

Excellencies, dear distinguished delegates, dear friends,

Firstly, I would like to thank the organizers for having invited Geneva Call to take the floor at this important conference.

Geneva Call is convinced that the protection of schools during conflict is essential. We have played an active role in this process and notably by being a member of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, as well as by taking part in the drafting committee of the Guidelines. Thus, I am very pleased to be here to explain why it is so important to engage **also** with armed non-State actors on this topic. Whether we like them or whether we don't like them. They are part of the problem. So they will be part of the solution.

Perhaps two words on Geneva Call, as not everybody knows us. Geneva Call is a neutral, impartial non-governmental organization dedicated to engaging with armed non-State actors to respect international humanitarian norms in armed conflict, particularly those norms related to the protection of civilians. We are currently focusing our efforts on banning the use of anti-personnel mines, protecting children from the effects of armed conflict, and prohibiting sexual violence in armed conflict and working towards the elimination of gender discrimination. We also respond to requests from armed groups to help them build their knowledge of international humanitarian norms and their capacity to implement them. Geneva Call's key tool for engaging with armed non-State actors is the *Deed of Commitment*. The *Deed of Commitment* process gives armed groups the opportunity to formally sign a document, express their agreement to abide by humanitarian norms and to take ownership of these rules. This is followed up with training and monitoring.

Protecting education has been on Geneva Call's agenda for some time now. Back in 2002, when Geneva Call was still a young organization, we had planned a meeting with a military leader from

an armed group. The day before the meeting, we heard that this group had laid anti-personnel mines around a school and its football pitch. I had to ask myself, “Why am I going to meet this guy? Somebody who’s able to lay mines where children play and go to school? What could I possibly say to a guy like that?” I nearly decided to leave without meeting him, but finally I decided that I should. During the meeting, I couldn’t help but ask him why. “Why did you lay mines around the school and its football pitch?” I learned that it was because the enemies were using the school as a dormitory, and because they played football on its pitch and used it as a landing pad for their helicopter. That was the day I understood how important it was to work towards protecting schools from the military activities of **all** the parties to a conflict. I understood how one belligerent’s behaviour could lead to a reaction from its opponents, combining to have a huge impact on innocent children, on their education, on their future.

On this question of impact, I would like to add something: yesterday we mentioned several consequences: schools are closed, education is interrupted, etc. One important aspect was not mentioned. When schools are attacked and destroyed, when the violence is everywhere, when the militarization of the society is becoming higher and higher, and when children have nothing to do because their schools are closed, the temptation for these children to join an armed group and to fight “for a cause” is strong. In fact putting children at risk by using a school for military purposes can lead these children at an even greater risk: to become a child soldier. We have collected several testimonies attesting that.

It doesn’t matter who is occupying the school, or who is using it for training or exercises; it doesn’t make any difference to the child if the author of the misuse are the State armed forces or an armed group. His school has become synonymous with the risk of attack, potential violence, and death.

Regular armed forces or armed groups ? The result is the same. This is why we have to work with all the parties to the conflicts.

In November last year, Geneva Call organized a one week meeting with representatives of 35 armed groups from 14 countries. The Guidelines have been included in the agenda and presented and discussed with the contribution of Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, and Prof. Steven Haines.

At the end of the week, the armed groups present adopted a final declaration. They included the Guidelines in the text and decided “to take them into consideration.”

Also, as part of its child protection work, Geneva Call has already engaged with about 50 armed non-State actors on this topic. Some of them have undergone awareness raising programmes and put in place internal policies against targeting schools or using schools for military activities.

15 of them have signed the *Deed of Commitment* for the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict. The most important element of the *Deed* is the prohibition of the use of children in hostilities. But there is also an article by which the armed groups commit themselves to avoiding using schools, or premises used by children, for military purposes.

In addition the *Deed of Commitment* includes also some “positive obligations” such as providing education in areas that the group controls. I quote the text:

“We accept also to provide children in areas where we exercise authority with the aid and care they require..., we will: take concrete measures towards ensuring that children have access to adequate food, health care, education, and where possible, leisure and cultural activities.”

But it could lead to a new problem: If armed groups control territories and facilitate or provide education to children in the regions under their control, they will face the challenge of protecting also these schools. They usually do so with military people, wearing military uniforms and weapons, and surrounding the school. And..... you see the problem...
The groups do their best, but finally they could do wrong...

This is part of my message today. The reality in the field is sometimes very complex, and we need to find pragmatic solutions.

For that the Guidelines will be a very useful tool in Geneva Call's work. It will be important to continue the dissemination of the Guidelines to armed non-State actors so they can learn about them, implement them and use them as tools to prevent the use of educational institutions for military purposes.

The Guidelines are intended for use by all the parties involved in armed conflicts and consider armed non-State actors to be essential stakeholders in their implementation. This is important for them. They must feel that this process does indeed concern them—that they are included in thinking about, disseminating and implementing the process.

Geneva Call will continue to work on this topic. We will continue to disseminate the Guidelines to armed non-State actors and engage them. Simultaneously, we will do more research on which factors lead to the use or attack of schools. This will help us to develop the strong arguments which we need to convince armed groups to change their behaviour.

Finally we will also raise awareness of the Guidelines in communities affected by conflict. Civilians in the field very often have contacts with fighters from armed groups. They sometimes have relatives inside these groups, and they can be good advocates for the cause of

protecting schools. We should not forget their potential to play an important role in upholding the Guidelines.

Today, States will endorse the Safe School Declaration. For obvious reasons armed non-State actors are not invited to do the same ! However, if the number of countries endorsing this declaration is high, it will be an important message, an strong incentive for armed groups to implement its accompanying Guidelines.

Thank you.