

SRI LANKA

12TH SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL IHL CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON PROTECTION OF PEOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICTS

DECEMBER 2023



Senior officials from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka came together to discuss and debate current and emerging issues of international humanitarian law (IHL) at the 12th edition of the South Asia Regional Conference on IHL held in Colombo from 9–11 August 2023.

“Protection of Persons in Contemporary Armed Conflicts: International Humanitarian Law Before, During and After Armed Conflict” was the theme of this year’s edition, which was jointly hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Government of Sri Lanka.

Organized annually since 2009, the conference aims to create a regional forum for states to exchange perspectives on new dimensions and emerging issues of humanitarian law.

In his keynote address at the opening ceremony, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka M.U.M. Ali Sabry, PC, highlighted the importance of implementing IHL in post-conflict situations to address humanitarian issues arising from armed conflict. U. L. M. Jauhar, Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also spoke at the event about the humanitarian needs of Sri Lanka, even as he appreciated the ICRC’s contribution to IHL implementation in the country.

Séverine Chappaz, head of the ICRC delegation in Colombo, highlighted the organization’s neutral and impartial role, which has been key in supporting states to develop humanitarian law since the 19th century.

The three-day event included plenary sessions with senior government officials from participating states, including members of the armed forces and the police, and ICRC experts. They also took part in group discussions focusing on progress, good practices and challenges in the domestic implementation of IHL. The conference featured discussions on issues related to the protection of people from urban warfare, human dignity in armed conflict, detention at sea, accounting for separated, missing and dead people and disability in armed conflict, among others.

ASSISTING MORE FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS IN THE EAST



The Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) programme, a key element of our Accompaniment Programme, will roll out in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka in the coming months, helping more families deal with the absence of their missing loved ones. Started in 2015, the Accompaniment Programme has been implemented through hundreds of dedicated accompaniers who are supervised by ICRC psychologists. It has been providing families of missing persons a much-needed platform to share their emotions, find ways to better cope with the ambiguity around the absence of their loved ones and collectively commemorate them.

With the ICRC's support, families of missing persons in the East dedicated offerings to local religious centres and made contributions for the improvement of public spaces of special significance to commemorate their missing loved ones. Once the Accompaniment Programme is rolled out in Ampara and Batticaloa districts in the Eastern province in 2024, its MHPSS component will reach completion, having been implemented in all provinces of Sri Lanka.

Over the years, the programme has provided support to thousands of families of missing persons from all ethnic communities across Sri Lanka, helping them to deal with the complex psychosocial impact of the ambiguity surrounding their missing loved ones. A relative of a missing person from Jaffna said, "It gives us great comfort when an accompanier from our village or our community sits with us and listens to our problems. We feel seen and heard."

A DECADE OF SUPPORT FOR PRISONS IN SRI LANKA



Following a decade of providing infrastructural support to prisons in Sri Lanka to improve the living conditions of detainees, the ICRC completed its last small-scale infrastructural projects in prisons in 2023. The projects that were completed over the years to improve access to health, water, sanitary facilities and food for detainees included repairing and upgrading kitchens and family visit areas, installing solid waste management systems and energy savings stoves, and repairing wards and medical facilities. We also donated hygiene and medical items and material for recreation such as books and sports equipment.

In 2023, we handed over to prison authorities a pilot project for improving access to health in detention, which was run in coordination with the Ministry of Health and the Department of Prisons over the last five years. In addition, we provided technical advice to prison authorities including the drafting of guidelines for facilitating online visits between detainees and their families that was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, guidance on initial health assessment for detainees, prison designs and prison administration. The drafting and printing of a Prison Brief, a collection of provisions from applicable domestic and international standards on prison administration, was also part of the technical support we provided.

We continue to visit prisons and discuss the treatment of detainees and conditions of detention with prison authorities through our bilateral and confidential dialogue. We also continue to support the families of economically vulnerable detainees, enabling them to visit their detained family member on a regular basis.

