Unifikasi: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum
Volume 12.2(2025): 145-152

The Impact of Armed Conflict on Environmental Damage and Children's Rights

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https://doi.org/10.25134/unifikasi.v12i02.1212

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: May 14, 2025
Revised: September 15, 2025
Accepted: December 10, 2025

Keywords
Armed Conflict;
Environmental Damage;
Rights of Children.

ABSTRACT

Armed conflict, which is a manifestation of violence and hostility, is a cause of loss of life and material damage, having profound as well as long-lasting impacts on environment. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze how International Humanitarian Law (IHL) addresses environmental protection during armed conflict, with a particular focus on Israel–Palestine context. The analysis also examined how environmental damage affected rights of children. A normative legal method was used, relying on literature as well as existing legal instruments, conventions, and scientific interpretations. The results showed that IHL provided a legal framework to protect environment. Major instruments included Additional Protocol I of 1977 and Environmental Modification Convention of 1977, which prohibited methods of warfare causing widespread, long-term, and severe environmental damage. However, these legal norms are often weak in practice because enforcement was limited and there were no binding obligations for some states. In Israel–Palestine conflict, environmental damage resulting had destroyed ecological infrastructure, cutting off access to clean water, sanitation, health services, and educationm all basic rights protected under Convention on Rights of Child. Children were particularly vulnerable in this situation, facing higher risks of malnutrition, disease outbreaks, psychological trauma, as well as setbacks in survival and development. This study concluded that the gap between legal norms and practical enforcement undermined both environmental sustainability and the protection of rights of children. Strengthening international accountability mechanisms and improving global cooperation were recommended to make environmental protection during armed conflict a concrete and enforceable responsibility that safeguards future generations.

Introduction

Armed conflict is an act of violent tension arising from hostilities between opposing factions.[1] This phenomenon has become global, causing material losses and casualties while leaving enduring imprints on the environment[2]. As stated in a previous study, military activities, ranging from preparation and weapons testing to the final production of war equipment, often create access to hazardous materials or waste.[3] During combat, ecological impacts may

[1] Paola Vesco et al., "The Impacts of Armed Conflict on Human Development: A Review of the Literature," *World Development* 187, no. November 2024 (2025): 106806, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106806.
[2] Emiru Birhane et al., "Armed Conflict-Driven Environmental Degradation and Uneven Socio-Ecological Resilience in Tigray, Ethiopia," *Sustainable Futures* 10, no. January (2025): 101289, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.101289.
[3] Gede Khrisna Kharismawan And I Made Budi Arsika, "Collateral Damage: Perlindungan Lingkungan Pada Saat Konflik Bersenjata Dalam Perspektif Deep Ecology," *Veritas et Justitia* 8, no. 2 (2022): 362–85, https://journal.unpar.ac.id/index.php/veritas/article/view/5171.

include collateral damage from military actions, such as ballistics capable of igniting forest fires, deliberate devastation through "scorched earth" tactics including dam destruction, defensive measures comprising trench digging and mine-laying, as well as operations conducted near nature reserves.[4]

The international community has agreed on provisions governing conduct to minimize these consequences, commonly known as International Humanitarian Law (IHL)[5]. Broadly, IHL comprises the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, regulating the condition of the wounded and sick in land and naval forces, the treatment of prisoners of war, and the protection of civilians. Additionally, two protocols from 1977 govern International Armed Conflict (IAC) and Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC). Among the existing IHL regulations, none was found to specifically address environmental protection resulting from warfare[6].

Significant impacts on both humanity and the ecology of Gaza Strip have become clearly visible since the conflict escalated on October 7, 2023. The massive Israeli offensive caused unprecedented destruction, affecting infrastructure, productive assets, and public services. This attack generated over 39 million tons of debris, a portion of which contains contamination from chemicals or hazardous substances.[7] Furthermore, the strife produced CO2 emissions ranging from 420,000 to 652,000 tons of CO2e (carbon dioxide equivalent) in the first 120 days, resulting from activities such as airstrikes, bombing, transportation, and fuel use.[8] IHL mandates that belligerents avoid unnecessary environmental damage and implement preventive measures.[9] In practice, however, the absence of firm enforcement has led to continued ecological degradation during warfare. This form of damage significantly impacts the[10] rights of minors, a vulnerable group specifically protected under international statutes. Children possess fundamental claims to health, education, survival, and development, as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child[11]. Regardless, warfare leading to environmental ruin impedes the fulfillment of these liberties. Based on this background, the following inquiries arise: first, how does IHL regulate environmental protection in the conflict between Israel and Palestine? Second, what consequences does the ecological damage caused by this strife have on the rights of children?

