5).

The immediate and long-term humanitarian and environmental consequences associated with the use and testing of nuclear weapons continue to be the subject of sustained scientific inquiry. Recent advances in scientific research have provided further evidence concerning, inter alia, the differentiated effects of ionizing radiation according to sex and age, the enduring environmental degradation resulting from nuclear weapons testing, and its adverse implications for mortality and infant mortality rates. Moreover, growing scientific consensus has underscored the potentially catastrophic global consequences of nuclear warfare, including severe disruptions to the Earth's climate system, food security (see Jägermeyr J. et al., 2020), marine ecosystems, and environmental sustainability (see. Lovenduski N.S. et al., 2020). These findings have further reinforced the humanitarian and legal arguments supporting the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.

In view of the current climate of crises and armed conflicts affecting the international community in recent years, it has become a priority for the ICRC to expand its membership base and to support the effective implementation of the TPNW, because the horrific devastation and suffering



witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 by Japanese Red Cross and ICRC medical staff, as they attempted to help tens of thousands of dying and wounded people, have left an enduring mark on the entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and have driven its advocacy of the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons over the last 75 years. (Schroeder, L., 2017).

Notwithstanding the significant normative developments achieved in the field of international humanitarian law, contemporary armed conflicts continue to be characterized by widespread human suffering and extensive humanitarian consequences. Recent and ongoing conflicts, including those in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Gaza, have resulted in substantial civilian casualties and large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure, thereby illustrating the persistent vulnerability of civilian populations during hostilities. In particular, the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in densely populated areas has raised serious humanitarian and legal concerns, owing to their limited capacity to distinguish effectively between military objectives and civilians. Such weapons frequently cause extensive damage to critical civilian infrastructure, including healthcare facilities and water, sanitation, and energy systems, thereby compromising the provision of essential services and severely restricting humanitarian access. These direct and indirect effects are further exacerbated in protracted armed conflicts, where the cumulative destruction of civilian infrastructure and the prolonged disruption of essential services contribute to long-term humanitarian crises, forced displacement, and heightened civilian vulnerability.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

In this increasingly unstable international environment, marked by escalating geopolitical tensions and protracted armed conflicts, the protection of civilians—and, in particular, of persons in situations of heightened vulnerability—must remain a fundamental priority for all parties to a conflict. At the same time, renewed commitment to diplomatic dialogue and the peaceful resolution of disputes is essential for the progressive restoration of international peace and security, which constitute indispensable conditions for the effective protection of civilian populations and the preservation of the international legal order. Because it should be emphasized that peace, therefore, must be understood as a process rather than an event. It is constructed over time through risk management, institutional restraint, and the acceptance of limits. (Mărcău, 2025, p. 13).

In certain circumstances, the restoration and preservation of international peace and security necessitate recourse to diplomatic initiatives and the imposition of sanctions against the aggressor state, as exemplified by the restrictive measures adopted against the Russian Federation. Notwithstanding their widespread use as an instrument of international governance, the effectiveness of sanctions in facilitating the peaceful resolution of armed conflicts remains a matter of sustained scholarly debate. In this regard, Lektzian and Regan (2016) contend that sanctions, when employed in isolation, do not exert a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of achieving a negotiated settlement in civil conflicts. Nevertheless, the authors argue that sanctions may contribute indirectly to conflict resolution by increasing the economic and political costs associated with the continuation of hostilities, reducing information asymmetries regarding the relative capabilities of the belligerent parties, and mitigating credible commitment problems that frequently impede negotiated agreements. Such effects, however, are conditional upon the implementation of sanctions within a coherent and well-coordinated international framework, whereby their effectiveness is enhanced through complementary enforcement mechanisms, including, where appropriate, military intervention.

In the same time, it must be acknowledged that in contexts characterized by cooperation, institutions emerge, solidarity is strengthened, and conditions conducive to peace are established. In contrast, the state of nature and international anarchy are marked by reciprocal injustice, arising even

from mere proximity among actors. Under such conditions, the persistent recurrence of injustice gradually escalates into violence and, ultimately, armed conflict. As evidenced by Mangiameli's study (2025, p. 11), law-bound freedom fosters security, while lawless freedom breeds mutual insecurity. When the latter prevails, conflict is inevitable –exposure to violence prompts violent reactions –and within international anarchy, this spiral generates the vicious cycle of arms races, military buildup, and power balancing.

CONCLUSION

Peace in the near future may be tense, incomplete, and unspectacular. Yet even such a peace can create space for life, reconstruction, and gradual transformation (Mărcău, 2025). However, in a world that continues to be shaped by armed conflicts, geopolitical instability, and an increasingly complex international security landscape, the protection and promotion of human rights, together with the safeguarding of vulnerable populations, continue to constitute a central objective of the international community. In this context, the active engagement of international organizations entrusted with the promotion of peace, the protection of human rights, and the provision of humanitarian assistance constitutes an indispensable element of the international community's institutional framework for responding to contemporary global challenges.

Such an example is provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross, with offices in over 90 countries around the world, which, for over 150 years, in cooperation with other international organizations committed to humanitarian protection, remains a key institutional actor in promoting compliance with international humanitarian law and strengthening the protection afforded to victims of armed conflict.

This maintains its conviction that the elimination of nuclear weapons constitutes the only means of ensuring that the catastrophic events of August 1945 are never repeated. In this regard, the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons on 7 July 2017 represents a historic milestone. Furthermore, the awarding of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in recognition of its efforts to mobilize the international community towards the development of a nuclear ban treaty constitutes an additional affirmation of the treaty's significance, particularly in the context of increasing international tensions.

Today, as in the past, the fundamental mission of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, together with other humanitarian organizations, remains unchanged: to promote respect for international humanitarian law, protect life, alleviate human suffering, and uphold the inherent dignity of every individual affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.



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