



United for humanity

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Weapons and international humanitarian law

(Resolution 3 of the 2024 Council of Delegates)

PROGRESS REPORT

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PROGRESS REPORT

Weapons and international humanitarian law

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Resolution 3 of the 2024 Council of Delegates (CD/24/R3) on weapons and international humanitarian law (IHL) called on States and components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement) to take action to address the humanitarian impact of a range of weapons, including nuclear weapons, biological and chemical weapons, conventional arms, and new technologies of warfare, including autonomous weapon systems (AWS), cyber and digital information operations, artificial intelligence (AI) in weapon systems, and military operations in or in relation to outer space.

This first progress report covers the period from October 2024 to July 2026. It summarizes key developments, reviews actions taken by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), and highlights future opportunities and challenges.

Heightened geopolitical tensions and renewed nuclear rhetoric have reinforced concerns about the risk of use of nuclear weapons and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would entail. Movement components have continued to promote the universalization and implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the 2022–2027 action plan on the non-use, prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons of Resolution 7 (CD/22/R7).

The absolute prohibitions on biological and chemical weapons remain firmly established in law, yet concerns persist regarding risks of use and the adequacy of preparedness and response capacities for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) events. The Movement has stepped up efforts to assess and strengthen its response capacities.

Efforts to promote responsible arms transfers have continued, with growing attention given to the integration of IHL and human rights considerations into decision-making. However, arms flows into situations of armed conflict marked by serious violations remain a major concern, heightened by the steep increase in States' military budgets and ongoing arms race.

The humanitarian impact of anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions and explosive remnants of war (ERW) remains severe, with continued civilian casualties and contamination, making it even more concerning that a small number of States have withdrawn from, or indicated reconsideration of, their obligations under the treaties governing these weapons. Movement components have renewed their efforts to implement the 2009 Movement strategy on landmines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war.

The devastating consequences of war in cities, including the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, remain a defining feature of contemporary conflicts. The Movement has been working towards the implementation of the 2022–2027 Movement action plan to prevent and respond to the humanitarian impacts of war in cities.

Rapid developments in new technologies of warfare – including AWS, cyber operations, AI and military operations in outer space – have heightened concerns regarding compliance with IHL. Movement components have contributed actively to international discussions and continued to call for new legally binding international rules on AWS.

The ICRC has continued to research and consult on the feasibility of a digital emblem, aimed at enhancing the protection of medical and humanitarian actors in digital environments, and launched processes for operational testing by States, the Movement and the private sector.

1) INTRODUCTION

Resolution 3 on “Weapons and international humanitarian law”, adopted by the 2024 Council of Delegates, calls on States and components of the Movement to take action on a broad range of weapons-related humanitarian concerns. It builds on long-standing Movement commitments to address the humanitarian consequences of weapons and ensure respect for IHL. It also invites the ICRC, in cooperation with the Movement, to report on relevant developments.

This is the first progress report on the implementation of Resolution 3, covering the period from its adoption in October 2024 to July 2026. For each thematic area addressed in the resolution, the report reviews key developments, describes activities undertaken by the Movement and highlights future opportunities and challenges.

The ICRC has submitted separate reports on the implementation of Resolution 6 on “War in cities” (CD/22/R6) and Resolution 7 on “Working towards the elimination of nuclear weapons: 2022–2027 action plan” (CD/22/R7), both adopted by the 2022 Council of Delegates.

2) PROGRESS

A) NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The ICRC has submitted a separate progress report on “Working towards the elimination of nuclear weapons: 2022–2027 action plan” (CD/26/17), with comprehensive information on key developments, Movement action, and future opportunities and challenges.

B) BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Key developments

The prohibition of biological and chemical weapons remains robust, but concerns persist regarding compliance and preparedness. The growing use of AI tools may increase risks of development of novel biological and chemical agents. The risk of accidental or deliberate release of CBRN materials – including from civilian infrastructure – has gained increased attention.

Movement action 2024–2026

- The ICRC monitored developments in multilateral forums related to the Biological Weapons Convention and Chemical Weapons Convention.
- The Movement continued to strengthen operational preparedness, for example:
 - Several National Societies (e.g. in Europe and Asia) developed or updated national contingency plans for CBRN incidents.
 - The ICRC, with partners, strengthened CBRN preparedness and response capacities in at least six contexts and, in others, facilitated and delivered basic and advanced training courses, including with National Society staff, to raise awareness and strengthen operational responses.
 - The IFRC organized a series of webinars that involved at least 60 National Societies to increase awareness of biological hazards, and supported National Societies in emergency preparedness planning and simulation exercises.

