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Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: A Study of International Humanitarian Law

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Abstract

Armed conflicts continue to pose severe threats to the protection of human rights and human dignity across the world. Conflict zones often witness widespread violations such as civilian killings, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and attacks on humanitarian workers. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) seeks to regulate the conduct of armed conflicts and protect individuals who are not participating in hostilities. This paper critically examines the relationship between human rights violations and the enforcement of IHL in conflict zones. It explores the legal framework governing armed conflicts, including the Geneva Conventions, customary international law, and relevant international institutions. The study also evaluates contemporary cases from conflict regions such as Ukraine, Gaza, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to illustrate patterns of violations and the challenges of accountability. The research adopts a doctrinal and analytical approach to examine the effectiveness of international humanitarian norms in preventing atrocities and protecting civilian populations. The study concludes that although international legal instruments provide comprehensive protections, enforcement gaps, political interests, and weak accountability mechanisms continue to undermine their effectiveness.

Keywords: Human Rights, Conflict Zones, International Humanitarian Law, War Crimes, Geneva Conventions, Civilian Protection.

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts have historically been associated with widespread violations of human rights and humanitarian norms. Modern warfare increasingly affects civilian populations, making them the primary victims of violence, displacement, and deprivation. Conflict zones often experience systematic abuses such as extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, and

sexual violence. These violations threaten the fundamental principles of human dignity and undermine the international legal order.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) was developed to mitigate the devastating effects of armed conflicts and ensure the protection of vulnerable populations. IHL establishes rules governing the conduct of warfare and the protection of civilians, prisoners of war, and wounded combatants. The foundation of this legal framework lies in the **Geneva Conventions**, which constitute the cornerstone of modern humanitarian law. These conventions impose obligations on states and armed groups to respect human dignity and refrain from targeting civilians.

Despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks, human rights violations in conflict zones remain widespread. Civilians continue to suffer from indiscriminate attacks, forced displacement, and destruction of essential infrastructure. Contemporary conflicts demonstrate that the gap between international legal standards and their practical enforcement remains significant. Reports indicate that civilians are frequently targeted, used as human shields, or deprived of basic necessities such as food, water, and healthcare.

This paper aims to examine the role of international humanitarian law in addressing human rights violations in conflict zones. It also evaluates the effectiveness of international mechanisms designed to enforce humanitarian norms and ensure accountability for war crimes.

2. Conceptual Framework: Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law

Human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL) are two complementary branches of international law that seek to protect human dignity and fundamental freedoms. While both frameworks share a common objective of safeguarding individuals from abuses, they differ in their scope, application, and legal context. Human rights law applies universally in both peacetime and wartime and imposes obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfil the fundamental rights of individuals within their jurisdiction. In contrast, international humanitarian law specifically governs situations of armed conflict and aims to regulate the conduct of hostilities while protecting persons who are not, or are no longer, participating in combat.

The development of modern international humanitarian law is largely attributed to the humanitarian movement initiated by Henry Dunant in the nineteenth century. His efforts led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross and eventually to the

codification of humanitarian rules in the Geneva Conventions. These conventions form the cornerstone of IHL and establish binding legal obligations for states engaged in armed conflict.

International humanitarian law is primarily designed to limit the devastating consequences of warfare by imposing restrictions on the methods and means of combat. It seeks to strike a balance between military necessity and humanitarian considerations. Accordingly, IHL requires parties to a conflict to distinguish between combatants and civilians and to avoid unnecessary suffering during military operations. The principles of distinction, proportionality, and necessity constitute the fundamental pillars of humanitarian law and guide the conduct of hostilities.

The core objectives of international humanitarian law can be summarized as follows:

- **Protection of civilians from direct attacks and indiscriminate military operations.**
- **Humane treatment and protection of prisoners of war and detained persons.**
- **Care and protection for wounded and sick combatants, regardless of their affiliation.**
- **Regulation and restriction of weapons and methods of warfare that cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.**

A central component of the humanitarian legal framework is the Fourth Geneva Convention. This convention specifically addresses the protection of civilian populations during armed conflicts and situations of military occupation. It prohibits acts such as collective punishment, unlawful deportation, forced displacement, and attacks against non-combatants. Furthermore, it establishes obligations on occupying powers to ensure the welfare and safety of civilians within occupied territories.

In addition to the Geneva Conventions, several other international legal instruments contribute to the protection of humanitarian values during conflict. One significant treaty is the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which seeks to safeguard cultural heritage during times of war. Cultural monuments, historical artifacts, museums, and religious sites are recognized as part of the shared heritage of humanity and must therefore be preserved even in the midst of armed conflict. The destruction of such cultural property not only represents a loss for a particular nation but also constitutes a loss for humanity as a whole.

