



ICRC

The President

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**The 11th “Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn” Lecture
on International Humanitarian Law**

“Upholding Humanity in Contemporary Warfare”

Special Lecture by

Mirjana Spoljaric Egger

President of the International Committee of the Red Cross

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Your Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be with you today. Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to Your Royal Highness for the kind invitation to speak at this esteemed event.

In times of crisis, the commitment of the Thai Red Cross to providing humanitarian assistance is deeply admirable, and I wish to thank you for your efforts. I am grateful for the years of collaboration and partnership in responding to emergencies and in advancing the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict.

I commend Her Royal Highness, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Thai Red Cross for creating and sustaining one of the longest-standing platforms dedicated to educating audiences about the rules of war.

For more than 20 years, this distinguished lecture series has shown an enduring commitment to promoting IHL, fostering dialogue between international experts and Thai society, and upholding the humanitarian values enshrined in the Geneva Conventions.

The strength of international humanitarian law increases with public awareness of its importance and with the political weight that a country's leadership attaches to it.

Lecture series like these play an important role in keeping the protective power of the rules of war imprinted into our collective conscience. The focus on the Geneva Conventions is crucial at a time when war is

becoming more widespread, and when international law and multilateral treaties are under great strain.

The reality can't be ignored, not today : **we are living in a decade defined by war.**

The ICRC currently classifies approximately 130 armed conflicts. This is more than we recorded last year, and far more than in previous decades.

While the number of countries experiencing armed conflict remains relatively stable, the number of simultaneous or newly escalating conflicts within them is growing. Many are protracted and often last for generations.

Today's wars are also marked by coalition warfare, the fragmentation of armed groups, and millions of civilians living under the control of non-state armed actors.

Above all, this decade is seeing an increase in wars between states, tectonic political shifts, blurring alliances, and rapid technological advancements, which together exacerbate the risk for more high-intensity conflicts with devastating humanitarian consequences.

As wars multiply and geopolitical divisions deepen, respect for international humanitarian law is in crisis, and with it, our shared humanity. Armed conflict is now the single greatest driver of humanitarian needs. Much of this suffering could have been prevented had the rules of war been better respected.

The ICRC works on frontlines across the world. We know war intimately, and bear witness every day to the scars it carves into people, families, and communities.

In **Myanmar**, the humanitarian situation remains dire after decades of fighting, compounded by a devastating earthquake in March of this year. Hostilities persist and, in some places, have intensified. Meanwhile, restrictions on the movement of people and goods continue to limit access to essential services for many communities such as those in Rakhine.

Nowhere in **Gaza** is safe anymore. What we see there surpasses any acceptable legal or moral standard. Civilians are being killed and injured in their homes, in hospital beds, and while searching for food and water. Children are dying because they do not have enough to eat. The entire territory has been reduced to rubble. Warfare conducted indiscriminately as well as extreme restrictions on humanitarian aid have made conditions unliveable and devoid of human dignity. At the same time, hostages remain in captivity, despite the clear prohibition of hostage-taking under international humanitarian law.

Large-scale drone and missile attacks in the **Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict** are killing and injuring civilians far from the frontlines. Essential infrastructure is being destroyed. More than 146,000 cases of missing people – both military and civilian – have been reported to the ICRC as of the end of July.

In **Sudan**, civilians face an unrelenting nightmare of death, destruction, and displacement.

And after nearly four decades of war in **Afghanistan**, civilians continue to be haunted by mines, unexploded ordnances, and abandoned improvised explosive devices.

The situation in **Syria** illustrates one of the most heartbreaking and enduring consequences of prolonged conflict: the unresolved fate of the

missing. The ICRC has registered over 36,000 missing people. This is likely just a fraction of the true number. If the ICRC had sustained access to all places of detention throughout the conflict, many of these cases might have been resolved or even prevented. Still today, water supply and electricity are at risk of collapse. At the same time, the recent violence along the coast and southern Syria underscores how the country's path to peace is fragile – and how quickly clashes can erupt.

The scale of human suffering – in Gaza, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria and dozens of other countries across the world – must never be accepted as inevitable. These are not unfortunate side effects of war, but consequences of a profound failure to uphold international humanitarian law.

They are the result of political failure.

When wars are fought with the mentality of “total victory” or “because we can” a dangerous permissiveness takes root – one where the law is bent to justify killing rather than prevent it. The Geneva Conventions were created specifically to prevent senseless suffering and death.

When hostilities are carried out indiscriminately and when violence is left unchecked, the consequences are catastrophic. Death and destruction become the norm, and not the exception.

In a highly interconnected world, unrestrained violence rarely remains confined to a single battlefield. It reverberates. When the world tolerates unbridled aggression in one conflict, it signals to the others – militaries, non-state armed groups, and their allies – that such behaviour is acceptable elsewhere.

