

DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE

PREPARING FOR IHL COMPLIANCE IN INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS

**WORKSHOP ON REDUCING THE HUMAN COST OF LARGE-SCALE MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE MARITIME
DOMAIN: PRISONERS OF WAR, WOUNDED SICK AND SHIPWRECKED, PROTECTION OF THE MEDICAL MISSION,
PREVENTING AND MITIGATING CIVILIAN HARM**

17-19 NOVEMBER LONDON

Background

As many states in the European and Asia-Pacific regions prepare for possible large-scale International Armed Conflict (IAC) across all domains of warfare, there is a corresponding need to focus upon International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This includes the ability of states to acquit their obligations under IHL and the Geneva Conventions as well as more broadly examine, prepare for and therefore mitigate the humanitarian consequences of such conflict. Based on the ICRC's mandate and expertise, the ICRC is committed to supporting States in effectively operationalising their IHL obligations during IAC, so as to ensure compliance with the law and minimise suffering. Conflict at sea not only presents specific challenges unique to the environment but also represents a domain of warfare where both States and the ICRC have less recent experience to draw upon when contemplating IAC at scale and its humanitarian consequences.

The unique dynamics and challenges of maritime warfare present particular complexities that bear on IHL compliance and harm to civilians including the nature of the hostilities themselves; the large-scale handling of captured, wounded and deceased individuals; the exposure of critical undersea infrastructure; active trade routes and potential large scale civilian displacement/evacuation via sea, all amplified by the specific challenges of the maritime environment itself.

This workshop is designed to engage collaboratively with States to examine key challenges related to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and broader humanitarian issues, as well as to identify practical operational steps to address them. It builds upon the success of similar initiatives conducted in the land domain within Eurasia and the maritime domain in the Asia-Pacific region, both of which have yielded highly productive outcomes. Co-organised by the ICRC and the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom, this workshop will take place in London on 17-19 November 2026.

Objectives and content

Large-scale IACs have rarely been short, often devolving into protracted conflicts characterised by devastating human, environmental and material losses. The dead, wounded and captured are an entirely predictable if not inevitable outcome of such conflicts, and yet are often underserved in terms of preparation, resourcing and training. This commends a focus upon Dignified Management of the Dead (DMD), Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked (WSS) both in terms of coordination of recovery and protection of the medical mission, as well as Detention (Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees) and mechanisms to account for protected persons in States' hands. All such that suffering can be mitigated and States are able to fulfil their obligations and best serve their professional and ethical standards.

The scale of conflict contemplated exacerbates these challenges and inevitably heightens risks to civilians, including the disruption of essential services, the potential for mass displacement and challenges in providing humanitarian assistance. Understanding these humanitarian concerns,

planning for them and exploring mitigation measures are, therefore, equally important to contemplate.

The overall objectives of this operationally focussed workshop are the following:

1. Take stock of States' understanding, operational planning and capabilities around search and rescue operations in conflict and the recovery of WSS and dignified management of the dead. Share best practice and explore what coordination measures may be taken and progressed (including civilian vessels) to reduce human suffering during military operations in the context of large-scale IAC.
2. Identify the operational challenges around WSS and how better protection of the medical mission may be achieved, including exploring concrete measures that may be taken to realise this, such as Protected Zones.
3. Explore positions, practices and plans to operationalise key obligations related to the capture and detention of persons at sea, and how States will handle and account for protected persons in their hands (including the dead) and inform relevant bodies.
4. Assess challenges to the safety and dignity of civilians presented by maritime warfare. Examine processes to enhance protections for civilians and mitigate the humanitarian consequences of such conflict, to include a focus upon civilian displacement at sea, the safe passage of goods and people as well as threats to critical infrastructure.
5. Provide an opportunity for States to benefit from exchanges, including peer-to-peer, on relevant challenges and practices.

