

Protecting civilian infrastructure. Second Round of Consultations.

Italy is pleased to take the floor at this second round of consultations on the protection of civilian infrastructure. We value this opportunity to exchange views on such a critical aspect of IHL, that lies at the core of our shared commitment to limit the impact of armed conflicts on civilians.

Introduction

From a political and diplomatic perspective, Italy attaches the highest priority to the protection of essential civilian infrastructure, recognizing its crucial role in the survival of populations and the stability of communities. This commitment is reflected not only in the actions of the Armed Forces, but also in development cooperation policies, humanitarian assistance, and multilateral diplomacy, in full consistency with the obligations deriving from IHL.

National practice on targeting infrastructure

Italy advocates for stringent safeguards for essential civilian infrastructure. Its approach to the conduct of hostilities fully complies with IHL, through the strict application of the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution, without the adoption of a separate national doctrine in this field.

More specifically:

Infrastructure may be considered a target only when it directly contributes to military action. “Effective contribution to military action” and “definite military advantage” are interpreted in a stringent manner.

Italy strictly conforms to the principle of proportionality. Military planners assess potential indirect or “reverberating” effects, taking into account disruptions to water, sanitation, and health services.

The Italian Armed Forces employ methods and means designed to reduce damage to essential services, including tactics aimed at temporarily disabling, rather than destroying, facilities, thereby facilitating the rapid restoration of critical infrastructure.

Special considerations for dual-use infrastructure

For Dual-use infrastructures a high level of evidence is required to demonstrate a direct link between its use and military action. Engagement of such assets must be authorized at the political or strategic level, depending on the operational context and the expected collateral impact.

Special protections under Article 54 of Additional Protocol I.

Operationally, Italy considers infrastructure providing essential services—such as water, sanitation, healthcare, and food preservation — to enjoy “enhanced protection” under Article 54 of Additional Protocol I.

Italian doctrine incorporates this safeguard as a legal imperative in military planning and decision-

making processes. Even if such sites may have a dual purpose, Italian forces must assess whether their disablement could endanger civilian survival before engaging them as targets.

Civil–military coordination, best practices, and international initiatives

Italy's position thus reflects a pragmatic approach based on concrete assessments that allow adaptation to a wide range of situations while preserving the strict application of humanitarian law. This approach requires military commanders to base their decisions on reliable and broad-base information.

In this context, Italy's experience in civil–military cooperation, through coordination with civilian authorities and international actors, plays a fundamental role.

The national model for the protection of critical infrastructure, though designed for emergency situations, also serves as a useful reference for improving preventive planning and the protection of civilian infrastructure in armed conflict settings.

Italy also engages in international training programs and exchanges of best practices on international humanitarian law and the protection of essential infrastructure, involving institutions like the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in Sanremo, NATO Civil–Military Cooperation activities, and the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence.

Finally, reaffirming the need to ensure full respect for international humanitarian law in the planning and conduct of military operations, Italy promotes multilateral initiatives, including the Safe Schools Declaration, the ICRC's Health Care in Danger initiative, the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, as well as relevant UN General Assembly resolutions on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.