As conflicts escalate, so too does the **weaponization of information**. Wars are fought today not only on the ground, but also in the digital arena, where harmful narratives and incendiary rhetoric are used to inflame tensions and justify violence.

Horrific events throughout history are rooted in a common element: dehumanisation. Stripping the humanity of others away creates an environment where torture, abuse, and killing is rationalised.

There is no such thing as a human animal. No people or territory should ever be erased from the face of the Earth.

In a world increasingly shaped by algorithms, the speed with which harmful narratives can spread is unprecedented – with dangerous real-world consequences.

We witness how genocidal vocabulary eventually translates into gruesome realities on the ground. The vitriolic hatred embedded in such language strips away empathy, creating fertile ground for atrocities to take place. It renders brutality acceptable, or worse, seemingly inevitable.

Your Royal Highness,

Distinguished guests,

We are living in a time when the world is not just at war – it is preparing for more war. Global military spending is at record highs. Across regions, states are investing in weaponry, modernising forces, and rearming with a sense of urgency.

As the president of an organisation responding to the horrific consequences of armed conflict, it is my first responsibility to encourage states to de-escalate and not lead the world towards limitless war.

It is also my duty to remind states that responsible conflict preparedness is not measured solely by firepower. It demands sustained investment in international humanitarian law during peacetime to ensure compliance in wartime.

The recent escalation between Thailand and Cambodia underscores how important this kind of preparedness is and how quickly hostilities can trigger humanitarian consequences for the civilian population.

This includes training for military personnel on core IHL principles related to the protection of civilians in the conduct of hostilities or the handling of detainees, to name a few. It also means detailed operational planning and rules of engagement for specific obligations set out in the Geneva Conventions – especially during international conflicts between states.

IHL obligations in wars are rigorous. States must not only understand these requirements but also prepare the systems and infrastructure necessary to be able to quickly put them into practice when war breaks out.

For example, in international armed conflicts, prisoners of war (POWs) and interned civilians are granted specific protections under the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions. States must plan how they would establish **internment camps** that meet minimum standards for shelter, sanitation, food, water, and medical care.

Men and women must be housed separately, and minors from adults unless with family members. Under IHL, all people detained or interned in relation to international armed conflict must be allowed visits by the ICRC to monitor their condition.

Protected persons that find themselves in enemy hands must be allowed to remain in contact with their families. They may only be held until the end of active hostilities at which point they must be returned home. This is where a critical IHL requirement comes in: the establishment of **National Information Bureaus** (NIBs).

These bureaus must share that information on those who are interned, detained, sick, dead, or missing with the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA), enabling us to transmit that information to the other side and then onto their families. For prisoners of war and civilian internees, the detaining power must issue **capture cards** and forward them to the CTA and families.

These are not systems that can be improvised once war begins. From capture cards to tracking the wounded, sick, and dead, National Information Bureaus are intricate information management mechanisms that require peacetime planning. Delays in setting them up not only risk non-compliance with IHL – they also lead to real human consequences, with people going missing and unaccounted for.

They are also critical to removing barriers to peace and reconciliation. National Information Bureaus are essential to tracing the missing as well as providing information that can be used to organise repatriations of prisoners and fallen service members.

Wars affecting a state's own territory also mean national health systems must be ready to absorb high numbers of war-wounded and deal with conflict-related injuries while continuing to meet ongoing health needs.

Mortuary and forensic capacity must be scaled up to ensure the dead are identified and treated with dignity, preventing people from disappearing in death.

We know armed forces are preparing for military confrontations. But within that, states must also prepare for the humanitarian consequences. **That begins with greater investment in IHL – not after the fighting starts, but now.**

International humanitarian law is not an abstract issue. It is not something for lawyers to elaborate on in conference settings. International humanitarian law directly relates to both national and international peace and stability.

If you invest in defence, you must budget for IHL.

Your Royal Highness,

Distinguished guests,

We are witnessing a seismic shift in how wars are fought. As states compete in the 21st-century arms race, it is critical to ask: how does IHL apply to these evolving technologies, and what must states consider as they invest in new weapons systems?

Cheap and scalable, **drones** are becoming one of the defining weapons of today's wars. Their widespread use is reshaping frontlines and revolutionising the battlefield.

Drones are not prohibited under IHL. But like any weapon, they must be used in full compliance with the rules of war. Low-resolution, analogue systems and operators' lack of training – especially when it comes to low-cost first-person view drones – raise serious concerns about the ability to distinguish military from civilian targets.

Distance does not absolve responsibility. Drone operators and their commanders remain legally accountable for the effects of their actions, just like any other combatant.

Without stronger regulation and accountability, the drone arms race will escalate. More actors will deploy more drones, with fewer safeguards and humanitarian consequences will multiply.

As drones edge towards greater autonomy, they intersect with another deeply concerning development: **autonomous weapons systems**.

