

# Interview with Janez Lenarčič, former EU Commissioner for Crisis Management



- > 1. Given the increased violations of IHL over the past decade, how does the EU plan to strengthen its advocacy for IHL compliance in crises like Gaza and Sudan, where humanitarian and medical workers are frequently attacked, and protection of civilians is disregarded? Additionally, what specific role does EU humanitarian diplomacy play in addressing these complex challenges and fostering adherence to IHL?**

Over the five years of my mandate, I have witnessed a steady deterioration in the respect of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This erosion undermines the fundamentals of basic humanity in conflicts which are multiplying and are now more numerous than at any time since 1945. We also see the highest levels of IHL violations globally, with Sudan and Gaza being two of the most acute cases, where such violations occur on a massive scale.

In this context, the EU considers advocacy one of the key tools. We have consistently raised our voice in every instance where we have credible, corroborated information about IHL violations, calling on perpetrators to cease their actions.

This advocacy involves close collaboration with the European External Action Service (EEAS), engaging in what we call “humanitarian diplomacy.” I have worked closely with High Representative Josep Borrell on this, and he has been consistently supportive. We also coordinate with EU delegations in conflict zones to address these issues directly on the ground.

However, we must acknowledge that the EU alone cannot resolve these challenges. According to the UN Charter, the Security Council bears the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. Unfortunately, this body has largely failed in its mandate, especially considering the current number of conflicts.

We will continue to advocate for compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL). My successor, Commissioner-designate Hadja Lahbib, who has been deeply involved in these issues during her tenure as the Belgian Foreign Minister, will undoubtedly build on and strengthen this agenda.

Together, we have already organised events on IHL, featuring prominent participants such as the International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor, Karim Khan, and the

President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Mirjana Spoljaric.

However, if we are truly committed to preventing violations of IHL, we must focus on preventing conflicts in the first place. This brings us back to the critical role of the UN Security Council, whose decisions can significantly shape outcomes in this domain

- > 2. With attacks on humanitarian convoys and restricted access obstructing essential deliveries of humanitarian assistance, what specific steps is the EU taking to guarantee the safe and unimpeded humanitarian access in conflict zones?**

Organizations that play an especially active role in this domain, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Geneva Call, are among our closest partners. We support their actions broadly and specifically on this issue. At the same time, we consistently call on the authorities of concerned countries, reminding them of their obligations under IHL.

Unfortunately, the situation remains deeply concerning and far from improving. We are receiving ghastly reports from Sudan, including massacres and rapes. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is equally dire, with the current level of humanitarian supply being the lowest since the horrific Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7.

We have been clear in urging Israel to uphold its obligations under IHL. This failure is unacceptable, and we expect influential countries like the United States, which possess significant leverage over Israel, to do more to ensure compliance with international law. Similarly, other nations with influence over various warring parties should act decisively.

The European Union, for its part, does not engage in direct communication with certain non-state actors, such as Hamas or Hezbollah. However, other entities do, and some wield considerable leverage. In Sudan, for example, there are multiple countries involved on both sides of the conflict. We expect them to use their influence to ensure warring parties respect IHL.

We also continue to support humanitarian organisations on the ground that work tirelessly with all actors. These organisations not only deliver essential aid but also remind all parties of their obligations under international law.

- > 3. As a leading humanitarian donor, how does the EU utilise its influence to ensure that both state and non-state actors are held accountable for IHL breaches, especially in situations where civilians, refugees, and healthcare facilities are directly targeted?**

We have already mentioned our advocacy efforts to improve the respect of IHL but also accountability is key for the EU. Without it, violations will continue. Impunity perpetuates these breaches, which is why we strongly support international justice mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that have a critical role in ensuring accountability for IHL violations.

The EU plays a pivotal role, politically, diplomatically and financially in supporting these institutions. This complements our advocacy efforts, forming a dual strategy: advocacy and accountability.

- > 4. The EU has committed to engaging with non-state actors to promote IHL compliance. Could you share examples of recent progress from these engagements, and how does the EU plan to further expand this strategic approach?**

While the EU does not engage directly with all parties, because of our political principles, we rely on partners such as the ICRC and Geneva Call, who have expertise in engaging with difficult actors. ICRC in particular, has a critical role according to the Geneva Convention. It plays a very special role and we see it as a custodian of IHL, and we very strongly support that role.

Geneva Call, is another organisation very active in some of the most challenging environments. Though I cannot name specific actors, their work is critical in reminding all parties of their obligations under IHL in very dangerous places with very difficult interlocutors. They are having a positive impact because of their engagement and this is encouraging.

At the same time, we recognise that advocacy and ground-level engagement alone are insufficient. Accountability remains vital, and we continue to emphasise its importance in all our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts.