Despite the existence of these comprehensive legal frameworks, the practical implementation of international humanitarian law remains a significant challenge. Violations frequently occur in contemporary armed conflicts, often due to political interests, lack of enforcement mechanisms, or the involvement of non-state armed groups. Consequently, the interaction between human rights law and international humanitarian law has become increasingly important in ensuring accountability and strengthening the protection of individuals in conflict zones.

In this context, the conceptual relationship between human rights law and IHL highlights the broader commitment of the international community to uphold human dignity even in the most extreme circumstances of war. Both legal regimes collectively form a normative framework aimed at preventing atrocities, reducing human suffering, and promoting respect for fundamental human values during armed conflicts.

3. Forms of Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones

Human rights violations in conflict zones manifest in various forms and often arise due to the breakdown of governance, the intensity of armed hostilities, and deliberate military strategies aimed at weakening opposing forces. During armed conflicts, the protection of fundamental human rights becomes increasingly fragile, and civilians frequently bear the greatest burden of violence and instability. International humanitarian law establishes clear legal obligations to prevent such violations; however, the realities of modern warfare often lead to widespread disregard for these principles. The following sections examine some of the most common forms of human rights violations occurring in conflict zones.

3.1 Attacks on Civilians

One of the most serious violations in armed conflicts is the deliberate targeting of civilians. International humanitarian law emphasizes the principle of distinction, which requires parties to a conflict to differentiate between combatants and non-combatants at all times. Civilians and civilian objects must not be the direct target of military attacks. The protection of civilians is a fundamental principle embedded in the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols.

Despite these legal safeguards, contemporary conflicts frequently involve attacks on civilian populations. Military operations sometimes take place in densely populated urban areas, resulting in indiscriminate bombardments that affect residential neighborhoods. Critical civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, markets, and water supply systems are often damaged or destroyed during hostilities. Such attacks not only cause immediate casualties but

also disrupt essential services, thereby intensifying humanitarian crises. The intentional targeting of civilians or civilian infrastructure is widely recognized as a war crime under international law and may lead to prosecution before international tribunals such as the International Criminal Court.

3.2 Torture and Inhuman Treatment

Torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment constitute another grave violation of human rights in conflict zones. Individuals captured during armed conflicts—including prisoners of war and civilians detained by military forces—are entitled to humane treatment under international humanitarian law. Torture, physical abuse, psychological intimidation, and humiliating treatment are strictly prohibited by international legal instruments such as the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.

Nevertheless, reports from numerous conflict regions indicate that detainees are often subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse during interrogation or detention. Such practices violate not only humanitarian law but also international human rights treaties that prohibit torture under all circumstances. The use of torture undermines the principles of justice and human dignity and constitutes a serious breach of international law that may qualify as a war crime or crime against humanity.

3.3 Sexual Violence in Conflict

Sexual violence has increasingly been recognized as a deliberate tactic used during armed conflicts to terrorize communities, destabilize societies, and exert control over civilian populations. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to acts such as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and forced marriage in conflict zones. These acts are not merely individual crimes but are often systematic strategies employed by armed groups to inflict psychological trauma and social disruption.

International humanitarian law and international criminal law recognize sexual violence as a serious violation of human rights and a prosecutable war crime. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court explicitly classifies rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of sexual violence as crimes against humanity and war crimes when committed in the context of armed conflict. Despite these legal provisions, survivors of sexual violence often face significant barriers in accessing justice, including social stigma, lack of documentation, and inadequate legal support systems.

3.4 Recruitment of Child Soldiers

The recruitment and use of child soldiers is another major human rights concern in conflict zones. Armed groups often recruit children due to their vulnerability, impressionability, and ease of manipulation. These children are frequently forced to participate directly in hostilities or serve in supporting roles such as messengers, porters, or spies.

International law strongly condemns the recruitment of children into armed forces. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict prohibits the compulsory recruitment of individuals under the age of eighteen into armed forces and restricts their participation in hostilities. The involvement of children in armed conflicts has devastating consequences for their physical and psychological well-being and deprives them of opportunities for education and normal development.

3.5 Forced Displacement

Armed conflicts frequently lead to large-scale displacement of civilian populations. Individuals and families are often forced to flee their homes due to violence, persecution, or destruction of infrastructure. Forced displacement can occur within national borders, resulting in internally displaced persons (IDPs), or across international borders, leading to refugee crises.

