JLP JOURNAL OF LAW AND POLITICS

©Author(s)

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/NSQL2164
Journal of Law and Politics (JLP), 2026; 7(2), 141-155.
jlp.ibupress.com
Online ISSN: 2671-3438

Application: 17.08.2026
Revision: 22.09.2026
Acceptance: 24.10.2026
Publication: 26.10.2026

Sudan, G. K. (2026). Legal obligations governing starvation and humanitarian access in international armed conflicts. Journal of Law and Politics, 7(2), 141-155. https://doi.org//10.69648/NSQL2164

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BALKAN JOURNALS

Legal Obligations Governing Starvation and Humanitarian Access in International Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

Starvation in armed conflict is a lack of food and other essentials required for civilian survival, due to food destruction or to restrictions in being able to access it. In international armed conflicts, the denial of such necessaries may be more pronounced when humanitarian assistance is denied, delayed or prevented to affected civilian populations. Even countries that have signed international documents banning starvation and have responsibilities and duties regarding humanitarian relief, show a wide gap between the protection and implementation in the context of contemporary conflicts. In this context, the research explores the links between humanitarian access constraints, food system disruption, displacement, insecurity and civilian hunger and deprivation due to restrictions on humanitarian access, disruption of food systems, displacement, insecurity and administrative and political barriers. International legal and institutional documents are qualitatively analyzed with the help of selected contemporary conflict situations, in order to explore the relationship between legal duties, humanitarian action and the realities of people affected by conflict. The analysis shows that starvation is not just a result of the lack of food availability but can also be a result of the breakdown of the social, economic and humanitarian conditions needed for civilian life in conflict situations. Existing protections are further undermined and humanitarian responses limited by significant implementation, monitoring and accountability gaps. The analysis also places the issue in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) to recognize the need to link immediate humanitarian response to medium-term food security and resilience building in conflict-affected communities. Effective response necessitates greater synergies between civilian protection, humanitarian assistance, accountability mechanisms and longer-term food-security strategies in conflict-affected contexts.

Keywords: Starvation, humanitarian aid, international armed conflict, SDG 2 (zero hunger), civilian protection.

Introduction

One of the worst forms of civilian victimization during armed conflict is starvation, which often occurs when people lack food, water and other resources required for life. Armed conflict can generate food insecurity through the destruction of agricultural resources and essential infrastructure, displacement, disruption of markets and loss of livelihoods (Shemyakina, 2022). But starvation has a legal dimension when it is due to actions which are intended or foreseeable to prevent civilians from having a means of survival. International humanitarian law thus does not just cover starvation as a humanitarian effect of war, but also as a topic of civilian protection (Schmitt, 2011). Conflicts can become a life-threatening obstacle to local food systems, and humanitarian assistance can be crucial to civilians' survival; however, civilian insecurity, movement restrictions, administrative difficulties, and interference in humanitarian operations can keep the humanitarian aid from reaching affected populations (Canton, 2021). This is challenging for the legal line of separation between legitimate regulation of humanitarian activities and limitations that could be considered an unlawful obstruction or that may help in the prohibition of starvation. Where deprivation is caused by multiple factors, such as restrictions on food, water, infrastructure and humanitarian assistance, the problem is compounded. Deciding whether such action is legal thus involves an examination of the obligations involved, the context and purpose of the restrictions, how they impact civilians, and who bears responsibility (Clapham, 2006). Meanwhile, the long-term consequences of food insecurity may extend beyond the war itself, as they can damage livelihoods and food systems (Cohen & Pinstrup-Andersen, 1999). This links civilian protection against starvation with Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero hunger), which offers an additional tool for addressing food security and resilience, but not a binding legal standard for the actions of parties to an armed conflict.

Research Objectives

- To discuss the legal obligations in international armed conflicts, in matters of starvation, civilian survival and humanitarian assistance.
- To examine cases of restrictions or obstruction of humanitarian assistance that could involve illegal acts and render the act liable for legal liability.
- To evaluate the implementation of these obligations in selected contemporary situations of armed conflict with a particular focus on access to humanitarian assistance and accountability.

- To discuss the implications of conflict for food insecurity and what can be done to enhance humanitarian protection and long-term food system resilience.

