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Beyond Collateral Damage — How the West Asia War Is Devastating the Environment



1 April 2026

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Beyond Collateral Damage — How the West Asia War Is Devastating the Environment

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INTERVIEW ANGLE



"International humanitarian law prohibits targeting the natural environment, yet the West Asia conflict has caused documented environmental destruction including white phosphorus use and oil depot strikes. How should international law evolve to hold warring parties accountable for environmental war crimes?"

WHY IN NEWS

Down to Earth's special investigation — "Attacks That Will Outlast the War" — documents over 120 verified incidents of environmental damage from the ongoing West Asia conflict, including Israel's alleged use of white phosphorus in Lebanon, glyphosate herbicide spraying over agricultural land in Gaza, and airstrikes on Iranian oil infrastructure releasing toxic hydrocarbons and heavy metal pollution. The investigation exposes critical gaps in international humanitarian law (IHL) in holding warring parties accountable for environmental destruction that persists long after ceasefires.

THE SCALE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

DTE's investigation — based on satellite data, air quality monitoring, and on-ground reporting — documents environmental harm across multiple categories:

Chemical Weapon and Herbicide Use

White Phosphorus (WP): WP munitions, when used in populated or forested areas, cause persistent fires that cannot be extinguished with water. WP burns at 815°C and continues burning on contact with oxygen. Its use in Lebanon (documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) caused:

- Forest fires across the Jabal Amel region
- Soil contamination from unspent WP particles (which remain active for years)
- Long-term agricultural land degradation

Glyphosate spraying over agricultural land: Reports of herbicide deployment (aircraft-deployed or ground-based) over agricultural areas have been documented. Glyphosate (Roundup’s active ingredient — classified as “probable carcinogen” by IARC in 2015) at high concentrations destroys soil microbiome integrity, affects groundwater, and makes agricultural land unusable for 2-5 years.

Airstrikes on Oil Infrastructure

The West Asia conflict has involved deliberate and incidental strikes on oil refineries, storage depots, and tankers — in Iran, Yemen, and the Gulf region:

Toxic emissions from oil facility strikes:

- Burning crude oil releases black carbon, particulate matter (PM_{2.5}/PM₁₀), benzene, toluene, and heavy metals (vanadium, nickel)
- Oil depot fires have been documented burning for weeks, affecting air quality across thousands of kilometres
- Marine spills from damaged tankers create oil slicks that devastate coastal fisheries and coral reef systems in the Persian Gulf

India’s direct exposure: India’s fishing community in Kerala, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu depends on Arabian Sea fisheries. Marine pollution from Gulf oil spills affects the same Arabian Sea zone.

The Hormuz Chokepoint — Compounded Environmental Risk

The Strait of Hormuz — through which ~20% of global oil trade transits — has become an environmental flashpoint. Increased tanker traffic, anti-ship missile threats, and naval operations in the Strait have combined to:

- Create a high-density maritime traffic zone with elevated collision and spill risk
- Concentrate military vessel operational discharges in a semi-enclosed sea
- Damage coral reef systems in the Gulf of Oman from underwater explosions and ship anchoring

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK — AND ITS GAPS

What International Humanitarian Law Says

UPSC RELEVANCE

“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.”

UPSC RELEVANCE

“Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage... Attacks against the natural environment by way of reprisals are prohibited.”

The ENMOD Convention (1976): Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques — prohibits use of the environment as a weapon of war.

Why the Legal Framework Fails

- 1. The “widespread, long-term and severe” threshold is impossibly high:** All three conditions (widespread + long-term + severe) must be met simultaneously. This high threshold means almost no real-world environmental damage from warfare has ever met the legal standard for prosecution.
- 2. Major parties have not ratified key protocols:**
 - USA has NOT ratified Additional Protocol I
 - Israel has NOT ratified Additional Protocol I
 - The applicability of IHL environmental protections to non-state actors (Hamas, Houthi, Hezbollah) is contested
- 3. No international body has standing to adjudicate:** The International Criminal Court (ICC) can potentially prosecute “environmental war crimes” under the 2016 Policy Paper on Case Selection (which explicitly includes attacks that cause environmental damage). But the ICC has never successfully prosecuted an environmental war crime. The process is decades-long.
- 4. The asymmetry of documentation:** Proving that a specific airstrike caused “widespread, long-term and severe” environmental damage requires post-conflict scientific assessment — which is impossible during active hostilities. By the time documentation is possible, accountability windows have often closed.