The international legal framework seeks to protect displaced populations through instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, which outlines the rights of refugees and the obligations of states to provide protection. However, the scale of displacement in modern conflicts often overwhelms humanitarian resources and creates significant challenges for host countries and international organizations.

In conclusion, the various forms of human rights violations in conflict zones highlight the severe humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts. While international humanitarian law provides a comprehensive legal framework to regulate the conduct of warfare and protect vulnerable populations, effective enforcement remains a critical challenge. Strengthening accountability mechanisms and enhancing international cooperation are therefore essential for preventing such violations and ensuring justice for victims.

4. Case Studies of Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones

Human rights violations in conflict zones can be better understood through the examination of specific case studies. Contemporary armed conflicts demonstrate how humanitarian norms are frequently violated despite the existence of comprehensive international legal frameworks.

These cases highlight the patterns of abuses that occur during warfare and the difficulties associated with enforcing international humanitarian law.

4.1 Ukraine Conflict

The ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has generated widespread concerns regarding violations of international humanitarian law. Since the escalation of hostilities in 2022, numerous allegations of war crimes have emerged, including attacks on civilian infrastructure, unlawful killings, torture, and forced displacement of civilians. Reports from international monitoring organizations indicate that residential areas, schools, hospitals, and energy infrastructure have been severely affected during military operations.

The humanitarian consequences of the conflict have been profound, with millions of civilians forced to flee their homes in search of safety. Children, women, and elderly individuals have been particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the conflict, including lack of access to healthcare, education, and basic necessities. Investigations into alleged war crimes have been initiated by international institutions such as the International Criminal Court, which has jurisdiction to prosecute individuals responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law.

The Ukraine conflict illustrates the challenges associated with ensuring accountability in large-scale international armed conflicts. While international institutions continue to document violations and gather evidence, political complexities and ongoing hostilities often hinder immediate legal action.

4.2 Democratic Republic of Congo

Another significant example of human rights violations in conflict zones can be observed in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The region has experienced prolonged armed conflicts involving government forces, rebel groups, and foreign militias. These conflicts have resulted in severe humanitarian crises characterized by widespread violence against civilian populations.

Reports from humanitarian organizations indicate that civilians in eastern Congo have been subjected to numerous atrocities, including mass killings, torture, gang rape, and forced recruitment into armed groups. Sexual violence has been particularly prevalent in the region and has often been used as a weapon of war to terrorize communities and exert control over territories. In addition, children have been forcibly recruited into armed groups and compelled to participate in combat operations.

Many of these acts have been investigated as potential crimes against humanity and war crimes under international law. International organizations such as the United Nations have repeatedly expressed concern about the scale of abuses occurring in the region and have called for stronger accountability mechanisms. Despite these efforts, the persistence of armed groups and the fragility of state institutions continue to impede effective enforcement of humanitarian law.

4.3 Attacks on Medical Facilities

International humanitarian law provides special protection to medical personnel, hospitals, and healthcare infrastructure during armed conflicts. Medical facilities must remain neutral and must not be targeted during hostilities. These protections are clearly outlined in the Geneva Conventions, which require all parties to a conflict to respect and protect medical establishments and humanitarian workers.

However, numerous reports from recent conflicts indicate that healthcare facilities have been deliberately or indiscriminately targeted during military operations. Bombing or shelling of hospitals not only results in civilian casualties but also severely disrupts the delivery of essential medical services to affected populations. When hospitals are destroyed or damaged, wounded civilians and combatants alike are deprived of life-saving treatment.

Attacks on medical facilities also create long-term humanitarian consequences by weakening already fragile healthcare systems in conflict-affected regions. Medical professionals often face threats, intimidation, or even death while attempting to provide assistance to victims of violence. Such actions constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes under international criminal law.

These case studies demonstrate that despite the existence of robust international legal norms, human rights violations remain prevalent in contemporary armed conflicts. They also highlight the urgent need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, improved monitoring systems, and enhanced international cooperation to ensure accountability and protection for vulnerable populations in conflict zones.

5. Challenges in the Enforcement of International Humanitarian Law

Despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks designed to regulate armed conflicts and protect civilians, the effective enforcement of international humanitarian law (IHL) remains a major challenge. Although treaties and conventions establish clear legal obligations for states and armed groups, violations continue to occur in many conflict zones across the

world. Several structural, political, and practical obstacles limit the ability of the international community to ensure accountability and compliance with humanitarian norms.

5.1 Weak International Enforcement Mechanisms

One of the primary challenges in enforcing international humanitarian law is the absence of strong and universally effective enforcement mechanisms. International courts and tribunals play an important role in prosecuting individuals responsible for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. Institutions such as the International Criminal Court have been established to investigate and prosecute serious violations of international humanitarian law.