Research Questions

- What are the legal obligations about starvation and humanitarian access?
- When can restrictions or obstruction of humanitarian operations be considered unlawful conduct and lead to legal responsibility?
- How well are these obligations observed in today's armed conflicts, especially in terms of humanitarian access and accountability?
- What can be done about conflict-induced food insecurity to serve SDG 2 and promote food system resilience more broadly?

Research Methodology

The research uses qualitative doctrinal and socio-legal approaches. The doctrinal part focuses on the treaties, customary international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international criminal law, judicial cases, and United Nations resolutions and institutional practices related to the scope of obligations regarding starvation and humanitarian access. The socio-legal aspect considers the way these obligations are implemented in real humanitarian situations and in institutional frameworks in selected contemporary situations of armed conflicts. Authoritative sources from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), United Nations, and other recognized organizations are also examined and included in the analysis alongside the scholarly literature. The findings are based on the applicable legal standards, documented civilian conditions, and institutional responses.

Research Gap

The prohibition of starvation, humanitarian relief, and civilian protection under international law have been the subject of existing scholarship, which has made significant contributions. There are also separate studies on conflict-related food insecurity, humanitarian operations, and sustainable food systems. These lines of inquiry, however, have not always been brought together in one analysis of the

legal framework of obligations regarding hunger and access to humanitarian assistance in international armed conflicts. Special focus should be paid to the nexus between the legal dimension of humanitarian access and the institutional and socio-economic factors that are a prerequisite for civilians to access essential resources. Restrictions on relief, the protection of food systems, humanitarian monitoring and accountability are also questions that need to be examined in depth in relation to the applicable legal standards. This research explores this nexus by combining a legal perspective and a socio-legal perspective, with SDG 2 as a complementary lens for food security and food resilience in the longer term.

Scope and Limitations

Even though the prohibition of starvation is also applicable in the context of non-international armed conflicts, the study is restricted to international armed conflicts. The limitation allows a more detailed analysis of the obligations that can be applied in the context of the IAC. The research primarily engages international humanitarian law, with relevant principles of international human rights law considered where they contribute to the protection of food, life, health and human dignity. SDG 2 is not considered an avenue for parties to armed conflict to impose binding obligations, but rather a complementary sustainable-development framework. The sources for the analysis are legal and institutional sources that are authoritative, and selected contemporary case studies. Assessment of conflict situations is always subject to various limits imposed by limited access, incomplete information, conflicting factual accounts, and the inability to independently verify events in the midst of conflict. The research therefore differentiates the impact of general conflict-induced food insecurity as well as the deprivation caused by specific action and the action that can meet the legal threshold of 'impermissible starving' and of 'illegal restriction of humanitarian assistance'.

Legal Framework for Starvation and Humanitarian Relief

An interrelated system of international humanitarian law, consisting of treaty law, customary international law and, when dealing with individual criminal responsibility, international criminal law, governs starvation and humanitarian relief (Akande & Gillard, 2019). The framework does not consider starvation only as being out of food. It shields civilians from starvation as a weapon of war, as well as from the destruction of objects essential for civilian life, and sets limits on

humanitarian action when civilians are lacking in these supplies (Fornari, 2022). It can be seen that these obligations are of special importance in armed conflict situations where protection is provided under the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I.

Prohibition of Starvation

Article 54(1) of Additional Protocol I (1977) bans starvation of the civilian population as a means of warfare (Allen, 1989). The prohibition is also considered to be customary international humanitarian law. Its scope should, however, be differentiated from widespread food insecurity, triggered by conflict. Where starvation or famine are present, this itself does not constitute a violation; rather, the legality of the deprivation is a question that must be addressed: whether civilians have been deprived of objects indispensable for their survival by an action that is prohibited by IHL and, in particular, where starvation is used as a method of warfare (Conley & de Waal, 2019). The prohibition is closely related to Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute, which criminalizes the "intentionally starving" of civilians by using starvation as a method of aggression in an international armed conflict, such as by wilfully impeding relief supplies (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute), 1998, art. 8(2)(b)(xxv)). Therefore, the prohibition is at the conduct-of-hostilities and at the individual criminal-responsibility levels.

