

Submission of the International Committee of the Red Cross to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's inquiry into the implications of climate change for Australia's national security

The International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian organisation that operates worldwide. The ICRC's mandate, which stems from the Geneva Conventions, is to protect the lives and dignity of people affected by conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also works to promote and strengthen International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and universal humanitarian principles which in turn reduce and prevent human suffering.

Introduction

The effects of climate change pose risks to national and global security in the form of humanitarian crises, internal displacement and migration, food insecurity, water scarcity, spread of diseases, and instability and conflict. The ICRC is able to comment on the impact of climate change on people and places affected by conflict as we see first-hand around the world how the effects of climate change increase people's vulnerability.

Many millions of people experience the double vulnerability of conflict and climate change. This combination of climate change and armed conflict means that vulnerable civilian populations are having to survive armed conflict and the effects of climate change simultaneously. The impact of armed conflict can also set back people's adaptation strategies by destroying infrastructure, capital, assets and livelihoods that are vital to positive forms of adaptation.

Those who are already living at the margins of environmental feasibility can be pushed beyond their limits by the additional impact of armed conflict, and others who are more secure can be thrust suddenly to the margins by displacement and destruction. At the same time, vulnerable communities that are gradually recovering from armed conflict can be stalled again by the effects of climate variability like drought or erratic and destructive rains.

International humanitarian law

International humanitarian law (IHL) is a body of law which limits the effects of warfare for humanitarian reasons and protects those who are not participating in armed conflict, such as civilians.

There are both general protections and specific rules within IHL that protect the natural environment as well in armed conflict. It is clear in IHL that the natural environment is protected and is civilian in nature. Moreover, it is well-recognised that civilians rely on natural resources essential for their survival.

Unfortunately, these protections are often violated and the destruction of the natural environment or access to scarce resources is all too often used as a weapon. This undermines communities'

resilience in the face of climate change and thereby increases insecurity, humanitarian suffering, and development reversals.

In armed conflict, the natural resources on which people rely are often attacked in contravention of IHL provisions. This can take the form of theft or killing of livestock, theft of land, drainage or poisoning of water resources, destruction of places of trade and livelihood. Removing the basis of communities' resilience and capacity to adapt to changing weather conditions imperils their survival and contributes to displacement and poverty.

Some attacks against the natural environment and civilian infrastructure can contribute to climate change. This is seen when oil wells and industrial facilities are destroyed, and forests denuded by firepower or chemicals or exploited for financial gain.

People whose resilience has already been tested by conflict are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. A key example of the humanitarian consequence is the current hunger crisis created by conflict and drought that is affecting millions of people in Yemen, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Somalia. Moreover, the effects of climate change can contribute to the cycle of violence, as communities use violent means of adaptation to secure increasingly scarce natural resources.

Australia's response

It is the ICRC's position that greater respect for IHL not only protects civilians and communities but may also help to reduce climate risk to vulnerable communities and reduce risks to the environment itself.

States are not only obliged to respect IHL but also promote respect for IHL locally, regionally and globally, in peacetime and in war. The Australian Government has a role to play in promoting respect for and adherence to the Geneva Conventions and other relevant international instruments, such as the first Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or any Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques. The Australian Government can also promote awareness of the link between armed conflict, the environment and civilian resilience and vulnerability.

The Australian Defence Force in particular should consider the ways that climate change and armed conflict interact with harmful effects for civilian populations and for the environment itself. Greater respect for IHL protects people from the double vulnerability of conflict and climate risk. There are specific protections in IHL against the kind of pillage that robs civilians of key natural resources in armed conflicts involving a climate change dynamic. IHL also ensures that certain natural resources are protected as objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population.

When respected, principles and rules of this kind actively reduce people's vulnerability to climate risks and preserve assets and infrastructure that facilitate their adaptation to these risks. This then reduces the risk of mass displacement, humanitarian emergencies and long-term environmental damage. The ADF should take the lead in upholding IHL principles to reduce people's vulnerability to climate change effects in armed conflict and encourage other state militaries over which it has influence to do the same.