However, these institutions often face limitations related to jurisdiction, resources, and political cooperation from states. Many countries have not fully accepted the jurisdiction of international courts or may refuse to surrender suspects for prosecution. Furthermore, the legal process involved in international criminal investigations is often lengthy and complex, which can delay justice for victims. As a result, perpetrators of serious humanitarian violations may escape accountability due to the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms at the international level.

5.2 Political Interests and Power Politics

Political considerations and geopolitical interests frequently influence the enforcement of international humanitarian law. In many situations, powerful states may avoid accountability or shield their allies from international scrutiny. Decisions related to investigations, sanctions, or international interventions are often shaped by strategic interests rather than purely humanitarian considerations.

For instance, within international bodies such as the United Nations Security Council, permanent member states possess veto power that can block resolutions aimed at addressing human rights violations or establishing international investigations. This political dynamic can prevent the international community from taking decisive action against perpetrators of humanitarian crimes, thereby weakening the credibility and effectiveness of international legal institutions.

5.3 Non-State Armed Groups

Another significant challenge arises from the increasing involvement of non-state armed groups in contemporary conflicts. Many modern wars are characterized by internal conflicts, civil wars, or insurgencies in which non-state actors play a central role. These groups may include rebel organizations, militias, terrorist groups, or private military actors.

Unlike sovereign states, non-state armed groups are often not formal signatories to international treaties governing armed conflict. As a result, they may not recognize or comply with international humanitarian law obligations. Even when such groups claim adherence to humanitarian norms, enforcement remains difficult due to the absence of centralized authority and accountability mechanisms. Consequently, civilians living in territories controlled by these groups may face severe human rights abuses without effective legal protection.

5.4 Lack of Monitoring and Documentation

Accurate monitoring and documentation of human rights violations in conflict zones represent another major challenge. Armed conflicts frequently occur in remote or highly dangerous areas where independent observers and humanitarian organizations face restricted access. Security risks, destruction of communication infrastructure, and ongoing hostilities often prevent investigators from collecting reliable evidence.

Organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies attempt to monitor compliance with international humanitarian law and provide assistance to victims. However, their ability to document violations is often limited by logistical constraints and security concerns.

In addition, misinformation, propaganda, and manipulation of media narratives can further complicate efforts to establish factual accounts of events in conflict zones. Without credible evidence and reliable documentation, the prosecution of war crimes becomes significantly more difficult, allowing perpetrators to evade justice.

Conclusion of the Section

In summary, the enforcement of international humanitarian law faces numerous obstacles that undermine its effectiveness. Weak institutional mechanisms, geopolitical considerations, the involvement of non-state actors, and the difficulties associated with documenting violations collectively contribute to the persistence of humanitarian abuses in conflict zones. Addressing these challenges requires stronger international cooperation, enhanced legal mechanisms, and improved monitoring systems to ensure that humanitarian norms are respected and that perpetrators of serious violations are held accountable.

6. Strengthening Protection of Human Rights in Conflict Zones

Ensuring effective protection of human rights in conflict zones requires stronger implementation of international humanitarian law (IHL) and improved cooperation among

states, international institutions, and humanitarian organizations. Although the international legal framework provides comprehensive rules governing armed conflict, the persistence of human rights violations indicates the need for more effective enforcement mechanisms and preventive measures. Strengthening protection mechanisms is therefore essential to safeguard civilians and ensure accountability for perpetrators of humanitarian crimes.

6.1 Strengthening International Criminal Justice Mechanisms

One of the most important steps toward protecting human rights in conflict zones is strengthening international criminal justice institutions responsible for prosecuting serious violations of international humanitarian law. Institutions such as the International Criminal Court play a crucial role in investigating and prosecuting war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. However, the effectiveness of such institutions depends largely on the cooperation of states.

States must support international judicial mechanisms by ratifying relevant treaties, sharing evidence, and ensuring that individuals accused of war crimes are surrendered for prosecution. Strengthening domestic legal systems to prosecute international crimes can also complement the work of international tribunals and ensure that justice is delivered more efficiently.

6.2 Enhancing Monitoring and Reporting Systems

Effective monitoring and documentation are essential for identifying violations of international humanitarian law and ensuring accountability. Independent monitoring mechanisms help gather reliable evidence of abuses, which can later be used in judicial proceedings. International organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross play a vital role in monitoring compliance with humanitarian norms and providing assistance to victims of armed conflicts.