Protection of Objects Essential to Civilian Survival

The protection of objects essential to civilian survival is protection of property. There is a clear ban on causing starvation under Additional Protocol I, Article 54(2), which bans the attack, destruction, removal, or rendering useless of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population for the specific purpose of denying its sustenance value (Additional Protocol I, 1977). The conservation area has been designated to safeguard foodstuffs, agricultural land, crops, livestock, drinking water facilities and supplies, and irrigation systems. The protection is important as it is not just a matter of having enough food on hand, but the systems of food and water production and procurement that are in place that allow civilians to survive (Allouche, 2011). It thus adds the preventive aspect to the ban on starvation. The rule is in addition to the general protections of civilian objects provided in Article 52 of Additional Protocol I; the customary provisions of IHL also identify the protection of objects essential to civilian life.

Humanitarian Relief & Access

Humanitarian relief becomes an important tool of civilian protection where civilians do not have access to sufficient supplies using available resources. Articles 23 and 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Articles 69–70 of Additional Protocol I contain the main provisions of the treaties (Additional Protocol I, 1977). The Fourth Geneva Convention is of special importance in occupied territory: in the case of inadequate supply, the Occupying Power agrees to and facilitates relief schemes. To the extent of the means at its disposal (Article 55 later), the Occupying Power assumes responsibility for the population's supply of food and medical supplies, in addition to bringing in supplies as necessary if they are not available locally. For international armed conflict, Additional Protocol I sets out the "humanitarian relief actions" where the civilian population is not receiving adequate supplies, and makes the parties to the conflict responsible for allowing and facilitating the prompt and unhindered transport of relief consignments, equipment and personnel under the conditions set out in the provision (Kurtzer, 2019). That does not mean that the parties can deprive each other of any regulatory or security action, but that such powers must not be regarded as an unlimited authority to prevent relief. The customary rules complement these obligations as follows: Rules 55 and 56 of the ICRC Customary IHL Study on access for humanitarian relief and the freedom of movement of authorised humanitarian relief personnel reinforce these obligations (Dinstein, 2000).

Protection of Humanitarian Personnel

Safe and unhindered access to humanitarian operations is directly dependent on the safety and mobility of humanitarian actors. According to Article 71 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, humanitarian relief personnel are subject to respect and protection and their operations should only be restricted in accordance with the principles of imperative military necessity and in terms of the conditions set (Meyer, 1984). Customary IHL also affords protection to humanitarian relief workers and their movement. This protection is legally related to the prohibition of starvation, as humanitarian assistance cannot be as effective a safeguard against civilian deprivation if those who have to provide it are attacked, prevented from moving or otherwise obstructed (Rottensteiner, 1999).

Consolidated Legal Standard

These rules combined create a three-part legal regime that applies to this research, i.e., civilians are not to be starved as an act of war, objects indispensable for civilian life are given special protection, and humanitarian aid must be allowed and assisted when civilians are inadequately supplied, but within the framework of those limitations recognised by IHL (Martin, 2001). These obligations are in addition to the overarching rules of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack. The framework is thus not limited to the issue of access to food but is about whether food is actually available. It also sets standards for behaviour which could impact on resources, infrastructure, and humanitarian mechanisms by which civilians are able to access essentials (Leaning & Arie, 2000). This sets the legal framework for the next section where restrictions on humanitarian access are considered, and whether they constitute an unlawful deprivation.

Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access is the link between the legal protection of civilians and the provision of the essentials of relief (Barber, 2009). International humanitarian law allows parties to control relief operations, provided that they are for legitimate security reasons; but this is not all that is allowed. According to Article 70 of Additional Protocol I, there is a need to provide humanitarian relief to inadequately supplied civilian populations in the form of the rapid and unimpeded passage of such relief (Schwendimann, 2011). The key legal issue, then, is whether a specific limitation can be considered to be a "legitimate restriction" or "obstruction" that "undermines" the humanitarian purpose.

Legal Framework for Humanitarian Assistance

Security arrangements, inspections and identifications may be in place, and security routes and distribution control may be designated depending on the relief operations. Additional Protocol I Article 70 and Article 71 give parties to the conflict the power and obligation to regulate, and grant protection to relief personnel, and a limited right to restrict in cases of 'imperative military necessity' (Spieker, 2011). As a result of that, it is not illegal to conduct inspections, checkpoints or temporary delays. The legality will depend on the purpose, necessity, duration and impact on the delivery of relief. However, the use of security regulations should not be allowed to make legitimate humanitarian operations ineffective (Akande & Gillard, 2017).

