

# Explainer: Humanitarian Pauses

*This document is part of a series of explainers that aim to strengthen understanding of specific mechanisms used to advance the protection of civilians (PoC) and improve humanitarian access in situations of active conflict. They are designed primarily to inform NRC strategic decision-making and advocacy and are not intended to serve as an exhaustive operational guide.*

*While the explainers are informed by international legal frameworks, the way certain terms are used in practice is often distinct from how they were originally set out in international law. The explainers highlight these points of distinction where relevant, and they further recognize that these PoC and access mechanisms continue to vary and evolve from context to context. With that in mind, the explainers offer some general considerations for their use, without seeking to make a definitive judgment on when, where, and how a specific mechanism should be implemented.*

## What is a humanitarian pause?

Humanitarian pauses refer to a **temporary cessation of hostilities for purely humanitarian purposes**, such as for the evacuation of civilians or distribution of relief items.<sup>1</sup> This arrangement requires the **agreement of all parties** and is usually for a defined period and specific geographic area where the humanitarian activities are to be carried out. The use of the "humanitarian" prefix distinguishes these pauses from general ceasefires, which are broader in purpose and which may be guided by political or military objectives.

Humanitarian pauses are not specifically defined under international humanitarian law (IHL), but IHL does include provisions for other temporary and permanent suspensions of hostilities, including armistices and truces, which are detailed in the IHL section later in this document.

Humanitarian pauses are also closely related to humanitarian corridors, which are discussed in a separate explainer. Corridors are typically narrower in geographic scope and are focused specifically on facilitating safe passage (whether of civilians or relief items), whereas humanitarian pauses generally cover a wider geographic area and may serve broader humanitarian purposes.

## When and where might they be used?

Because humanitarian pauses are, by definition, temporary in nature, NRC recommends pursuing more comprehensive protection and access options before calling for a pause. There are, however, certain instances in which the humanitarian community or NRC may conclude that a humanitarian pause is helpful or necessary. This would include situations where the following conditions have been met:

- When there is an **urgent need** to facilitate the movement of civilians or relief items in **areas of active hostilities**
- When other options for humanitarian access and the protection of civilians **have been exhausted**, and when a more sustained resolution of the fighting appears unlikely

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<sup>1</sup> See [OCHA's Glossary on Pauses during Conflict](#).

A pause **may be used in conjunction with other access and protection measures**, for example to enable an evacuation of civilians or to allow civilians or humanitarian staff to access a humanitarian corridor. These modalities are detailed in separate explainers.

Humanitarian pauses may also be used **when time is needed to negotiate more sustained humanitarian access or protection arrangements**. Humanitarian pauses should not, however, be used as a bargaining chip in political negotiations – humanitarian aid should never be conditioned on political or military actions. The term “humanitarian” should likewise not be used if the aim of the pause is for political or military actors to negotiate a broader political ceasefire. Blurring this terminology may ultimately backfire if the pause is breached or if the political negotiations are unsuccessful, making it less likely that a truly humanitarian pause will be agreed in the future.

It is important to note that **a pause is not a replacement for a sustained resolution to a crisis**, nor does it suspend the duty of parties to conflict to **comply with their obligations under IHL** when a pause is not in place – namely, to protect civilians and to allow the passage of relief items.

## What are the drawbacks and risks?

As highlighted above, there are drawbacks to pauses as a protection and access mechanism. A few of these are summarized below:

- To begin with, **the benefits of pauses are inherently limited and temporary** and are unlikely to offer a sustainable solution to protection and assistance needs of the civilian population.
- Calling for pauses before other access and protection options have been pursued **may distract from efforts to secure more sustained solutions** for access and the protection of civilians during hostilities. It can also set a precedent for future negotiations.
- Parties to a conflict **may agree to a pause that is intentionally tokenistic** and which offers limited opportunities for protection and assistance needs to be met. This could be, for example, agreeing to a pause of only a few hours or imposing other restrictions that limit the ability of civilians or humanitarians to move.
- **Pauses are frequently breached**, especially if the preconditions are not in place (e.g. if a pause is declared unilaterally), which may give civilians and humanitarian actors a false sense of security and **place them in even greater risk**.
- Parties to the conflict might **abuse the terms of the pause**, for example by using the pause to move military personnel or assets.
- Pauses are **often accompanied by an escalation in hostilities** immediately before or after the pause comes into effect.

## What is required to establish a successful humanitarian pause?

To avoid the risks outlined above, the following preconditions must be in place:

- **The terms of the pause should be negotiated to ensure it allows for assistance and protection** activities to be carried out. Concretely, this requires the pause to be long enough for civilians and humanitarians to be able to move and carry out necessary

activities, that enough forenotice is provided to enable civilians and humanitarians to be able to take advantage of the pause, and that the location covered by the pause corresponds to the places where protection and assistance are needed. This negotiation may often be carried out by a neutral third party, but NRC and humanitarian actors can advise on the operational needs of humanitarian actors.

