

People on War 2016

Key findings, messages and calls to action

Key findings

- People living in countries affected by war believe the law matters. Over two thirds of all respondents think it still makes sense to impose limits on war. Almost half of those surveyed in conflict-affected countries still believe the Geneva Conventions prevent wars from getting worse.
- The survey results highlight that violence against health care is unacceptable. Over three quarters of those surveyed believe that attacking hospitals, ambulances and health-care workers is wrong.
- Compared to 1999, there is a higher degree of acceptance amongst people living in the P5 countries (five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States) and Switzerland that the death of civilians in conflict zones is an inevitable part of war.
- Over the past two decades, there has been a shift in public attitudes towards torture. Two thirds of all those surveyed in 2016 say torture is wrong. But when asked specifically about whether an enemy combatant can be tortured, fewer people disagree than in 1999. In addition, there is a significant increase in the number of people who don't know or prefer not to answer.
- There is a disconnect between public opinion and the policies and actions of States and armed groups. Violations of the laws of war – including the targeting of civilians, humanitarian workers and hospitals – are continuing, yet the survey results clearly show that the majority of people understand that these practices are wrong and that civilians and health-care workers and facilities should be protected.

Key messages – the laws of war are clear

- **ON TORTURE** - Torture and all other forms of ill-treatment are absolutely prohibited by international treaty and customary law. This applies to every State and to all parties to armed conflicts. There are no exceptions, whatever the circumstances. Whole communities are impacted by the corrosive effects of torture on society, especially when it goes unpunished, generating hatred and triggering a cycle of violence. What's more, research shows that torture does not work, as the "information" that is obtained is generally not reliable.
- **ON HEALTH CARE** - Everyone has a right to health care in armed conflict, regardless of what side they are on or their political or other affiliation. Attacks on medical personnel, facilities and vehicles are illegal under the rules of war. Medical personnel must not be targeted for caring for sick and wounded enemies. The doctor treating your enemy is not your enemy. A wounded or sick prisoner must be provided with appropriate medical care.
- **ON CIVILIANS** - The deliberate targeting of civilians is prohibited, and so are indiscriminate attacks against populated towns and villages. Every possible precaution must be taken to avoid harming civilians and their houses, or destroying their means of survival, such as water sources, crops,

livestock, etc. Civilians have a right to receive the help they need, and the targeting of aid workers and medical personnel is prohibited.

- **ON MIGRATION** - People in conflict-affected countries do not flee their homes on a whim. There is a direct correlation between flagrant violations of the laws of war and forced displacement. Migration policies should be like humanitarian policies, i.e. founded on the principle of humanity. Vulnerable migrants need particular assistance, regardless of their legal status or the term used to refer to them. Detention of migrants should be a last resort, and States must respect the principle of non-refoulement (a person should not be sent back to somewhere where their fundamental rights are threatened).

Calls to action

- All parties to a conflict, including non-State armed groups, are reminded of their obligations under international law to respect and ensure respect for human life and dignity. Support for parties to an armed conflict should depend on their compliance with the law.
- States and armed groups need to show greater political will to find ways to strengthen respect for international humanitarian law, including by holding those who violate the law to account.
- The denial of medical treatment to the wounded and sick in armed conflict is a violation of the laws of war. All parties to conflict should bear in mind that the way they behave or treat people, including wounded enemy fighters, matters and can impact the way in which communities recover once the fighting is over.
- Torture is illegal and unacceptable under any circumstances. All parties must respect the law. Torture is an affront to humanity and does not make our societies safer. Those who torture need to be prosecuted and punished.

The above information can be found in the 2016 People on War report on www.icrc.org/peopleonwar (after Monday, 5 December 2016, at 9 a.m. GMT).