BRINGING JUDGES AND FORENSIC PRACTITIONERS TOGETHER



In partnership with the Sri Lanka Judges' Institute (SLJI) and College of Forensic Pathologists of Sri Lanka (CFPSL), we organized a series of workshops on medico-legal processes for judges and forensic practitioners to facilitate the exchange of ideas between them.

The workshops explored topics such as ethical considerations, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, inquest into deaths, forensic anthropology, exhumations, and identification and management of the dead in mass casualty events. Around 90 judges and forensic practitioners took part in the three workshops held between November 2022 and June 2023.

#FROM THE HEART: CELEBRATING WORLD RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT DAY

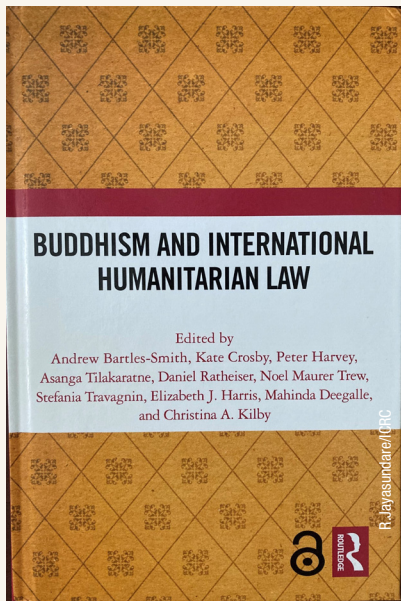


To celebrate the power of community and people helping others in times of crises and in their everyday life, we joined the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to mark World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day on 8 May 2023. The theme for the celebrations was “#From The Heart”. SLRCS branches in 25 districts planted trees and gave scholarships to 100 school children. National Society branches around the country organized blood donation campaigns and beach cleaning initiatives

among other activities to help their communities.

World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day is celebrated to mark the birth anniversary of Henry Dunant, the founder of the ICRC. On this day, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement honours the millions of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff around the world who carry Dunant's determination to provide hope and dignity to people in vulnerable situations without distinction or thought of personal gain.

BOOK LAUNCH: “BUDDHISM AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW”



The first major study on the intersection between Buddhist teachings and international humanitarian law was published by Routledge in September 2023, as the result of a joint initiative by the ICRC with leading Buddhist scholars and practitioners. Entitled “Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law”, the study draws on authoritative Buddhist texts, common practices, historical examples and direct experiences of people involved in armed conflict to explore the subject from multiple perspectives. It is part of an ICRC project that explores correspondences between Buddhist and IHL principles and identifies Buddhist resources to improve compliance with IHL and equivalent Buddhist or humanitarian norms.

Several Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars and practitioners have contributed chapters to the book. It will be of particular interest to students and researchers of international law, Buddhism and ethics and conflict studies.

The book has been published in Open Access and can be downloaded for free.

FACTS & FIGURES

(FEBRUARY - SEPTEMBER 2023)



ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

- **1,468** families were contacted to follow-up on tracing enquiries and **43** cases of missing persons were registered.
- **1,346** psychosocial support sessions (656 individual and 690 group sessions) were provided to **911** relatives of missing persons through accompaniers from partner organizations. Of these, **50** people with economic, legal/administrative, educational and health needs were referred to other sources for assistance.
- **74** families of missing persons received cash and in-kind help to start or regenerate business projects through our livelihood support programme.
- **71** destitute families of missing persons received unconditional cash grants to cover their immediate needs of food and other essentials. One family received assistance to start a small-scale business to improve their daily food intake.
- **566** households received business management skills training to link their businesses with market and service providers.

STRENGTHENING FORENSIC CAPACITY

- We helped finalize the English-Sinhala-Tamil glossary of medico-legal terms for the judiciary to use. The glossary was jointly developed by the Sri Lanka Judges’ Institute, the College of Forensic Pathologists of Sri Lanka and the ICRC.
- Between January and October 2023, we handed over material consisting of personal protective equipment and training and teaching aids for forensic practitioners to teaching hospitals in Jaffna, Kurunegala and Ratnapura districts as well as to Uva Wellassa University, University of Ruhuna, University of Jaffna, University of Kelaniya and the Institute of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology and Police Training College in Kaluthara to promote the dignified management of the dead.