- **There must be a detailed agreement by all parties to the conflict** on the terms of the pause, preferably agreed in writing. This agreement should outline the exclusively humanitarian nature of the pause, and confirm that parties to conflict will not carry out any activities of a military nature or which could give them a military advantage for the duration of the pause. It should also define the terms of the pause as outlined above (i.e. on its duration, commencement, location, and any other conditions). The agreement should be made at senior levels, but the terms of the pause should be proactively shared to all troops that are present in the area. The agreement should ideally also outline how compliance will be monitored and how breaches of the pause will be addressed.
- **Details on the agreement must be shared in a timely fashion** with affected communities and humanitarian actors. Civilians and humanitarian actors need time to prepare for the pause, whether to exit or to transport relief items.

Advocacy for the establishment of a pause is typically far more effective when there is a **unified stance among humanitarian actors on whether a pause is needed**. For this reason, and as detailed later in this document, we encourage NRC staff to consult with other humanitarian actors before calling for the establishment of a pause.

## What other considerations should be taken into account?

There are a series of questions NRC staff should ask if a pause is being considered. The answers to these questions will help determine whether it is the appropriate moment to consider a pause, the level of risk that is likely to be involved, and whether humanitarian actors or civilians would be able to benefit from the pause's functions.

- Have other **options been pursued** for securing more sustained humanitarian access and/or the protection of the civilian population?
- Have the terms of the pause been agreed by all relevant parties to the conflict? In writing?
- What is the **likelihood that the pause will be respected**? Do the parties (and their fighters in dispersed locations) have a **good track record** of adhering to these types of agreements or respecting commitments made during humanitarian negotiations? Is there external pressure to promote compliance?
- Are there reasons to suggest that the pause is being **instrumentalized by parties to conflict** (e.g. to advance its military objectives or avoid providing greater access and protection)?
- Is the pause of a **long enough duration** to enable civilians and humanitarians to carry out necessary activities?
- Are civilians and humanitarians provided with enough information and **informed sufficiently in advance** to be able to make use of the pause?
- Are **other necessary conditions in place** to enable the pause to be used for its intended purpose (e.g. have restrictions on the entry of humanitarian supplies or personnel been lifted)?

- Is there **collective buy-in** for a pause among relevant humanitarian actors?

## How are humanitarian pauses reflected in international law?

Despite being widely used, the term “humanitarian pause” is not specifically defined under IHL, nor are parties to a conflict required to put in place a pause. Rather, **humanitarian pauses are one way a party to a conflict can give effect to their other obligations under IHL**, namely to enable the passage of relief items or facilitate the evacuation of the sick and wounded.

There are a number of other terms that are also used to refer to the temporary or permanent suspension of hostilities. Often these terms are used interchangeably, but some do have a specific definition under IHL. Below is a brief summary of these different terms and how they are (or are not) reflected in international law:

- **An armistice**, as defined in international law, is a military agreement suspending active hostilities between parties to a conflict. An armistice can be local (i.e. suspending operations in just one area) or general (i.e. suspending all operations). If the duration of the armistice is not defined, the parties may resume operations at any time, subject to previous warning. An armistice does not put an end to the state of war. See [Hague Regulations Articles 36-41](#) for more detail.
- **A truce** is an agreement between parties to the conflict to temporarily halt hostilities in an area for a limited duration to facilitate non-combat-related activities such as attending to the wounded, burying the dead, or exchanging prisoners. The positions of opposing forces must remain unchanged during a truce unless otherwise agreed upon. The truce's effects are limited to the specified territory and do not suspend the application of international humanitarian law or terminate the state of conflict. IHL outlines obligations to respect the flags of truce – see [Hague Regulations Article 32](#). See also the [ICRC glossary on truce](#).
- **A ceasefire** is a term lacking a formal definition in international law. In a technical sense, it describes the effect resulting from one of the above-mentioned agreements to suspend hostilities (i.e. in contrast to a state of “open fire”). In practice, the term is frequently used by political and media actors in a much broader sense to call for a temporary or permanent cessation of hostilities, whether for humanitarian or political reasons. While historically ceasefires were used to describe cessations of hostilities covering an entire area of operation, recently they have also been used to describe more localized pauses. The ambiguities and different uses of this term often cause confusion, and it is therefore advised to avoid it where possible.
- **“Days of tranquility”** is a term used primarily by UNICEF, often in collaboration with WHO, to describe temporary suspensions of hostilities to enable children's access to health care during conflict, including to undertake national immunization campaigns or other exclusively humanitarian activities. The term is not specifically defined under IHL.

In addition to the above, there are also contextual and religious terms that are used to describe temporary or permanent cessations of hostilities – the Islamic concept of *hudna* is one example.