Future opportunities and challenges

Significant gaps remain in preparedness and response capacities for large-scale CBRN events. Strengthening coordination and operational readiness is a priority. Emerging risks that will require careful monitoring include the increasing use of AI in CBRN contexts, deliberate release of chemicals capable of contaminating multiple environmental compartments, and the creation of conditions for the spread of biological agents in conflict areas.

C) ARMS TRANSFERS

Key developments

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) continues to provide an important legal framework, with over 118 States Parties as of 2026. However, arms flows into conflict zones remain high, often contributing to serious violations of IHL.

Movement action 2024–2026

- The ICRC and National Societies engaged with States in over 70 bilateral dialogues on integrating IHL considerations into arms transfer decisions.
- Regional workshops and seminars were conducted in Africa, Asia and Latin America, reaching hundreds of government officials.

Future opportunities and challenges

Ensuring that arms transfer decisions systematically incorporate IHL risk assessments remains a key challenge. Greater transparency and implementation of risk mitigation measures are needed.

D) ANTI-PERSONNEL MINES, CLUSTER MUNITIONS AND EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR

Key developments

The legal frameworks governing anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions and ERW have long been regarded as among the most effective humanitarian disarmament regimes. As of 2026, the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention) counts over 160 States Parties, while the Convention on Cluster Munitions has over 120 States Parties and signatories combined, and Protocol V to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) continues to attract broad adherence.

However, recent developments have raised serious concerns about the strength and universality of these norms. Reports of the renewed use of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions in several ongoing armed conflicts have been accompanied by a small number of States withdrawing from, or indicating reconsideration of, their obligations under these treaties. Such developments risk undermining decades of progress in stigmatizing these weapons and reducing their humanitarian impact.

At the same time, contamination from mines, cluster munitions and ERW remains widespread. Civilians continue to account for the majority of recorded casualties, with children disproportionately affected. In many contexts, contamination continues to impede access to land, livelihoods and essential services long after the end of active hostilities.

Movement action 2024–2026

The Movement has continued to combine operational response with legal and policy engagement:

- The ICRC maintained programmes to address weapon contamination in over 30 countries, supporting risk education, safe behaviour and access to essential services in affected communities.
- Risk education activities reached millions of people annually, including in newly contaminated areas.
- The ICRC and its partners supported national authorities and mine clearance operators in strengthening clearance capacity and prioritization.
- Physical rehabilitation programmes supported tens of thousands of mine/ERW survivors each year, alongside broader services for people with disabilities.

In parallel, the ICRC and National Societies intensified efforts to uphold the legal norms underpinning the conventions. Movement components, jointly or individually, undertook advocacy and awareness-raising activities in over 30 countries to promote adherence to and full implementation of the treaties; engaged in bilateral and multilateral dialogue with States, emphasizing the humanitarian consequences of any weakening of treaty commitments, including withdrawal; and contributed to international and regional meetings, consistently reaffirming the importance of maintaining the integrity of these instruments.

Future opportunities and challenges

Any withdrawal from key treaties represents a significant challenge to the humanitarian disarmament architecture. Any erosion of these norms risks increasing civilian harm and reversing hard-won progress.

In this context, components of the Movement should, as appropriate and according to their capacities, consider prioritizing the following:

- reaffirming the humanitarian rationale and continued relevance of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and CCW Protocol V on ERW
- engaging with States to discourage withdrawal from these instruments and to promote continued compliance with their obligations
- promoting universal adherence, particularly among States not yet party
- strengthening operational responses, including risk education, victim assistance and support to clearance efforts
- ensuring sustained political and financial commitment to meet treaty obligations, including clearance deadlines and stockpile destruction.

Maintaining the strength, universality and integrity of these treaties will be essential to reducing the long-term human cost of these weapons.

E) WAR IN CITIES AND EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

The ICRC has submitted a separate progress report on the implementation of Resolution 6 on “War in cities” adopted by the 2022 Council of Delegates (CD/26/16).

F) NEW WEAPONS, MEANS AND METHODS OF WARFARE

Key developments

Rapid technological developments have expanded the range of capabilities available in armed conflict, including AI, cyber operations and military operations in or in relation to outer space. The Open-ended Working Group on Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space (OEWS)

PAROS) was established by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). One substantive session took place in 2025 and one in 2026. Military AI was substantively discussed across several multistakeholder forums and at the UN, where the UNGA adopted a resolution in 2024 affirming the application of international law, including IHL, and requesting that the UN Secretary-General seek views and provide a substantive report on the international peace and security implications of AI in the military domain. In 2025, the UNGA mandated the first UN informal exchanges on military AI, held in June 2026.

Movement action 2024–2026

The ICRC, together with National Societies in several countries, has conducted research, convened expert discussions and engaged with States, industry and other experts to promote understanding of the humanitarian, legal and ethical implications of these technologies.

