



**Panel Discussion on**  
**Armed Non-State Actors and Forced Displacement**  
**Geneva, 30 June 2011**

Geneva Call, in collaboration with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), held a panel discussion to examine the implications of engaging armed non-State actors (ANSAs) on the topic of forced displacement. Although this issue is not directly covered under Geneva Call's existing *Deeds of Commitment*, the organization is increasingly working on a broader range of humanitarian norms, many of which relate, or are relevant to displacement issues.

Today, more than 40 million persons are displaced worldwide. Of these, the great majority, approximately 27 million, are internally displaced (IDPs). There is clearly an active link between ANSAs and forced displacement, given that ANSAs are involved in nearly all contemporary armed conflicts. In areas where ANSAs operate, their behavior significantly impacts on the civilian population; ANSAs may cause forced displacement, forcible return or the prevention of return, and thus affect the entire displacement cycle. Under international humanitarian law (IHL) ANSAs have clear obligations towards displaced persons, as stipulated in the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, the Rome Statute, the Kampala Convention, as well as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

While these norms are regularly violated, often with impunity, it is worth noting that ANSAs can and have played a positive role, for example by cooperating in the provision of assistance and facilitating voluntary and safe return. In addition, ANSAs have made unilateral commitments, signed bilateral agreements, and issued relevant internal codes of conduct and regulations, press releases and other statements. It has also been observed that displaced communities themselves have developed effective coping strategies and asserted their rights in the face of ANSAs.

ANSAs have become a regular feature of armed conflicts over the past 20 years, yet State actors are increasingly constraining the work of humanitarian agencies in many contexts. Affected governments can be extremely sensitive to the status of ANSAs and want to prevent these groups from receiving what they may perceive as forms of legitimacy. Governments often restrict access to humanitarian

actors providing assistance. On the other hand, the international community, particularly where the war on terror is concerned, imposes conditionalities on the use of funds and in some cases even criminalizes contact with ANSAs by humanitarian actors. The panel<sup>1</sup> called for humanitarian space to be safeguarded, and reiterated the need for dialogue with all parties to the conflict. The protection of civilians, in particular vulnerable populations such as IDPs and refugees, is an underlying principle of all humanitarian interventions and an obligation under IHL. States must enable humanitarian actors to fulfill their mandates and continue to provide political and financial support to their work, or at least not obstruct them in seeking to achieve their goals.

The discussion came back repeatedly to the need for a better understanding of ANSAs in order to provide better engagement strategies. Humanitarian actors are confronted with a diversity of ANSAs, ranging from unrecognized and partially recognized States, to armed insurgents and militias, to powerful criminal gangs. Their structures and motivations differ considerably which can have an important bearing on how their behavior might be influenced, how the situation of displaced populations is affected and how humanitarian assistance is delivered effectively. The meeting recognized the need for further research and collaboration between academics and humanitarian actors in order to refine the criteria and methodologies for engaging ANSAs on forced displacement.

This panel discussion was the fourth of a series of events, organized by Geneva Call with the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, on the issue of humanitarian engagement with ANSAs. Prior to this event, Geneva Call and IDMC had organized an expert conference on IDPs and ANSAs. The summary reports of all the panel discussions, as well as a comprehensive report on the expert conference itself, including key findings and recommendations, are available on Geneva Call's website ([www.genevacall.org](http://www.genevacall.org)).

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