Given that these terms are often used interchangeably (and sometimes erroneously), wherever possible **NRC should focus on the specific conditions that are necessary** rather than entering into debates on terminology.

## Do we have examples of pauses we can learn from?

- **OPT and Israel:** In 2014, there were several short humanitarian pauses, including one on July 17. Amid hostilities between Israel and Hamas, a pause facilitated by the UN and the ICRC, aimed to evacuate the wounded and deceased from the Ash Shuja'iyeh neighbourhood in Gaza City's eastern part after intense shelling. Originally scheduled from 10:00 to 15:00, the two-hour humanitarian pause started at 13:30, experienced interruptions due to crossfire, and was eventually extended until 16:30. However, the pause was only partially implemented due to the resumption of hostilities.<sup>2</sup>
- **Syria:** In February 2018, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2401, urging an immediate cessation of hostilities, a 30-day humanitarian pause, humanitarian convoy deployment, medical evacuations, and the lifting of sieges in Syria. Despite this, pro-government forces escalated their offensive in Eastern Ghouta the next day. Russia announced a daily five-hour humanitarian pause, but only a minimal number of civilians used it. Bombing persisted during these pauses, and poor roads hindered access to exit points. The Syrian government and allies intensified airstrikes, gaining more control. Despite insufficient protection measures, on March 5, 2018, a UN convoy with aid reached Douma, eastern Ghouta, but Syrian forces removed most health supplies. There were over 56 airstrikes in Eastern Ghouta during the daily humanitarian pauses between 27 February and 7 March.<sup>3</sup>
- **Yemen:** On May 7, 2015, parties involved in the Yemen conflict agreed to a five-day ceasefire to facilitate humanitarian access and the delivery of essential supplies. The pause, from May 12 to May 17, allowed for the delivery of critical humanitarian aid and enabled civilians in insecure areas to seek assistance. Despite ongoing violations, including armed clashes and shelling, the pause resulted in improvements in security and relief delivery compared to pre-pause conditions. However, challenges such as ongoing insecurity, fuel shortages, logistical issues, and poor telecommunications affected the full implementation of the humanitarian pause. The brief duration of the pause was seen as insufficient by aid workers to make a significant impact, and there were concerns that it might legitimize the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

## What steps should be taken if a pause is being considered?

If the protection or access environment has deteriorated significantly and pauses are either already being discussed or may soon be considered, it will be important for the NRC CO to **consult internally** and **coordinate with key actors in the humanitarian system at country level**. Where humanitarians are involved with a pause it is almost always an interagency endeavor (agreed by the Humanitarian Country Team), and advocacy for or against the establishment of a pause will be far stronger when carried out jointly with other actors. For that reason, internal and external coordination is essential.

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<sup>2</sup> OCHA, [Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency. Situation Report](#), 2014.

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council, [Security Council Seventy-third year, 8201st meeting](#), Monday, 12 March 2018, 11a.m. New York. S/PV.8201. Record of Speeches.

<sup>4</sup> OCHA Yemen, [Yemen: Humanitarian Pause. Situation Report No. 5](#), 2015.

Detailed guidance on steps that should be followed can be found in NRC's internal note on [Promoting the Protection of Civilians in Situations of Conflict](#), and is summarized here:

- Identify who, at CO or field level, has information or expertise relevant to pauses or to protection and access more broadly, and convene them as an informal strategy group.
  - At minimum, this should include someone from: PfV; H2R/Access; ICLA; Advocacy; and Health, Safety and Security (HSS) teams.
  - Where these positions don't exist, are vacant at CO level, or the relevant individuals are less familiar with this topic, consult relevant colleagues at regional or global level.
- With the abovementioned internal group of colleagues, carry out a light touch analysis of the protection risks civilian populations face and the access barriers, and what measures would be most effective in addressing them.
  - As part of this, assess whether broader protection and access tools have been tried and exhausted – this is essential in determining whether we have reached the point of last resort.
- Validate this analysis with the above-mentioned individuals, as well as with relevant external counterparts. This could include the Protection Cluster, OCHA, ICRC, or other peer organizations.
- Consult NRC regional and head office colleagues, including (at minimum) the global policy, access, and PfV leads. If the approach is endorsed by NRC regional and head offices, coordinate next steps with other actors (internal and external) at country level before proceeding.

In parallel with any advocacy efforts on pauses, **NRC should always consider what we can do to strengthen protection and access through our operational and coordination work.** The abovementioned [internal guidance note](#) outlines options for addressing threats, reducing vulnerabilities, and supporting communities' coping capacities through NRC's core competency programming, access work, and coordination engagement.

### Where can I find more resources?

- OCHA [Glossary of Terms: Pauses during a Conflict](#) (2011)
- [ICRC Customary International Law Database](#)
- Chatham House [Humanitarian pauses and ceasefires – what are the differences?](#) (2023)
- [ICRC Q&A and lexicon on humanitarian access](#)

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