Participants

The objectives of the workshop will be best served by operational experience in the N3 and N5 areas complemented by legal or medical expertise. Thus, States are respectfully invited to send two (up to three maximum) representatives with the following profiles:

- Warfare officer/bridge officer with operational experience in N3 and/or N5 at OF4/OF5 level.
- LEGAD or Medical Officer with expertise and experience related to the workshop's themes, also at OF4/OF5 level.

Workshop modalities and administration

- A confirmed agenda together with a list of relevant publications and documents will be provided ahead of the workshop and circulated by mid-October 2026.
- The workshop will be a combination of presentations, working group exercises based on decontextualised scenarios, and open discussions. The scenarios and related guiding questions will be shared ahead of the workshop to allow the participants to get familiar with the topics.
- The discussions will be conducted in English and under the Chatham House Rule.
- Travel and accommodation: participants will be responsible for their own travel and accommodation arrangements. The venue will be confirmed with recommended accommodation options in London three months ahead of the workshop.
- Coffee breaks and lunches during the workshop are free of charge for participants.

For any questions you may have related to the workshop, please contact:

- Ms Sophie PAUL, ICRC Regional Delegate to the Armed Forces, spaul@icrc.org, Mob: +44 7912 080924
- Ms Teresa Plana Cascado, Deputy Head of Regional Delegation, tplanacasado@icrc.org

DRAFT AGENDA – Final agenda will be confirmed to participants a month in advance.

Time	Title & Detail
0900 – 09.45	Open event and Welcome Introduction to the event, agenda, timings and constitution of Working Groups.
1000-1100	ICRC: Large Scale Conflict and IHL; ICRC roles; Maritime Environment
11.00- 11.15	Break
11.15 – 12.00	Case study 1982 Argentina UK Conflict Protection Zones / ‘Red Cross Box’; Detention; sinking, rescue & recovery. Lessons Identified from Maritime IAC
12.00 - 12.45	Mass Casualties (MASCAL) at sea and recovery ops Case study of migrant recovery operations at scale and Lessons Identified
12.45 – 13.45	Lunch
13.45 – 14.15	Non-military organisations involved in coordinating for facilitating rescue at sea Key insights into MASCAL/Search and Rescue from Non-military contributors. Potentially to include Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC), International Maritime Rescue Federation, International Maritime Organisation
14.45 – 15.15	Introduction to Working Groups and tasking
15.15 – 1700	Working Group 1 Recovery of Wounded Sick and Shipwrecked (WSS) and the dead. Scenario-based exercise to understand how Military Task Groups/MRCCs/Neutral vessels/belligerents may be coordinated, and what steps may be needed to prepare such operations. Examine the challenge of recovery of WSS and the dead.
15.15 – 17.00	Working Group 2

	Protection of the medical mission: testing the concept of Protection Zones/'Red Cross Boxes'. Establish if and how they may work, benefits, challenges, how to agree with the adversary, how they may be delimited and notified, examine access protocols and recommend next steps.
09.00 – 10.30	Restitution WG 1. WG 1 Presents findings, WG 2 input and comment
10.30 -1100	Break
11.00- 12.30 -	Restitution WG 2. WG 2 Presents findings, WG 1 input and comment
12.30-13.30	Lunch
13.30 – 14.30	ICRC Brief – Detention, Accounting, Dignified Management of the Dead (DMD), forensic considerations
14.30 – 15.15	Background brief on predicted civilian displacement and likely impact on the maritime environment
15.15 – 15.30	Break
15.30 – 17.00	Working Group 3 Detention and Accounting for protected persons in States' hands
15.30 – 17.00	Working Group 4 Examine impact on civilians and mitigation measures. Examine processes, measures, and procedures for belligerents to enhance protections for civilians and mitigate humanitarian consequences, including safe passage of goods and people. Discuss disruption of supply chains, commercial shipping, energy, communications (also linked to damage to critical undersea infrastructure) and evacuation routes.
09.00 – 10.30	Restitution WG 3. WG 3 Presents findings, WG 4 input and comment
10.30 -1100	Break
11.00- 12.30 -	Restitution WG 4. WG 4 Presents findings, WG 3 input and comment
12.30 – 13.00	Close Event Depart to airports