MONITORING THE CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

- **30** visits were made to **19** places of detention and the findings and recommendations were shared confidentially with prison authorities.
- **116** detainees across the country were visited individually.
- **49** families were provided with travel allowance to cover **135** family visits to their relatives in detention.



PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

- A team of students from the Open University of Sri Lanka took part in the 21st Red Cross IHL moot court competition in Hong Kong from 8–11 March 2023.
- **2** lectures on humanitarian diplomacy and 1 lecture on IHL were conducted for those pursuing Diploma in Diplomacy and World Affairs course at the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute.
- **1** workshop on IHL was conducted in partnership with the Sri Lanka Judges' Institute, with **40** High Court judges taking part in it.
- **1** academic paper authored by a Sri Lankan scholar was published in the Asia-Pacific Journal of IHL. The article, entitled "Ecocide as a standalone international crime – a critical assessment of recent developments", is a result of the 8th Advanced International Humanitarian Law South Asian Academics Platform held in May 2023, which focused on climate change and the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict.
- **239** army officers, part of the junior command and senior command courses at Army War College in Buttala, took part in 2 one-day seminars on IHL in February and August 2023.
- **30** operational and legal officers from the Sri Lanka Armed Forces participated in a five-day course on IHL and Targeting conducted in Colombo by the director of Military Department of IHL, Sanremo, from 27 February–3 March 2023.
- **147** Army, Navy and Air Force officers, including representatives from Bangladesh(2), India (3), Indonesia (1), the Maldives (1), Nepal (2), Pakistan (2), Rwanda(1), Saudi Arabia (10), Senegal (1), USA (1) and Zambia (1) took part in a three-day IHL seminar on the conduct of hostilities, behaviour in war and ICRC thematics of urban warfare and health care in danger at the Defence Services Command and Staff College in Makola from 13–15 March 2023.
- **54** officers took part in a two-day Military in Security Operations seminar at the Security Forces Headquarters (SFHQ Wannai) in Vavuniya from 24–25 April 2023.
- **96** Army personnel to be deployed to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan were given a pre-deployment briefing on 27 April 2023.
- **156** Air Force personnel to be deployed to United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) received a pre-deployment briefing on 26 May 2023.
- **30** tri-services personnel and 6 police personnel participated in a lecture on emerging technologies and IHL at the National Defence College on 15 June 2023.
- **299** military personnel to be deployed to United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), MINUSCA and field training exercises in Malaysia were given a pre-deployment briefing on 21 July 2023.
- **81** IHL instructors in Vavuniya (SFHQ Wannai) and SFHQ (West) in Panagoda participated in two sessions where they were introduced to the ICRC-designed IHL training packages in July 2023. **23** IHL instructors (19 from the Army and two each from the Navy and Air Force) were also introduced to the ICRC-designed IHL training packages at the Institute of Peace Support Operations Training Sri Lanka from 21–23 August 2023.






SUPPORTING THE SRI LANKA RED CROSS SOCIETY

- **13** people displaced from Rakhine State, Myanmar, detained in Immigration Detention Centres in Mirihana and Welisara, Sri Lanka, were able to maintain contact with their families with the help of the ICRC and SLRCS teams.
- **19** volunteers working on Restoring Family Links (RFL) services attended an annual national RFL workshop organized with the support of the ICRC.
- **93** volunteers were trained in disaster response and camp management techniques.
- **30** participants from SLRCS joined an awareness session on the Safer Access Framework and humanitarian principles.
- **17** district-level events were provided first-aid support by the SLRCS.
- **10** SLRCS branches at the district level observed World First Aid Day with the theme “First Aid in the digital world”.
- **26** awareness-building sessions on humanitarian principles and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were organized at the community-level for over 1,000 people, including students and professionals.

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