# Damage That Outlasts War: Gaza's Environment and International Law

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**Mains:** GS-II/III: International law, humanitarian crises and the environment




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## Why in the News

Every year on **6 November** the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict is observed. In the discussion of 6 November 2026, the environmental damage in Gaza again raised the question why damage in war is not limited to buildings and immediate loss of life. The effects on water, soil, coast and health can last long after the war.

## An Older Assessment, a New Context

UNEP published an assessment of the environmental impact on Gaza on **23 September 2025**. It raised concerns about damage to the water and sewage systems, rubble, changes in the structure of the soil and coastal pollution. This is an assessment of 2025, not a fresh count of November 2026. Instead of presenting old figures as today's position, one should use them to understand the nature of the damage and the difficulty of restoration.

## The Chain of Damage from the Environment to Health

- **Water:** When pipes and treatment systems are destroyed, clean water falls and the risk of contamination rises.
- **Rubble:** The remains of buildings can contain dust, hazardous substances and explosive remnants. Clearing without testing is a risk for workers and citizens.
- **Soil:** When vegetation is removed and the soil is compacted by heavy activity, water infiltration can fall and runoff can increase.
- **Livelihoods:** Loss of farming, fishery resources and habitable space affects food and income.

## What the Legal Framework Says

In international humanitarian law, the distinction between military objectives and civilian objects, and the principles of proportionality and precaution, are important. Protection of the environment is also linked to applicable international law. Environmental damage does not automatically prove one single offence in every case; the relevant rules, facts, intent, expected impact and evidence must be examined.

In **2022** the International Law Commission adopted a text of principles on the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts. It covers responsibilities before, during and after a conflict. It should not be understood as a new independent treaty applying to all States. Some of its provisions are linked to existing law, while others give direction for policy and development; the legal basis of each should be examined separately.

## Protection Not Only during War

Before a conflict, environmental planning and identification of sensitive areas are useful. During a conflict, care about the impact on civilian infrastructure and natural resources is necessary. Afterwards, safe access, testing of rubble, restoration of water and sewage and scientific testing of contaminated land become necessary. Reconstruction should include the needs and participation of local people.

## Way Forward

Immediate humanitarian relief and environmental restoration should not be treated as separate tasks. Clean water and safe rubble removal are also life-saving measures. Independent assessment, preservation of evidence and clean-up according to risk can allow better use of resources. The aim of reconstruction should not be only to put buildings back up but to create a safe and habitable environment.

## Mains Practice Question

**The environmental impacts of armed conflict give rise to long-term humanitarian crises. Discuss in the context of international law and post-conflict restoration.** (250 words, 15 marks)

### Answer Outline

**Introduction:** Link the environmental damage of war to public health and livelihoods.

**Main Body:** Effects on water, soil, rubble and resources; the distinction, proportionality and precaution of humanitarian law; explain the nature of the 2022 ILC principles. Do not turn the old assessment into a current count.

**Conclusion:** Write the need for a combined framework of relief, scientific clean-up and local participation.

## Sources

- United Nations: 6 November International Day
- UNEP: Gaza environmental assessment of 23 September 2025
- ILC: principles on protection of the environment adopted in 2022
- Contemporary commentary of 6 November 2026