The Human Rights Role and Starvation as An Issue of Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access becomes more important where civilians are reliant on external sources for food as their local food systems and commercial supplies have been disrupted. Additional Protocol I, Article 54(1) bans starvation as a means of warfare, and Article 54(2) and Article 70 ensure that material conditions and relief measures are available to prevent starvation. No denial of an individual relief consignment means anything by itself is not evidence of starvation (Cifra, 2026). But systematic denial of relief, however, especially when other sources of vital supplies are not available, can add to the conduct prohibited by the law of the armed conflict. The two issues must therefore be separated: the humanitarian one, i.e., deprivation, and the legal one, i.e., starvation as a weapon of war (Hutter, 2020).

Cumulative Deprivation

Deprivation can be caused by a combination of factors such as the loss of farm assets, the lack of water and markets, displacement, limitation of movement, and hindrance to relief (Cernea, 2000). When added together, they can have a significant impact on depriving civilians of basic needs even if each measure on its own does not account for these deprivations. It doesn't relieve anyone of the legal requirements for starvation, such as the intent if it's necessary. Instead, the pattern of action and its effects could be used to assess if any separate actions were part of a wider pattern of actions to achieve the deprivation of civilians (Fornari, 2022).

The dividing line between legal regulation and illegal hindrance is then drawn between legitimate security considerations, humanitarian need and the actual impact of prohibition. Restrictions are more likely to be "unlawful" if there is insufficient justification for them, they are arbitrary or excessive, they lead to unnecessary delay, they hinder the passage of essential relief to civilians, or they are implemented without alternative supplies. When this behaviour is a part of a deliberate or deliberate attack on civilians to deprive civilians of objects necessary for their survival, it may also involve the prohibition of starvation. In the individual criminal responsibility level, Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute outlaws "intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, including wilfully hindering the relief of civilians" (Akande & Gillard, 2019). The legal assessment should hence prioritize circumstances, purpose, cumulative effects and consequences of the restriction, rather than consider any restriction on humanitarian access to be illegal.

Civilian Protection under International Human Rights Law

International human rights law fills in the gaps for severe deprivation in situations where international humanitarian law applies (Spieker, 2011). The right to adequate food and the fundamental freedom from hunger are recognised in Article 11 of the ICESCR, and the right to life in Article 6 of the ICCPR is particularly relevant where deprivation of food, water or essential services threatens to impact on life. Protection against conditions which threaten basic human existence is further reinforced by the right to health, as well as by the general principles of human dignity (Rottensteiner, 1999).

During armed conflict, the applicability of human rights law was acknowledged by the International Court of Justice in the Wall Advisory Opinion, but the Court also noted that international humanitarian law might apply as the more specific law in regard to actions taking place during hostilities (Kretzmer, 2005). Both regimes are thus to be considered complementary. IHL specifically covers starvation and humanitarian relief and the conduct of hostilities, while IHRL enhances the protection of life, food, health and dignity (Thomas & Tow, 2002). This interaction is especially relevant to the issue of chronic deprivation as it has implications that go beyond nutrition when deprivation is prolonged, to the enjoyment of fundamental rights as well.

Starvation and Food Security and SDG 2: Zero Hunger

The dimension of the research related to starvation, food security and Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2: Zero Hunger) gives the sustainable-development perspective (Sporchia et al., 2024). Armed conflict can impact agriculture, markets, livelihoods, transport and access to essential resources, leaving food insecurity as a longer-term impact of conflict as opposed to a humanitarian emergency. In 2025, 266 million people suffered from acute food insecurity in 47 countries and territories, with conflict and insecurity being a leading cause of severe food crises, according to the 2026 Global Report on Food Crises (Valin et al., 2021). SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture and forestry. Beyond its importance for the provision of emergency food, its significance for conflict-affected populations is also felt in the protection and recovery of the mechanisms by which communities produce, access and maintain food access.

Findings

The analysis shows that the international law relating to starvation and humanitarian aid is relatively solid but that, for it to be effective, its implementation needs to be done in conflict situations. The main problem uncovered by the research is not having any legal protection, but the lack of cultivating existing obligations into effective civilian protection, as access to food, water and other necessities is increasingly being denied. The study highlights, firstly, the distinction between starvation as a legitimate and prohibited means of warfare and conflict-induced food insecurity. Additional Protocol I, Article 54 and customary law cover starvation and deprivation of things essential for the civilian population's survival. But hunger, famine or extreme food shortage alone are not a violation (Schwendimann, 2011). Secondly, humanitarian access is a critical aspect of civilian protection. Reliance on the legal right to provide relief is of minimal benefit when insecurity, damage to infrastructure, limited movement and administrative constraints make it difficult to get the aid to the affected populations (Leaning & Arie, 2000). It is not just a matter of the restrictions being in place but also their justification and impact on civilians, especially if there are no other avenues to access essential supplies.