Research Methods

This study adopted a normative legal approach, known as library legal research, utilizing secondary data derived from relevant statutes, regulations, journals, and books. By

[4] Daniel Hryhorczuk et al., "The Environmental Health Impacts of Russia's War on Ukraine," *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology* 19, no. 1 (January 2024): 1, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12995-023-00398-y.
[5] Khoirunnisa Khoirunnisa et al., "The Ukraine-Russia Conflict: An International Humanitarian Law Review of the Involvement of Foreign Fighters," *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 11, no. January (2025): 101340, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101340.
[6] Zelda Farah Ardiata et al., "Pandangan Hukum Humaniter Internasional Terhadap Konflik Perseteruan Bersenjata Israel-PalestinA," *Ganesha Law Review* 4, no. 2 (2022): 24–32, https://ejournal2.undiksha.ac.id/index.php/GLR.
[7] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Gaza," 2024.
[8] Yesim Yuksel, "Israel's Attacks on Gaza Cause Environmental Catastrophe amid Humanitarian Crisis," 2024.
[9] Mahbubul Islam, "Protecting the Environment during Armed Conflict: Fragilities in the Provisions of International Humanitarian Law," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 22, no. 03 (March 2017): 35–38, https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2203043538.
[10] Gabriella Colao, "Environmental Damages and Armed Conflict," in *Ecological Integrity in Science and Law* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 253–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46259-8_21.
[11] Clara Pettoello-Mantovani et al., "International Legal Implications for Children in Conflict Zones," *Global Pediatrics* 14, no. August (2025): 100285, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gpeds.2025.100285.

definition, this approach functions as a scientific process designed to uncover truth, anchored in the logic of legal science from a normative standpoint. The application of scientific logic in this context is in line with the provisions of the discipline and the methods of normative legal science, focusing on the law as the central object.

Results and Discussion

1. *Environmental Protection in Armed Conflict between Israel and Palestine Based on International Humanitarian Law*

Armed conflict between Israel and Palestine significantly impacts humanitarian spheres while simultaneously inflicting serious environmental damage. IHL, rooted in Geneva Conventions and supplementary instruments, imposes obligations on belligerents to protect the environment from excessive destruction during military operations.[12] However, the reality on the ground shows that the environment often becomes a target of warfare and rarely receives sufficient attention. According to a 2024 report issued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the volume of debris in each area stemming from this conflict is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Number of Debris in Each Area in Gaza[13]

Governorate	Tons of debris
North Gaza	8,134,416 t
Gaza	15,313,427 t
Deir Al-Balah	2,448,472 t
Khan Younis	9,100,027 t
Rafah	604,626 t
Damage Roads	3,600,00 t
Total	**39.200,978 t**

The data presented above shows the volume of debris from attacks capable of inflicting even greater environmental harm. This form of destruction invariably impacts human rights, particularly those of children. Regardless of fact that regulations regarding environmental protection in armed conflict lack extensive detail, several IHL provisions address the issue. In IHL framework, Additional Protocol I to the 1977 Geneva Conventions contains the primary mandates. Article 35 paragraph (3) declares, "It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment". This article signals a ban on strategies causing extensive ecological ruin. Damage occurs not only on land but also at sea, potentially resulting in pollution from weapons waste and toxic materials.[14] Article 55 paragraph (1) adds, "*Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term, and severe damage. This protection includes a prohibition on the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby prejudice the health or survival of the population.*" Emphasizing the obligation to provide special safety for nature, the provision dictates that the environment