Improving monitoring systems may involve the use of advanced technologies, including satellite imagery, digital evidence collection, and data analysis tools. These technologies can help investigators document violations even in areas that are difficult to access due to security risks or geographical barriers.

6.3 Promoting Training and Awareness of Humanitarian Law

Another important strategy for strengthening protection in conflict zones is promoting awareness and training related to international humanitarian law among military personnel and

armed groups. Soldiers and commanders must be educated about the legal principles governing armed conflicts, including the rules of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity.

Training programs can help armed forces understand their obligations under international law and encourage compliance with humanitarian norms during military operations. Many international organizations and humanitarian agencies collaborate with governments to develop training programs aimed at integrating humanitarian law into military doctrine and operational practices.

6.4 Increasing International Cooperation in Prosecuting War Crimes

International cooperation is essential for investigating and prosecuting serious human rights violations committed during armed conflicts. War crimes often involve multiple jurisdictions and transnational elements, making cooperation among states crucial for effective prosecution.

International institutions such as the United Nations frequently facilitate cooperation among countries by supporting investigative commissions, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian interventions. Strengthening international legal cooperation can help ensure that perpetrators of war crimes do not evade justice by seeking refuge in other jurisdictions.

6.5 Supporting Humanitarian Organizations in Conflict Zones

Humanitarian organizations play a critical role in providing assistance to victims of armed conflicts and promoting respect for international humanitarian law. Organizations such as the Médecins Sans Frontières and other relief agencies deliver essential services including medical care, food aid, and shelter to affected populations.

Providing adequate financial and logistical support to these organizations is essential for ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches vulnerable communities. In addition, states must guarantee the safety and neutrality of humanitarian workers operating in conflict zones.

Preventive Approaches and Diplomatic Solutions

Beyond enforcement and humanitarian assistance, the international community must prioritize conflict prevention and diplomatic solutions. Peaceful resolution of disputes through negotiation, mediation, and international diplomacy can significantly reduce the likelihood of armed conflicts and the resulting human rights violations. Strengthening international cooperation and promoting dialogue among conflicting parties can therefore play a crucial role in protecting human rights and maintaining global peace.

In conclusion, strengthening the protection of human rights in conflict zones requires a comprehensive approach that combines effective legal enforcement, improved monitoring systems, enhanced international cooperation, and proactive diplomatic engagement. By reinforcing these mechanisms, the international community can better uphold humanitarian principles and ensure that the rights and dignity of individuals are protected even during times of armed conflict.

7. Conclusion

Human rights violations in conflict zones remain one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges facing the international community today. Armed conflicts often lead to widespread suffering, including the loss of civilian lives, destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, and severe violations of human dignity. Despite the existence of comprehensive international legal frameworks designed to regulate warfare and protect vulnerable populations, violations of humanitarian norms continue to occur in many parts of the world.

International humanitarian law (IHL) plays a critical role in mitigating the impact of armed conflicts by establishing rules governing the conduct of hostilities and ensuring the protection of civilians, prisoners of war, and wounded combatants. The foundational legal instruments of humanitarian law, particularly the Geneva Conventions, have significantly contributed to the development of international standards aimed at limiting the brutality of warfare. These conventions emphasize fundamental principles such as distinction, proportionality, and humanity, which guide the behavior of parties engaged in armed conflicts.

However, the persistent occurrence of human rights violations demonstrates that the existence of legal norms alone is insufficient to ensure compliance. Weak enforcement mechanisms, political considerations, the involvement of non-state armed groups, and difficulties in monitoring violations often undermine the effectiveness of international humanitarian law. As a result, many perpetrators of serious humanitarian crimes continue to evade accountability.

Strengthening international institutions responsible for investigating and prosecuting war crimes is therefore essential. Bodies such as the International Criminal Court play an important role in promoting accountability and deterring future violations. At the same time, international cooperation among states and support from global institutions such as the United Nations remain crucial for ensuring the effective enforcement of humanitarian norms.

Furthermore, improving monitoring mechanisms, enhancing awareness and training on humanitarian law among armed forces, and supporting humanitarian organizations working in

conflict zones are vital steps toward strengthening protection for civilians. Preventive diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution must also be prioritized, as preventing armed conflicts is ultimately the most effective way to safeguard human rights.

In conclusion, while international humanitarian law provides a robust legal framework for protecting human dignity during armed conflicts, its success ultimately depends on the commitment of states, international institutions, and armed groups to respect and implement these principles. Strengthening accountability mechanisms, fostering international cooperation, and promoting a culture of respect for human rights are essential for ensuring that humanitarian norms are upheld even in the most challenging circumstances of war.

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