- The ICRC, in 2025, submitted its views on AI in the military domain to the UN Secretary-General, including recommendations for the design and use of AI in military decision-making. It subsequently held consultations on these recommendations with States, and technical and industry experts, and contributed to the UN informal exchanges on AI in the military domain.
- The ICRC and four other chairs (Ghana, Luxembourg, Mexico and Switzerland) convened consultations among States and stakeholders on “Upholding International Humanitarian Law in the Use of Information and Communication Technologies during Armed Conflicts”, as part of the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, and facilitated the development of a practical outcome document.
- The ICRC participated in and delivered statements during the Open-ended Working Group on Security of and in the Use of Information and Communications Technologies, emphasizing the human cost of cyber operations during armed conflict, the limits that IHL imposes, and presenting Resolution 2, “Protecting civilians and other protected persons and objects against the potential human cost of ICT activities during armed conflict”, to the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.
- The ICRC participated in and delivered statements during the sessions of the OEWG PAROS, stressing the concerns with respect to the potential human cost of military operations in outer space.
- Several components of the Movement have focused their research and humanitarian advocacy, as well as dialogue with authorities, on the human cost of cyber operations during armed conflict, injecting a humanitarian perspective in ongoing national and international debates.

Future opportunities and challenges

Ensuring that new technologies are developed and used in compliance with IHL remains a central challenge, even more so as many States still lack formal legal review mechanisms. The rapid development and deployment of military AI, and the potential use of AI in cyber operations amplify these challenges, raising profound risks of civilian harm. The Movement has a critical opportunity to highlight the potential human cost of these technologies, and support effective frameworks and responses that place humanitarian considerations at the forefront of innovation in warfare.

G) AUTONOMOUS WEAPON SYSTEMS

Key developments

International discussions on AWS have progressed – including within the framework of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) under the CCW and in the UNGA – and the GGE has supported the elaboration of a strong rolling text, with clear prohibitions and restrictions; a

majority of High Contracting Parties to the CCW publicly stated in 2025 that this text can form the basis for negotiation of an instrument.

Movement action 2024–2026

- The ICRC engaged extensively with States and other stakeholders, including in key multilateral forums, to raise awareness of the legal, humanitarian and ethical concerns posed by AWS and to push for a legally binding instrument with clear prohibitions and restrictions. It conducted public communication, including through the publication of an advocacy paper, and published an in-depth position paper on key IHL issues raised by AWS.
- National Societies in several countries supported advocacy and public debate initiatives, and 23 National Societies endorsed a joint appeal, ahead of the September 2025 session of the GGE, calling on States to launch formal negotiations on a legally binding instrument based on the existing rolling text.

Future opportunities and challenges

Momentum is building towards the negotiation of new legally binding prohibitions and restrictions on AWS, and 2026 presents a critical opportunity for States to decide to launch such negotiations. The Movement can play an important role in mobilizing support for this initiative, with the aim of moving towards effective regulation of AWS that addresses humanitarian concerns.

H) DIGITAL EMBLEM

Key developments

Research and consultations on the concept of a digital emblem have advanced, with increasing recognition of the need to protect medical and humanitarian actors in digital environments. Operational testing began in November 2024, with the first operational test involving cyber commands taking place in the context of an annual Red Team exercise at the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). Testing is expected to ramp up further in 2027.

Movement action 2024–2026

The ICRC has continued technical research, testing and consultations with States and Movement components to build on the demonstrated technical feasibility of the digital emblem, and to explore pathways towards adoption and legal incorporation. The ICRC took part in several global technology conferences, presenting the project to a range of stakeholders. Several National Societies have volunteered to test the digital emblem on their infrastructure, with testing by Movement components being coordinated by the Australian Red Cross. The ICRC and the Australian Red Cross have also participated in the discussions on the standardization of a digital emblem at the Internet Engineering Task Force as work continues on building standards; the ICRC presented a work item on this topic at the International Telecommunication Union.

Future opportunities and challenges

A global launch of Phase II of the Digital Emblem Project took place in July 2026, ushering in an operational phase of technical testing and refined standards development. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure broad agreement on an operational framework for the digital emblem, and to build trust in its use and identification.

4) CONCLUSION

Since the adoption of Resolution 3 by the 2024 Council of Delegates, progress has been made across a wide range of weapons-related humanitarian issues. The Movement has played a central role in advancing the resolution's objectives.

At the same time, the evolving nature of armed conflict, the persistence of serious humanitarian consequences and the rapid development of new technologies underscore the need for sustained and coordinated efforts. The humanitarian impact of weapons remains severe and, in some areas, is worsening.

Strengthening compliance with IHL, advancing international norms and enhancing operational response capacities will remain central priorities for the Movement in the coming years.