[12] Red Crescent, "International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross* 106, no. 927 (2024): 1357–1450, https://doi.org/10.1017/S181638312400064X.
[13] UNICEF, "Humanitarian Situation Report No. 34," 2024.
[14] Aqib Tahmid et al., "Reviewing the Impact of Military Activities on Marine Biodiversity and Conservation: A Study of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict within the Framework of International Law," *Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources* 6, no. 03 (December 2023): 15–31, https://doi.org/10.33002/nr2581.6853.060302.

may not serve as a target for attack or retaliation. This principle positions the ecology as an inherent object of protection linked to human rights, specifically the claims to health, clean water, and a decent standard of living for civilians.[15] Based on the precautionary principle, interpreted as action taken before an impact arises, suggests that[16] even during hostilities, operations should proceed with caution, distinguishing between attackable and non-attackable objects.

Environmental Modification Convention, or Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (ENMOD Convention) of 1977, also holds relevance[17]. It prohibits environmental manipulation capable of bearing a destructive impact on human welfare.[18] Although discussions rarely apply this convention specifically to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the underlying principle emphasizes that nature should not function as an instrument of war.[19] Regardless of the fact that the legal norm appears clear, the greatest challenge resides in implementation and enforcement mechanisms. As Israel is not a party to Additional Protocol I, the direct applicability of these articles remains a subject of dispute. Most[20] principles regarding environmental protection, nonetheless, count as customary international law and bind all factions. Weaknesses in[21] international accountability mechanisms also make it difficult to address violations concretely.[22]IHL framework thus provides a strong normative basis for safeguarding the environment in the region, yet the gap between norms and practice endures as a fundamental problem. Resulting ecological damage causes suffering while endangering future generations. Strengthening[23] the implementation of IHL through international accountability mechanisms and cooperation with global organizations is essential, hence, environmental protection must transition from a mere legal principle to a reality on the ground.[24]

2. The Impact of Environmental Damage Caused by Israeli-Palestinian Armed Conflict on Children's Rights

Environmental damage resulting from armed conflict between Israel and Palestine has destroyed basic ecological infrastructure in Gaza, posing significant health and social risks to children.[25] Extensive harm to clean water networks and sewage treatment facilities, including

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[15] Alan Boyle and Catherine Redgwell, *International Law and the Environment* (Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/he/9780199594016.001.0001.
[16] Latifah Emmy, "Precautionary Principle Sebagai Landasan Dalam Merumuskan Kebijakan Publik," *Yustisia Jurnal Hukum* 95, no. 2 (2016): 275–97, https://doi.org/10.20961/yustisia.v95i0.2806.
[17] Deepak Rawtani et al., "Environmental Damages Due to War in Ukraine: A Perspective," *Science of The Total Environment* 850, no. December 2022 (December 2022): 157932, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.157932.
[18] United Nations, "Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (ENMOD)," Pub. L. No. 1108 (1977).
[19] Christina Voigt, ed., *International Judicial Practice on the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684385.
[20] Yoram Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316389591.
[21] Jean Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, *International Committee of the Red Cross: Customary International Humanitarian Law*, *International Committee of the Red Cross: Customary International Humanitarian Law*, vol. 1, 2005, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804700.
[22] Pustovit, "Enforcement Gaps in International Humanitarian Law: The Case of Environmental Protection," *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 245–70.
[23] Yamina Boukari et al., "Gaza, Armed Conflict and Child Health.," *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 8, no. 1 (February 2024), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2023-002407.
[24] Voigt, *International Judicial Practice on the Environment*.
[25] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Gaza."

the destruction or malfunctioning of most wastewater treatment plants, has deprived a large portion of the population of access to safe drinking water. The devastation of sanitation systems increases the risk of outbreaks of highly contagious diseases in minors, including diarrhea, and the resurgence of previously controlled illnesses such as polio, due to disruptions in immunization and sanitation. Destruction[26] of health facilities and attacks on medical services, similarly, reduce the health system ability to care for injured or sick youths, increasing death and disability rates from treatable injuries.[27]

