

UK reaffirms commitment to humane treatment of POWs and accountability of Russia in Ukraine: UK statement to the OSCE

25.2.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Ambassador Neil Holland reaffirms the UK's commitment to the humane treatment of prisoners of war, highlighting the IHL obligations, improving oversight mechanisms, and the training of personnel deploying on operations. Russia must be held accountable for the documented inhumane treatment of prisoners of war in Ukraine.

The United Kingdom thanks France for convening this important discussion. We fully support today's focus on the protection of prisoners of war, an obligation that lies at the centre of International Humanitarian Law and at the core of the OSCE's politico military commitments.

Madam Chair, as the panellists have rightly highlighted, Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention and Additional Protocol I are both very clear. The humane treatment of prisoners of war is a legal obligation, a fundamental standard of military professionalism, and a prerequisite for stability and trust among States.

The United Kingdom takes these obligations extremely seriously. There have, regrettably, been instances where UK personnel have fallen short of the high standards we set for ourselves. These incidents were thoroughly investigated, including through independent inquiries and judicial processes. Where wrongdoing was identified, individuals were held accountable. But, crucially, the UK used these experiences to drive significant reforms: strengthening training on international humanitarian law, improving detention policies and oversight mechanisms, and embedding clearer guidance for personnel deployed on operations.

This process of transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement is essential. It reinforces discipline within our armed forces and demonstrates the UK's determination to meet its IHL obligations in full. We encourage all participating States to take a similarly rigorous approach.

Madam Chair, today's discussion once again highlights that responsible states train their armed forces, enforce discipline, and uphold their legal commitments. Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine shows the profound consequences when a state deliberately chooses not to do so. ODIHR's recent reports, as well as the findings of the latest Moscow Mechanism mission, document a pattern of torture, ill-treatment, and inhumane conditions inflicted by Russian forces on Ukrainian prisoners of war. These are serious and systematic violations. They demand accountability.

Russia is bound by the same rules as every other participating State around this table. Its continued disregard for its obligations undermines not only the safety of POWs, but the very foundations of the OSCE's security order.

Madam Chair, the humane treatment of prisoners of war is not simply a legal requirement. It is a test of credibility, professionalism, and commitment to the rules-based order. The United Kingdom will continue to uphold these standards ourselves, to support Ukraine in defending its sovereignty, and to press for full compliance by all participating States. Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-reaffirms-commitment-to-humane-treatment-of-pows-a>

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