



SECRETARIA STATUS

Vienna, 1 e 2 ottobre 2019

*Conferenza sulla protezione dei civili nei conflitti armati in zone urbane*

Dear participants,

I am honoured to have this occasion to extend to you, on behalf of Pope Francis, his sincere appreciation and his encouragement to you for your work during this Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare.

I would like to thank the Government of Austria for having dedicated time and giving support for this initiative to engage international political and operational will to enhance the protection and the application of International Humanitarian Law.

We are sadly witnessing a growing indifference to the sufferings of others, even when they are denied dignity and life, and are subject to the control of armed forces in urban settings. The poor and unarmed people - men, women and children – become easy targets of the most blind and abject violence, exploiting and paralyzing young people in their search for a better future, and exposing them to a brutality that will mark them for life. I would like to point out several different reasons for this alarming situation:

Firstly, conflicts are prolonged by the upsurge of violence, creating, among other difficulties, flows of refugees and displaced persons, as well as other tragic outcomes that we witness, with dramatic long-term humanitarian consequences, affecting particularly women and children.

Secondly, in urban areas, conflicts tend to be especially concentrated. The cumulative effect of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas makes them less and less conventional and more so weapons of widespread destruction, causing devastation to entire cities, especially for schools, hospitals, infrastructures and vital services essential to the population. Moreover, their catastrophic impact in populated areas serves as a grim reminder of the tragedy and cruelty of conflicts, causing hatred and socio-political wounds that are difficult to heal. Be it an international, regional or local conflict, they make reconciliation more difficult.

A third aspect to keep in mind is that public consciousness seems to have become more callous towards the violence, which appears to be the “new normal”; there is a pervasive “globalization of indifference”, as Pope Francis says. In the context of urban warfare, civilians are not just collateral damage but are the overwhelming majority of casualties and wounded. That minimum protection of the dignity of every person, which ought to be guaranteed with great vigilance through the implementation of international humanitarian law, is all too often violated in the name of so-called military necessity or political demands.

In the light of this unfortunate increase in the urbanization of conflicts, the Holy See would like to emphasize some ideas for reflection.

The first is the centrality of the dignity of the human person and the necessary struggle for its development. As Pope Paul VI eloquently observed: “development is another name for peace” (Cf. *Populorum Progressio*). Respect for the fundamental human rights of all, the promotion of education, access to healthcare, social justice, political participation, and regional and international cooperation are in fact indispensable elements for integral human development, as well as for national and international security and peace. Certain legal instruments already have made assistance to victims a central element of the obligations agreed upon by States. All State and non-state actors should act responsibly and trustfully together, preserving the centrality of the human person and his/her dignity, safeguarding the basic principles of humanity and defending the supreme value of life.

The second point is also urgent: strengthening international humanitarian law. Peace and security are central and legitimate concerns that can be stable and enduring only if they are based on justice, solidarity and fraternity among States and within States. It must not be limited only to the military dimension. Compliance with IHL must not be optional. If the applicable law is not ample enough to deal with new situations and realities of conflict, it is imperative to strengthen it. Significantly, this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions. We have learned over those years that law by itself is not sufficient to eradicate armed conflicts and arbitrary violence from human history. Thus, “where humanitarian law presents hesitations and omissions, may individual consciences be able to acknowledge the moral duty to respect and protect the dignity of the human person in every circumstance, especially in those situations where it is most endangered”. (Cf. Pope Francis Address to the Participants in the Conference on International Humanitarian Law, 28 October 2017).

The Holy See reiterates its encouragement and appeal to the international community to continue on the path it has taken towards reducing human suffering and mitigating the negative consequences of hostilities. Moreover, Pope Francis encourages every possible effort to foster dialogue and promote a culture of peace, firmly believing that the highest aspiration of humankind should be the abolition of all conflicts. This is a life-long commitment that must be passed on from one generation to another.

The Holy Father gives his blessing to you, the participants of this meeting, with the hope that you will continue to “promote (...) a culture in which no one looks at another with indifference or turns away from the suffering of our brothers and sisters” (Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera*, n.20). In uniting my personal best wishes, accompanied by prayer, I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt respect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pietro Parolin'.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin  
Secretary of State of His Holiness