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Panel discussion

Beyond commitments for peace: The role of parliaments in the enforcement of international humanitarian law and international human rights law

Panel jointly organized by the Standing Committee on Peace and International Security and the Committee to Promote Respect for International Humanitarian Law

Wednesday, 7 October 2026, 11:30–13:00

Concept note

Background

International humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) are bodies of law concerned with the protection of the life, health and dignity of individuals. While IHL aims to protect civilians and other individuals affected by armed conflict, and restrict the means and methods of warfare, IHRL establishes rules aiming to protect the fundamental freedoms, inherent dignity and basic needs of all people against States' overreach and abuse.

At a time when both IHL and IHRL are needed more than ever, they are only as strong as the mechanisms that enforce their rules and prevent violations from being repeated. Respecting and enforcing IHL and IHRL are foundational prerequisites for building sustainable peace and breaking the cycle of impunity. Violations can deepen grievances, erode trust in institutions and fuel further violence, while credible accountability can help prevent recurrence and support reconciliation.

The effective enforcement of IHL and IHRL requires accountability efforts and mechanisms at all levels – national, regional and international.

National authorities and domestic systems are at the heart of the enforcement of IHL and IHRL. They are uniquely positioned to utilize their legal and institutional frameworks to ensure that IHL and IHRL violations are addressed, perpetrators are held accountable and such violations are prevented from recurring. Key to this is the implementation of obligations under universally ratified instruments such as the Geneva Conventions. These Conventions not only establish fundamental rules for the protection of individuals during armed conflict but also impose clear obligations on States to repress and suppress violations, including through domestic legal mechanisms.

As parties to treaties, States have an obligation to adopt implementing legislation and ensure that their domestic legal systems are fully equipped to address IHL and IHRL violations effectively. This includes ensuring that war crimes – as notably defined under the Geneva Conventions – are criminalized within domestic legal frameworks, and that the same applies to other serious international crimes addressed in instruments such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), with the principle of universal jurisdiction incorporated into domestic laws. This enables domestic courts to prosecute individuals accused of such crimes, even when the offences were committed outside the State's territory.

Over time, regional and international enforcement mechanisms have been established to complement the role played by domestic courts in holding perpetrators accountable and bringing redress to victims.

At the global level, States came together to set up international criminal justice institutions aiming to prosecute alleged perpetrators of international crimes, including violations of IHL. The 1990s marked the birth of some of these mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. These mechanisms paved the way for the establishment, in 2002, of the ICC – a permanent international court that is competent to investigate and try individuals charged with the core international crimes under the Rome Statute, including war crimes.

Other mechanisms have also been established at the regional level – especially courts aiming to ensure accountability for IHRL violations. By grouping States with shared geographic, historical and political ties, such courts – which exist in Africa, the Americas and Europe – can apply regional human rights instruments in a way that resonates with local realities. In particular, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, based in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania, has played a significant role in protecting human rights enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

The enforcement of IHL and IHRL, however, still faces many challenges today. The lack of universalization of key legal instruments – such as the Rome Statute, the ACHPR, the American Convention on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights – limits enforcement and accountability. Resource limitations pose another challenge for the effective functioning of these mechanisms, as do the complexity and varying interpretations of their respective mandates. This is further compounded by the lack of adequate domestic criminal legislation to enable domestic courts to prosecute individuals accused of committing international crimes, while weak or selective enforcement can undermine confidence in national and international institutions and erode the rules-based foundations of peace and security.

Since the enforcement of IHL and IHRL begins at home, parliaments have a critical role to play in contributing to respect for the law and to the fight against impunity. They can ensure that domestic legislation aligns with IHL obligations by criminalizing violations and granting judicial authorities the jurisdiction necessary to address such crimes effectively. They can provide adequate financial support so that authorities are equipped with the resources needed to investigate, prosecute and punish serious violations of IHL and IHRL. And they can raise awareness, dispel misconceptions and advocate for the universalization and implementation of key IHL and IHRL instruments. Through their oversight of the security sector, armed forces and security institutions, parliaments can also help prevent violations before they occur and ensure that security policies and operations comply with international law.

Objectives

This panel discussion will address current challenges related to the enforcement of IHL and IHRL, as well as the role that parliaments play in strengthening respect for these rules and promoting accountability. It will bring together experts with experience of working with international, regional and/or national enforcement mechanisms, as well as parliamentarians who have engaged with such mechanisms. The discussion will also examine how effective enforcement and accountability can contribute to conflict prevention, reconciliation and sustainable peace.

The event builds on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) long-standing engagement with issues related to IHL, human rights, and peace and security. It also forms part of the ongoing [Bring human rights into focus](#) campaign, which aligns with the Organization's priority theme for 2026.

Guiding questions

- What are the key IHL and IHRL instruments and frameworks at stake?
- What mechanisms are available to enforce IHL and IHRL at the national, regional and international levels?
- What are the main challenges faced by these mechanisms today?
- What actions can parliaments take to contribute to the enforcement of IHL and IHRL and, through this, to the prevention of conflict and the building of sustainable peace?