- > 5. Considering the increased risk to humanitarians and medical workers over recent years, what additional protection is the EU implementing, or planning to implement, to safeguard these workers and ensure their freedom of movement in conflict areas?**

The safety of humanitarian workers is a growing concern. In response, we recently launched the [Protect Aid Workers](#) initiative, which was launched at the European Humanitarian Forum. A forum that was initiated during my mandate and where we listened to aid workers and created this initiative. The aim is to address the concerns and needs expressed by aid workers, ensuring their security while enabling them to deliver critical assistance. We hope this project will make a difference.

The forum itself has become a significant platform for discussing and advancing IHL. I am glad to see it will continue under the incoming Polish Presidency, and we will have the fourth edition in May. This will offer a space to evaluate initiatives like Protect Aid Workers and identify new opportunities for progress.

- > 6. For the past two years, the EU has made significant progress in protecting humanitarian action from the unintended negative consequences of restrictive measures. How will the EU continue to advance on this agenda, instrumental in enabling principled humanitarian actors to operate in some of the direst humanitarian crises, and to ensure the EU's approach to restrictive measures is better aligned with IHL?**

This has been one of the biggest battles of my mandate, and we are almost there. What really helped was the UN Security Council Resolution 2664. This was adopted in December 2022, introducing humanitarian exemptions in all UN sanctions regimes.

Before that, we had already begun advocating for humanitarian exemptions in EU sanctions regimes, but progress was modest. When this Security Council resolution was adopted, I used it as a foundation to push EU Member States. It was not easy, but I think we achieved a lot. Now, we have humanitarian exemptions not only in UN sanctions regimes, which the EU has transposed

into its legislation, but also in mixed regimes - those that combine UN sanctions with EU-specific sanctions. Most importantly, nearly all EU sanctions regimes now include proper humanitarian exemptions. There are still a few ongoing discussions, but we have made significant progress.

These exemptions are crucial because, without them, humanitarian workers cannot operate effectively. When they cannot work, humanitarian needs go unmet, and people in desperate situations do not receive the aid they need. This has been one of the more positive chapters of our efforts over the last five years, and I am genuinely pleased with the progress.

It also highlights the importance of the UN Security Council's decisions. When it acts decisively, as in this case, it can have a profound and positive impact, including saving lives.

**> 7. In the 2021 EC's Communication on the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles the EU emphasised the need to prioritise the promotion and consistent application of IHL in its external actions. How would you assess the EU's progress on this commitment since the Communication?**

On this issue, I believe we have a mixed picture. We have made good progress in fostering cooperation with other EU institutions, such as the EEAS and its delegations in the field. We've also raised the importance of IHL with our development partners, both within the EU and externally.

However, there is still much to be done. The EU is often accused of double standards, and we need to work harder to demonstrate that we apply one consistent standard when it comes to IHL. Whether violations occur here or elsewhere, our response should be the same - condemnation and action against violators. There is room for improvement in this area.

Another challenge lies in verifying allegations of IHL violations. Perpetrators often deny such violations, making it essential to rely on hard, reliable data. The problem is that while humanitarian organisations possess this data, they often cannot use it openly.

Speaking publicly about violations and naming perpetrators could lead to humanitarian organisations being expelled from the countries where they operate. This would hinder their ability to provide frontline assistance, a price too high to pay.

In response, we launched discussions at the first European Humanitarian Forum in 2022. We encouraged our humanitarian partners to develop mechanisms to use their data without associating it publicly with their organisations.

At the most recent European Humanitarian Forum, a promising solution emerged: the [IHL in Focus](#) project, led by the Geneva Academy and Oxfam. We have supported this initiative financially because we believe in its potential.

The project recently published its first report, focusing on the use of siege tactics in armed conflicts and their impact on food security and the safety of besieged populations. Going forward, the project plans to release more thematic reports and annual reviews, offering credible snapshots of IHL adherence worldwide. This independent and objective mechanism is exactly what we need to support both advocacy and accountability efforts.

**> 8. To conclude, do you have additional recommendations for the future Commissioner on advancing the IHL agenda?**

I do not believe my successor needs much advice. As I mentioned earlier, Hadja Lahbib comes into this role with significant expertise and familiarity with the issues. In fact, two years ago, we co-organized an IHL side event on the margins of the UN General Assembly. She performed exceptionally well during the hearings, demonstrating her deep knowledge of IHL and humanitarian aid in general.

My recommendation would be to remain steadfast in advocating for IHL and to continue fighting for its respect. I also encourage her to take full advantage of the excellent partnerships we have with humanitarian organizations, including the NGOs gathered under VOICE. For us at DG ECHO, VOICE and its members are among our most important interlocutors. With 89 member organizations - 79 of which are certified partners - VOICE represents a crucial network for advancing this agenda effectively.

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Interview conducted by Maria Groenewald, VOICE Director, and Francesca Giubilo, VOICE Senior Advocacy Officer