These weapons can select targets and apply force without any human intervention after their activation, raising serious humanitarian, legal, ethical, and security concerns.

Life-and-death decisions must never be delegated to sensors and algorithms. Human control over the use of force is critical to preserving accountability in warfare. Machines with the power to take lives without human involvement should be banned under international law.

Autonomous weapons systems that function in a way that their effects are unpredictable should be prohibited. For example, allowing autonomous weapons controlled by machine-learning algorithms – where the software writes itself without human oversight – is an unacceptably dangerous proposition.

A new legally binding instrument is critical to establish clear prohibitions and restrictions. Without it, we risk condemning future generations to a world where machines decide who lives and who dies, and accountability is dangerously eroded.

We are also in an era where the battlefield is not only physical but digital. **Cyber operations** have already been used to disrupt electricity, water systems, hospitals, and other civilian infrastructure – often very far from the frontlines.

IHL applies to cyber operations just as it does to conventional means and methods of warfare. The principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution are just as binding in cyberspace as they are on land.

Civilian protections must be hardwired into digital warfare. That means belligerents must ensure human oversight, refrain from cyber-attacks against civilian infrastructure, and minimise foreseeable harm to civilians and civilian systems.

International humanitarian law also applies to any military activity in **outer space** related to armed conflict.

Disabling or destroying satellites can have serious humanitarian consequences. Satellites that provide navigation, communications and remote sensing have become indispensable to the functioning of civilian life.

Humanitarian organisations also depend on satellite services to reach people in need. Without these systems, providing life-saving assistance and helping communities recover becomes even more difficult for us.

Just as states must rigorously ensure that new weapons technologies comply with international humanitarian law, they must not neglect their responsibilities concerning **conventional weapons**.

Putting IHL into action and protecting civilians doesn't only happen in active conflict zones. It also happens in the choices states make about the kinds of weapons they produce, stockpile, or prohibit.

Today, the global commitment to ban anti-personnel mines is starting to fracture, with several states that once championed disarmament now taking steps to withdraw from the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. This is not just a legal retreat on paper; it risks endangering lives and reversing decades of hard-fought progress.

Most ASEAN member states are parties to the mine ban treaty. When Thailand joined in the late 1990s, the Thai government created the National Mine Action Committee. Within a year, Thailand destroyed some 10,000 anti-personnel mines. At the same time, teams of deminers were deployed to clear contaminated land, significantly reducing the human cost of mines from 350 casualties between 1999 and 2001 to just 24 in 2011.

This month also marks 80 years since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – a catastrophe that to this day continues to inflict emotional and physical suffering on survivors.

Terrifyingly, the nuclear weapons in today's arsenals are far stronger. The bombs dropped then would today be classified as a small nuclear weapon.

But there is no such thing as a small nuclear weapon. Any use of nuclear weapons would be a catastrophic event. It would inflict a level of suffering and destruction that no humanitarian response could address. It is extremely doubtful that nuclear weapons could ever be used in accordance with international humanitarian law.

And yet, we continue to see nuclear arsenals expand, and their use be threatened with casualness and frequency. However, the number of states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons continues to grow, with 73 states now parties to the treaty and another 25 that have signed it. This includes most ASEAN states – among them Thailand.

Distinguished guests,

Allow me to ask you: What happens to societies – to the world – if we fall prey to the belief that might alone makes right? When we disregard the rule of law, and pursue victory at any cost?

IHL was not created to prevent war, but to prevent barbarity in war.

That distinction is crucial. It recognizes the reality of armed conflict while insisting that even in war, humanity must endure – in how we treat the wounded, in how we protect civilians, and how we treat prisoners. Peace can start in a prison cell.

Protecting hospitals as sanctuaries for the injured is not weakness.

Shielding civilians from hostilities is not weakness.

Allowing lifesaving aid to reach those in need is not weakness.

Treating detainees with dignity is not weakness.

It is strength.

It takes strength to act with restraint in the chaos of war. To resist the pull of vengeance and to rise above retribution. To preserve our shared humanity when conflict threatens to erase it.

Respect for IHL is soft power in action.

Its influence should not be under-estimated.

Upholding IHL enhances a state's international reputation. States that champion the rules of war and humanitarian principles often gain diplomatic influence because of their moral leadership.

Parties to conflict that disregard international humanitarian law do so at the cost of legitimacy. **The stain of brutality stays long after the guns fall silent.** It complicates post-conflict recovery, economic rebuilding,

and international cooperation – and lays fertile ground for future violence and security threats to take root.

It is possible, however, to protect civilians in war.

When combatants respect the rules of war – when they spare civilians, protect critical infrastructure, and care for the wounded – they reduce the long-term costs of conflict. They make recovery possible. They preserve the social fabric necessary for peace.