Disruptions in food supplies and logistics caused by blockades and infrastructure damage worsen the nutritional status of minors, with an increase in acute malnutrition directly threatening growth, cognitive development, and survival. Besides microbiological and nutritional threats, piles of debris, fires, and the release of hazardous materials from damaged infrastructure cause air pollution and soil or water contamination, leading to chronic exposure to toxic substances and long-term developmental impairments[28]. Damage to schools, mass displacement, and the loss of a safe environment exacerbate psychosocial impacts: children experience impaired emotional development, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the loss of access to education essential to developmental rights. Legally, these conditions affect fundamental liberties protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to health. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the obligation of every state to strive to protect the claims of children to health. Article 6, paragraph (1), adds, "*States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life.*" Paragraph (2) states, "*States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child*." This form of provision elucidates the right to life as a fundamental, non-derogable entitlement because existence remains inherent from birth and universally recognized. States possess an obligation to protect minors from all forms of threats to life, including violence, armed conflict, and state policies with the potential to harm, such as environmental damage caused by warfare. This protection receives explanation and reaffirmation by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the General Comment on the right to health.[29] Since the environmental impacts of conflict are widespread and long-lasting, a just recovery requires a response combining improvements to environmental infrastructure, prioritized access to health and nutrition services, educational restoration, and environmental accountability to prevent harm to future generations.[30]

IHL, specifically Articles 35(3) and 55 of Additional Protocol I of 1977, prohibits parties to a conflict from carrying out attacks that cause widespread, long-term, and serious damage to the natural environment.[31] Such regulations show the existence of indirect protection for children, given that environmental damage directly affects health and survival. Conflict-causing ecological ruin can also be classified as a violation of human rights. Legal protection

[26] Abeer Abu Shawish and Catherine Weibel, "Gaza Children Face Acute Water and Sanitation Crisis," 2017.
[27] WHO, "Health System at Breaking Point as Hostilities Further Intensify in Gaza, WHO Warns," 2025.
[28] Samah Adnan Ashour, Mohammed Migdad, and Mohamed Buheji, "The Impact of War on Gaza on Children's Malnutrition Since 2023," *Public Health Research* 15, no. 1 (2025): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.5923/j.phr.20251501.01.
[29] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), "General Comment No. 15 (2013) on the Right of the Child to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 24)," 2013.
[30] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "OHCHR Thematic Report – Attacks on Hospitals during the Escalation of Hostilities in Gaza (7 October 2023 – 30 June 2024)," 2024.
[31] International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC, "Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict: Rules and Recommendations Relating to the Protection of the Natural Environment under International Humanitarian Law, with Commentary" (2020).

for children in the context of armed conflict should, as a result, be understood broadly, including the safeguarding of the surrounding environment. Since the ecological impacts of this form of strife remain extensive and long-term, a just recovery requires a response combining improvements to infrastructure, access to health and nutrition services prioritized for minors, educational restoration, and remediation mechanisms to prevent harm to future generations.[32]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis carried out in this study showed that Israeli-Palestinian conflict inflicted not only human suffering but also severe environmental degradation. It was further observed that IHL instruments did not specifically regulate the prohibition of ecological ruin resulting from warfare. Regardless, several other regulations were found to address this issue, including Additional Protocol I of 1977 and the 1977 Environmental Modification Convention, which prohibited the methods of warfare capable of causing widespread and severe ecological harm. Despite the presence of these regulations, it is important to state that weak implementation and enforcement mechanisms often render legal norms ineffective in practice. Based on the observations made, hostilities between Israel and Palestine have caused ecological destruction, threatening the fundamental rights of minors, particularly the claims to life, health, and education guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Decimation of water, sanitation, health, food, and school infrastructure worsens the physical, nutritional, and psychosocial well-being of the youth.

Suggestion

Based on the preceding description, this study recommends strengthening international accountability and global cooperation. These actions are considered very important because of their capability to ensure that environmental protection in conflict exists not only as a legal principle but also a practical implementation for the sustainability of future generations, particularly regarding the rights of children.

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How to Cite :
Tendiyanto, Teten, Zulmi Ramdhani, and Abdullah Abdullah. "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Environmental Damage and Children's Rights". *Unifikasi: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 12, no. 02 (December 31, 2025): 145–152