



geneva call

The Swiss NGO Geneva Call helps armed non-state actors – groups involved in internal armed conflict that operate outside state control – to commit to humanitarian norms. Co-founder Elisabeth Decrey Warner explains.

How did you get the idea to set up Geneva Call?

It all started when the Ottawa Treaty, the convention banning anti-personnel mines, was signed in the late 1990s. There was a lot of excitement about it, but not everyone was enthusiastic. I remember being approached by some people – one from the Philippines and another from Colombia – who feared it would change nothing in their own countries, where irregular armed groups were continuing to use anti-personnel mines. We soon realized that we would need a way to make such groups respect the same norms. That is how the idea of Geneva Call was born.

Are there many organizations similar to yours?

There are many organizations that work with these kinds of groups to negotiate access to deliver humanitarian assistance to civilians in conflict – Médecins Sans Frontières, for instance. But these agreements are usually very short-term. What makes Geneva Call different is that we engage armed groups in the long term. We acquaint them with humanitarian principles, train them and invite them to publicly sign an agreement to comply with a specific humanitarian norm, which we call a Deed of Commitment. And we help them to implement the agreement. In this sense, I think we are the only organization of its kind.

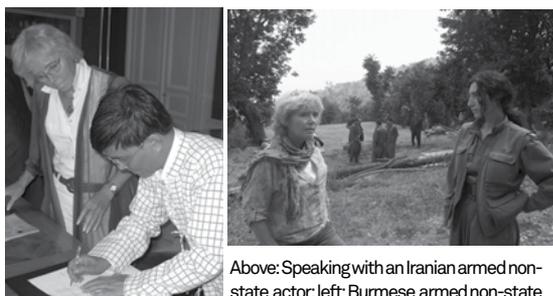
What is the Deed of Commitment and how is it signed?

Because non-state armed groups cannot sign international treaties, we invented this special mechanism. The Deed of Commitment is an official document which is signed by the leader of a group as well as by the government of the Republic and Canton of Geneva. To date we have three different Deeds of Commitment, one on anti-personnel mines, one on protection of children and one on the prohibition of sexual violence. The signing ceremony takes place in Geneva in the Alabama Room in the Hotel de Ville, where the First Geneva Convention was signed. The idea is to convey the message to the leaders of the group:

“Look, we are inviting you to this historic room and the government of Geneva is witnessing and co-signing the document. We take your engagement seriously, and you have to take your commitment seriously.”

Geneva Call's definition of an armed non-state actor includes “de facto governing authorities and non- or partially internationally recognized States.” Do you approach them differently from other armed groups?

Some entities object to being defined as armed groups, as they consider themselves to be de facto states. In such cases, we help them to adopt legislation based on norms of humanitarian law.



Above: Speaking with an Iranian armed non-state actor; left: Burmese armed non-state actor signing Deed of Commitment

We did this, for instance, in Somaliland. As the de facto authorities refused to sign one of our Deeds of Commitment, we spent two days working with members of their parliament, and now they have their own legislation banning anti-personnel mines.

How often do representatives of armed non-state groups approach you with requests for training or guidance?

Ten years ago, when we were almost unknown, we always had to make the first step. Now groups approach us. For example, two years ago some people from the Syrian rebellion approached us saying: “Yesterday we were taxi drivers, teachers and students. We do not know anything about humanitarian law.” They asked us to help inform their fighters and provide educational materials.

Do you inform states about your engagement with armed groups operating on their territory and how do they react?

We always inform the concerned states. We tell them that we will start to engage with a particular group on their territory. All information about our work is on our website, in our annual reports – there is nothing secret. Yet we do not consider our activities to be subject to permission. We base our work on the provisions of the Common Article 3

of the Geneva Conventions, which clearly states that humanitarian organizations have the right to “offer their services” to the parties to the conflict. Different states react differently. Some welcome us and support our work; some have even requested us to initiate engagement with armed groups on their territory. Sometimes there is no reaction at all, and we assume there is no problem. Only one or two countries are really unhappy with our work. In such cases we meet the groups outside the country.

Are there any red lines or limits when it comes to your engagement with armed groups?

In principle, there are no limits. If we speak only to the good guys, we will not change the situation of civilians in conflicts. If we believe that we can improve the behavior of a very bad guy, then we should try and do that. However, limits may be imposed by field conditions, considerations of our staff safety, or by the nature of armed groups. For instance, if there is no chain of command whatsoever. It does not make sense to speak to a so-called leader if in practice he cannot control his fighters.

How do you verify compliance?

This is a very important part of our work. We have several verification mechanisms. First, each group has to report on its progress and the challenges it encounters in implementing its commitments. We often have to provide support and bring in specialized teams, to demine areas, for example, or take care of demobilized child soldiers. Second, we learn from local NGOs and from the media in the region if there are any incidents that could constitute a violation. Finally, we go regularly to the field to assess progress and interview people. The level of respect for our Deeds of Commitment has been very high.

Geneva Call has been around for almost 14 years now. To what extent do you think it has been able to achieve its goals and what do you consider your biggest success?

We have testimonies from the field, numbers of Deeds of Commitment signed and respected, new civilian protection policies adopted. These numbers demonstrate that Geneva Call has an impact. But some things are difficult to measure. How many women were not raped because of Geneva Call's work – one or a hundred? We will never know. Even if it is only one, that is already a good result. When an armed group agrees to demine a region which it controls and make it possible for people in a village to live normally, to go to school, to the hospital or the market without the risk of stepping on a mine – it is probably a success. Each mine destroyed is a potential victim saved.

The interview was conducted by Maria Kuchma.