As president of the ICRC, I am witness to the worst of humanity but also how compassion can emerge even in the darkest of circumstances.

- In **Gaza**, the ICRC has facilitated the release of 148 hostages and over 1,700 detainees since October 2023, allowing loved ones to be reunited across Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, and beyond, including in Thailand.
- In **Myanmar**, ICRC delegates are visiting places of detention to monitor the conditions and treatment of those held and to help them keep in touch with their families. Thousands of detainees have been visited by the ICRC so far this year.

The ICRC has helped more than 2,000 detainees held in relation to the conflict in **Yemen** to be released and returned home.

- We have supported **Russia and Ukraine** in the repatriation of fallen soldiers more than 50 times – most recently with a complex, multi-day operation in June that included thousands of fallen soldiers.
- Earlier this year, in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the ICRC helped transport more than 1,300 disarmed members of the DRC government forces and their families from Goma to Kinshasa. Then in July, a declaration signed between the DRC and the Congo River Alliance/M23 Movement committed the sides to establish a

mechanism facilitated by the ICRC to arrange for the release of people detained in relation to the conflict.

These examples are important, and I am naming them here to show how IHL can be translated into concrete actions that lessen suffering.

Prisoner releases, civilian evacuations, and humanitarian corridors are not just acts of relief. They are expressions of IHL in action, and often the first fragile threads of dialogue between warring sides. They are a very concrete pathway to peace.

Since 1934, the ICRC has been mentioned in about **150 peace instruments** like ceasefire agreements, peace accords, and other frameworks. This is primarily due to the role we play in the humanitarian steps outlined in the Geneva Conventions.

As demonstrated in recent weeks with the ceasefire reached between Thailand and Cambodia, the ASEAN group of states provides a critical platform for conflict resolution and de-escalation in Southeast Asia—such as the repatriation of human remains – to be agreed and acted upon.

We are committed to strengthening our dialogue and cooperation with Thailand and all ASEAN members in support of compliance with international humanitarian law because the ICRC acts as a neutral intermediary – a role grounded in our purely humanitarian mandate and made possible because we engage with all parties no matter which side of the line they fight on.

We have done so for more than 160 years.

Your Royal Highness,

International humanitarian law is only as strong as leaders' will to uphold it.

If the Geneva Conventions are to save lives as they are intended to then exceptional efforts must once again be made by all states to reaffirm their unwavering commitment to upholding the rules of war.

Just as states came together in 1949 in the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War to adopt the Geneva Conventions, the international community must come together today to revive respect for this legal framework.

This is not a symbolic gesture. This is about protecting future generations from increasingly brutal patterns of warfare.

IHL must become a political priority.

And this is why last September, Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan, and South Africa, together with the ICRC, launched an initiative to galvanize political commitment to the rules of war. Since then, **more than 70 states** have joined this effort.

Twenty-four of these states have stepped forward to lead seven thematic workstreams alongside ICRC legal teams. Together, they are developing practical recommendations to strengthen respect for IHL.

These include:

- Identifying good practices to prevent violations,
- Supporting national IHL committees,
- Exploring how IHL can contribute to peace efforts,
- Strengthening the protection of civilian infrastructure, notably hospitals,

- Addressing the challenges posed by communications and information technologies,
- And examining the humanitarian impacts of modern naval warfare.

Since the beginning of the year, over 130 states have participated in consultations around these themes. The 24 co-chairing states are now working closely with the ICRC to consolidate and present preliminary findings which will be published in the coming months.

I am encouraged to share today that these discussions – against what we see in battlefields – revealed broad support for protective, rather than permissive, interpretations of international humanitarian law.

These efforts will continue into next year and culminate in a high-level meeting to uphold humanity in war in 2026.

Today it is my honour to welcome **Thailand** to the global IHL initiative. Your leadership will be crucial in helping bring ASEAN states and others on board in this vital effort.

As president of the ICRC, I am often confronted with the question if IHL is still relevant today, or if the new world order necessitates a new set of rules. I am often asked whether our neutrality has become obsolete.

Here's my answer: IHL is not a relic of the past. It is a living body of law, designed to protect human dignity when it is most difficult. It enshrines the principle that every human life – no matter what side of the frontline they are on – is equally deserving of protection.

Its principles remain urgently relevant today as wars are increasingly fought in urban centres, with new technologies, and by a growing number of actors. The nature of warfare may change, but the need to uphold basic humanity in war does not.

The suffering of a mother who is forced to watch her child die of starvation is exactly the same today as it was 100 years ago.

All state leaders are legally obliged to go out of their way – always – to prevent wars from escalating beyond the point of no return. What happened in the Second World War can happen again if we're not careful enough to prevent it.

Today, in a decade marked by war, states have to join forces to reignite the vision of lasting peace and stability based on internationally agreed frameworks and a rules-based world order. And they should do so before it becomes too late.

Thank you.