



Statement by Didier Burkhalter
Federal Councillor and Head of the Federal
Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)

Roundtable 5:
Uphold the Norms that Safeguard Humanity

**“Switzerland’s commitment to promote
respect for the universal norms that
safeguard humanity in the midst of war”**

World Humanitarian Summit
Istanbul, 24 May 2016

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Mr Deputy Secretary-General,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The 1949 Geneva Conventions are universally recognised as the cornerstones of modern international humanitarian law. Their continued validity is beyond doubt. However, there is a disturbing discrepancy between the law and the facts on the ground. We urgently must take steps to close this gap. This is a foreign policy priority for Switzerland.

We therefore fully support the Secretary-General's Agenda for Humanity. We need a clear commitment by all to the centrality of protection in the conduct of hostilities and in humanitarian action. And an acknowledgment that people continue to have rights, even in the midst of war.

The Core Commitments prepared by the United Nations for this roundtable do not restate or modify existing obligations. Nor do they create new ones beyond those enshrined in existing and applicable norms of international humanitarian law. They simply draw our attention to the areas where concrete action is urgently needed.

There are a number of key challenges that must be addressed as a matter of priority. We must improve access for humanitarian workers to those in need. We must increase the safety and security of those that risk their lives to care for the wounded and sick. We must also demonstrate that violations of international law are neither acceptable nor justifiable. We must efficiently prosecute international crimes and address the grievances of the victims.

The Core Commitments echo our collective promise to never overstep the limits of humanity under any circumstance. It is time to deliver on this promise. Switzerland is submitting concrete commitments to contribute to these efforts. Let me highlight four of them:

First, we will promote efforts to provide the Geneva Conventions with an institutional forum to facilitate exchange among States Parties. The current lack of such a body is an anomaly for any modern treaty regime. This is why States agreed at the last International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to work towards establishing a dedicated forum for international humanitarian law. They also agreed to examine how we can make better use of the International Conference to enhance the implementation of the law.

Switzerland invites all States to participate actively in this collective endeavour. We commit to efficiently promoting and facilitating this intergovernmental process, alongside the ICRC.

Second, at the national level, the challenges in the implementation of the laws of war must be addressed by all the ministries and actors concerned. We encourage all States that have not yet done so to establish an inter-ministerial Committee for International Humanitarian Law. They have proven to be a valuable means of ensuring the effective application of the law. Switzerland commits to supporting the ICRC in organising a conference of these Committees in Geneva towards the end of this year. The idea is to encourage the creation of such committees, promote their role and enhance cooperation among them.

Third, Switzerland commits to strengthening respect and protection for the humanitarian and medical mission – in particular by promoting the humanitarian principles and through dialogue with all parties to an armed conflict. All too often, humanitarian actors are hampered in their efforts to deliver assistance and to engage in the protection of civilians.

Health workers encounter serious difficulties in providing medical care to all wounded and sick without discrimination. It is outrageous that attacks are being committed against hospitals, against patients and against the men and women who risk their lives to bring relief and care to those in need. Such attacks violate the very foundations of international humanitarian law. They are against the imperative to treat every human being in need with humanity, irrespective of their affiliation.

Finally, we commit to helping ensure that humanitarian action is not hampered by counter-terrorist measures. Even when confronting armed groups that abide by no rules, we must uphold the laws of war and ensure respect for international law, especially international humanitarian law and human rights law.

Dear colleagues, together we can make a difference for the countless men, women and children who suffer around the globe because of armed conflicts. Our action must be inspired by the values of humanity that form the foundation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. You can count on Switzerland, just as we count on you!