DTE’S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Lower the legal threshold:** The “widespread, long-term AND severe” triple test should be amended to an OR standard — any one of the three conditions should trigger environmental protection obligations.
- 2. Create an International Environmental Crimes Tribunal:** A dedicated body (potentially under UNEP authority) for investigating and adjudicating wartime environmental destruction — with standing to issue provisional measures during active conflicts.
- 3. “Green IHL” provisions in future arms control agreements:** Specific prohibitions on targeting civilian water infrastructure, agricultural systems, and forested watersheds — analogous to specific protections for medical facilities under existing IHL.

4. Environmental impact bonds: Countries providing arms to warring parties should contribute to an Environmental Reconstruction Fund — creating financial accountability for supplying states whose weapons cause documented environmental harm.

THE INDIA ANGLE — WHY THIS MATTERS FOR UPSC

India has a specific stake in this debate:

UNSC Non-Permanent Member: India’s ongoing engagement at the UN Security Council requires a clear position on IHL compliance in the West Asia conflict.

Indian diaspora and fisheries exposure: India’s fishermen and diaspora in the Gulf region are directly affected by environmental degradation.

Strategic restraint doctrine: India’s “strategic autonomy” and “multi-alignment” requires India to have principled positions on international law violations — not just geopolitical alignments.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Additional Protocol I to Geneva Conventions; ENMOD Convention (1976); White Phosphorus; IARC (glyphosate classification); Strait of Hormuz; ICC (International Criminal Court).

MAINS GS-2:

“International humanitarian law and environmental protection in warfare — evaluate the adequacy of existing legal frameworks and India’s position.”

MAINS GS-3:

“Armed conflict and environmental destruction — analyse the short-term and long-term consequences for affected regions and global commons.”

INTERVIEW:

“The West Asia conflict has caused documented environmental destruction with no legal accountability. Does this represent a failure of international law, international institutions, or political will?”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW — ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION:

Additional Protocol I (1977) to Geneva Conventions: Art 35(3) + Art 55 — prohibit widespread/long-term/severe environmental damage

ENMOD Convention (1976): Prohibits hostile use of environmental modification techniques

Rome Statute (ICC): Environmental destruction can constitute a war crime (2016 ICC policy paper)

Limitation: “Widespread + long-term + severe” triple threshold rarely met legally

WEST ASIA CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE (DTE INVESTIGATION):

120+ documented environmental incidents

White Phosphorus in Lebanon: Forest fires, soil contamination, agricultural land damage

Glyphosate herbicide: Classified probable carcinogen by IARC (2015); destroys soil microbiome

Oil infrastructure strikes: Black carbon, benzene, heavy metals released; weeks-long fires

Marine pollution: Tanker/depot strikes causing oil spills in Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea

STRAIT OF HORMUZ — ENVIRONMENTAL AND ENERGY CONTEXT:

~20% of global oil trade transits through Hormuz daily

~3.5 million barrels/day LNG equivalent (world’s largest LNG transit point)

Environmental risk: High vessel density + military activity + coral reef proximity

KEY INTERNATIONAL BODIES:

ICC (International Criminal Court): Rome Statute; can prosecute war crimes including environmental destruction; never successfully prosecuted an environmental war crime

UNEP (UN Environment Programme): Nairobi; mandated to assess wartime environmental damage; no enforcement authority

ICJ (International Court of Justice): State vs state disputes; separate from ICC

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Geneva Conventions (1949): 4 conventions; Additional Protocols I and II (1977) added; III (2005) added emblem

India and Additional Protocol I: India ratified AP I in 1978 — is bound by its environmental protection obligations

White Phosphorus: Legal as a smoke screen/illumination round; controversial (potentially illegal) when used in populated areas as incendiary

IARC (International Agency for Research on Cancer): WHO body; classified glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic” (Group 2A) in 2015

Sources: [Down to Earth](#), [UNEP](#), [ICRC](#), [Human Rights Watch](#)

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