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Dehumanizing detention: degrading our collective humanity

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Language matters and the protections of international law are crucial when facing global trends of dehumanization. Dehumanizing narratives strip people of their dignity, making it easier to justify inhumane treatment, torture, and exclusion from legal protections.

In this post, Terry Hackett, Head of Division on Persons Deprived of Liberty at the ICRC, emphasizes the urgent need to reject dehumanization, ensure humane treatment, and strengthen compliance with international law to protect the dignity and rights of detainees globally.

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Imagine you no longer have control over your life, you are referred to as an animal, a number, a parasite, or an object. Your family do not know if you are alive or dead. Others no longer see, or recognize, you as a fellow human being. Because of this you are told you are no longer deserving of the legal protections afforded to others. You are no longer part of humanity.

This may seem extreme and unlikely. However, it is the everyday reality for hundreds of thousands of people detained in relation to armed conflict or other situations of violence around the world.

Dehumanization as a tool of oppression

People deprived of liberty, being subjected to inhumane treatment and torture, intentionally deprived of contact with their family, used as political bargaining chips subjected to poor conditions of detention and denied to access to basic services. These actions both contribute to and are symptoms of a broader trend of dehumanization *explored by* Natalie Deffenbaugh and *observed by* the ICRC in its humanitarian operations around the world.

Sadly, many times this narrative is threaded with justifications of alleged violations of international humanitarian law or based on overly permissive interpretations of the law. In some cases, these justifications are a precursor to legally hollow arguments to exclude entire categories of detainees from the protection of international humanitarian law.

Dehumanizing language often precedes or accompanies violence inflicted on detainees or the intentional imposition of inhumane detention conditions. For the perpetrator, it is much easier to subject a person to ill treatment or torture, deny them access to vital services, cut off from their loved ones and justify exclusion from legal protection when a person or group of people are seen as animals, objects or a disease, rather than fellow human beings.

Dehumanization is a vicious cycle. Once it begins, the inhumane treatment that follows makes it even more difficult to counter the language, perception and hate it incited. Dehumanizing narratives and actions must be rejected and urgently countered as they not only inflict suffering on people deprived of liberty and their families. They also degrade our shared humanity by contravening the rules that we, as a collective international community, have agreed to through the universal ratification of the Geneva Conventions.

So practically what can be done?

Countering dehumanization: a legal and humanitarian imperative

First, all people deprived of liberty, no matter their affiliation or what they have been accused of or convicted for must be recognized, in language and action, as just that: people.

People are protected under the law, they have names, families and identities, and they have a right to be treated with dignity and to be accounted for.

This starts with the recognition that no one falls outside of the law.

International humanitarian law is an inclusive body of law designed to protect our individual and collective humanity in the chaos of hatred of armed conflict.

The absolute obligation of humane treatment of people deprived of liberty as well as other provisions is a thread that binds international humanitarian law and international human rights law providing strong and often overlapping layers of protection. The exclusion of people from humane treatment is never to be justified or excused.

Secondly, the obligation of humane treatment must be put into action under any and all circumstances and without exception. This of course includes the very basics such as ensuring the provision of adequate food, water, sanitation and vital medical care, coupled with meaningful human contact.

Humanity in detention: the role of technology and human connection

The emergence of artificial intelligence driven technology within places of detention, if not grounded in the rules of international law, has the potential to reduce the humanity of people deprived of liberty to a series of 1s and 0s. Technology must be designed and applied in a way that facilitates positive and meaningful human contact and not as a barrier that further separates detaining authorities from detainees.

Meaningful human contact also includes connection to one's family and the outside world. This connection starts with authorities fulfilling their obligations to ensure families are aware of the fate of their loved ones who have been detained. Beyond notifications, regular contact between detainees and families must also be actively facilitated and planned for. Although technology can facilitate virtual connections with families, it cannot replace face to face contact.

Words and more critically, actions matter. We must learn from the countless lessons of history that show how dehumanization through language or poor treatment of those detained leads to unspeakable suffering and degrades our collective humanity.

Strengthening resolve for compliance with IHL

On 12 August of 2024, we marked the 75th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, reminding us of the world's agreement to place limitations on war in service of protecting our shared humanity. In a moment where we see international humanitarian law being treated with increased elasticity, it is the responsibility of all states to further strengthen their resolve for and compliance with the law and its principles enshrined to protect civilians and people deprived of liberty.

Detention in armed conflict and the way people are treated within places of detention must be based on international law, not on rhetoric.

Editor's note: *This article was originally published on [The Interpreter](#), and is available [here](#).*

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