

Oslo Conference on Safe Schools, Oslo, 28-29 2015

Statement by Ireland, 29 May 2015

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Ireland has followed closely the development of the *Guidelines for protecting schools and universities from military use during armed conflict* and welcomes the valuable part played by the process in highlighting the importance of protecting children and education from the effects of armed conflicts. We thank Norway and Argentina for their roles in preparing the Safe Schools Declaration and join with others in endorsing the Declaration today.

The use of schools and other educational facilities for military purposes during armed conflict may violate international humanitarian law, and certainly increases the risk of attacks against them. It often results, therefore, in their damage or destruction, or will render them unusable until unexploded ordnance has been cleared. As today's meeting demonstrates, there is a growing appreciation of the long term effects of prolonged denial of education caused by attacks on school facilities.

As in many other areas addressed by IHL, what is required for the protection of children and schools in armed conflict is not so much the development of new rules but compliance with existing ones. It is behaviour - not rules - that needs to change. The development of these non-binding Guidelines will, we hope, lead to those essential changes in behaviour, and to improvements in implementation of the existing IHL rules that protect educational facilities during armed conflicts, by both states and non-state actors alike. Indeed, states considered this issue at the last International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and recommitted themselves to implementing the IHL rules that protect children and educational facilities during armed conflict. The Guidelines can play a valuable role in supporting our efforts in this area.

As the ICRC and others have pointed out, the Guidelines must be read against the background of existing international law. It is that binding legal framework that determines the lawfulness of the actions of states and non-state actors in armed conflict. We see the Guidelines therefore as providing valuable practical guidance for those involved in planning military operations, leading - we hope - to a reduction in the military use of schools and universities and in attacks against them.

Ireland will continue to promote efforts to improve compliance with IHL in this area and to support children and young people whose education has been affected by armed conflict, including through Irish Aid programmes. In fact Irish Aid is currently examining options for strengthened action in this area.