Thirdly, there is an implementation and accountability gap identified. The practical implementation of existing legal safeguards may be undermined due to problems with access to conflict zones, the inability to document conduct, restrictions on access and monitoring, and failure to secure compliance (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). This suggests that the current structure is only effective to a degree when institutional capabilities and monitoring and accountability mechanisms exist. Fourth, social legal theory shows the socio-legal dimension of the control over the material conditions of survival as a determinant of civilian food insecurity (Barber, 2009). Combined displacement, destruction of agricultural resources and infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, disruption of markets, and limited humanitarian access can lead to a decrease in civilians' access to food. Thus, the legal analysis of starvation needs to consider the general circumstances under which deprivation takes place.

Lastly, the research proves that SDG 2 is not a substitute for but complementary to relevance. IHL does not only cover the short-term aspects of food insecurity, such as starvation, but also contains binding rules on humanitarian relief (Thomas & Tow, 2002). SDG 2 covers the longer-term aspects of food insecurity through food-system resilience, sustainable agriculture, livelihoods and recovery. In this

sense, it must take the analysis one step further than giving immediate relief, to the level of sustainable civilian food security.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The procedures for humanitarian access to parties to an armed conflict should be established and made efficient with a view to ensuring the prompt movement of humanitarian personnel and essential materials. Security measures must be based on a substantial and valid legal ground and should not involve unnecessary delays or obstruct civilians' need for humanitarian assistance.

Early-warning and monitoring systems by international organisations should be integrated with indicators of food insecurity, malnutrition, displacement, damage to infrastructure and humanitarian access. These systems should be backed by a separate documentation and evidence-preservation system to enable prompt action and responsibility for any violations.

Parties shall enhance the protection of agricultural land, plants, animals, water installations, food storage facilities and other facilities necessary for civilian food production. Saving these resources is important not only to avoid hunger in the here and now, but also to ensure the ability of affected people to obtain food.

Where possible, humanitarian programmes should integrate emergency relief with livelihood and food system recovery, including rebuilding agricultural production, markets and key infrastructure. This can help to lessen long-term reliance on outside aid and increase community resilience.

Lastly, SDG 2 needs to be embedded in longer-term food-security and recovery plans and programmes in conflict-affected settings, and in the implementation of sustainable agriculture, nutrition and resilient food systems. These should be in addition to, not in place of, the binding obligations imposed by international humanitarian and human rights law.

Conclusion

This study explored whether there is an adequate international legal framework in place that can adequately contribute to the protection of civilians in the context of an international armed conflict (IAC) and the provision of humanitarian aid. The analysis shows that the main challenge is not the lack of rules that apply

to the situation, but the ability to apply these rules to effectively protect civilians during conflict. International humanitarian law provides important safeguards in banning the use of hunger as a weapon of war, protecting objects essential to civilian existence, and setting down rules for humanitarian assistance and obligations towards occupying powers (Rottensteiner, 1999). However, the efficacy of such protection will rely partly on humanitarian responses being delivered to impacted populations, and partly on the safeguarding of food, water, infrastructure and livelihoods that are key to civilian survival. Food security is also a clear indicator that there cannot be an equal exchange between food insecurity and legally forbidden starvation. The determination of a violation depends on the facts of the situation, the elements of the legal rule and the relevant conduct (Fornari, 2022). Humanitarian access is especially important when there are no other ways for civilians to get the things they need, and it needs to be evaluated in the context of the overall situation of the conflict. Thus, a multi-dimensional approach, encompassing IHL compliance, meaningful humanitarian access, accountability, and protection of civilian food systems, is needed for effective protection (Cernea, 2000). SDG 2 supports this by tackling the issue of sustainable food security and recovery. International protection is thus more than legal protection; it means providing civilians in the midst of armed conflict with safe, adequate, and sustainable access to the things they need in order to survive.

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