

Zeitschrift: Annual report / International Committee of the Red Cross
Herausgeber: International Committee of the Red Cross
Band: - (1997)

Rubrik: The ICRC in action

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE ICRC IN ACTION

By virtue of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and on the basis of the Movement's Fundamental Principles, the ICRC seeks to provide protection and assistance to victims of armed conflicts. It takes direct and immediate action in response to emergency situations, at the same time promoting preventive measures by developing and spreading knowledge of humanitarian law.

Activities for people deprived of their freedom

The ICRC visits persons deprived of their freedom in international armed conflicts (prisoners of war within the meaning of Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention and Article 44 of Protocol I) and persons protected under the Fourth Convention (civilian internees, persons arrested by the Occupying Power and penal-law detainees in enemy hands).

In the event of non-international armed conflict, covered by Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Protocol II of 1977, the ICRC endeavours to come to the aid of persons deprived of their freedom in connection with the conflict.

In situations of internal disturbances and tension which are not covered by humanitarian law, the ICRC has a statutory right of initiative entitling it to offer its services to visit people detained in connection with the events.

The purpose of ICRC visits is purely humanitarian; ICRC delegates observe the material and psychological conditions of detention and the treatment accorded to detainees, provide them with relief supplies if required (medicines, clothing, toilet articles) and ask the authorities to take any steps deemed necessary to improve the detainees' treatment.

ICRC visits to places of detention, whether pursuant to the Geneva Conventions or outside the field of application of humanitarian law, are carried out according to specific criteria. Its delegates must be allowed to see all the detainees and talk freely to them without witnesses, to have access to all premises used for detention and to repeat their visits, and must be provided with a list of the persons to be visited (or be permitted to draw up a such a list during the visit).

Before and after these visits, discussions at various levels are held with the people in charge of the detention centres. Confidential reports are then drawn up. In the case of international armed conflict, these reports are sent to both the Detaining Power and the Power of Origin of the prisoners of war or civilian internees, while in other cases they are sent only to the detaining authorities.

These confidential reports are not intended for publication. In its public statements the ICRC confines itself to releasing the number and names of the places visited, the dates of the visits and the number of people seen. It does not express an opinion on the grounds for detention and does not publicly comment on its findings with regard to material conditions and treatment. If a government should publish incomplete or inaccurate versions of ICRC reports, the institution reserves the right to publish and circulate them in full.

Protection of the civilian population

International humanitarian law is based on the principle of the immunity of the civilian population: civilians taking no part in the hostilities must on no account be the object of attacks but must be spared and protected. The Geneva Conventions, and especially their Additional Protocols, contain specific rules intended to protect civilians and civilian property. The ICRC makes representations to remind parties to conflict of their obligation to respect and protect the civilian population, and takes action whenever the rules protecting civilians are violated.

Restoration of family links

The ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA) came into being during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Since then it has worked incessantly to facilitate the restoration of family links between conflict victims separated by the events. It symbolizes, by its work and its presence in every ICRC delegation, the importance that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement attaches to alleviating mental and psychological suffering, in addition to the nutritional and medical assistance that the ICRC provides to victims.

In 1997, the CTA was integrated into the newly created General Central Tracing Agency and Protection Division.

On the basis of the ICRC's obligations under the Geneva Conventions and the institution's right of humanitarian initiative, the Agency's main tasks are as follows:

- ♦ to arrange for the exchange of family correspondence in the form of Red Cross messages, when the usual means of communication have been disrupted;
- ♦ to obtain, centralize and, where necessary, forward any information that might help to identify the people in whose behalf the ICRC works and who are in particular need of protection;
- ♦ to help trace persons reported missing or who have lost touch with their families;

- ◆ to arrange for transfers and repatriations and to reunite dispersed family members;
- ◆ to issue, for a limited period and a single journey, ICRC travel documents for persons without identity papers, in order to enable them to return to their own country or to enter the host country of their choice;
- ◆ to issue certificates of captivity, hospitalization or death for former detainees, prisoners of war or their rightful claimants.

These tasks are usually carried out in close cooperation with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which together with the CTA form a unique network of solidarity and action. Where necessary the CTA organizes training courses, usually on a regional basis, to help the National Societies increase their efficiency in both operational and technical terms.

Assistance

The ICRC provides assistance for the direct and indirect victims of armed conflict and other violent situations. It does so by virtue of its mandate as set out in the Geneva Conventions, its right of initiative in humanitarian matters, the victims' right to assistance, and the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

The ultimate aim of the ICRC's assistance activities is to preserve the lives, alleviate the suffering and maintain or restore the health of conflict victims. The protection of health by providing assistance is part of the more general protection, under international humanitarian law, of the fundamental rights and dignity of people caught up in armed conflicts.

The ICRC's first priority is to provide assistance for the direct victims of conflicts: the wounded, the disabled, the sick, prisoners, displaced people and civilians in conflict areas and occupied territories.

In practice, and especially during prolonged conflicts, the entire population of the affected countries suffers; the distinction between direct and indirect victims of the situation tends to become blurred and assistance has to be adapted to the growing needs of an ever-increasing number of vulnerable groups.

The ICRC provides assistance to the best of its ability, and in acceptable security conditions, in situations of armed conflict or internal violence:

- ◆ it makes on-the-spot assessments of the type, extent and urgency of needs, and
- ◆ defines and plans its assistance independently, controls distribution of it and supervises its programmes so as to guarantee at all times that the assistance actually reaches the intended beneficiaries and meets their priority needs.

In order to preserve the health of individuals and communities, their access to preventive and curative health services must be ensured. These services must be

kept operational and provided with the requisite medicines and other medical supplies and equipment. But above all, access must also be ensured to the essentials of survival (drinking water and food), protection against the elements (shelter and heating) and facilities for personal hygiene (water for domestic use) and environmental hygiene (control of disease vectors and disposal of waste).

All this entails a very wide variety of activities which are conducted under the responsibility of the General Relief Division and the Health Division, which are both attached to the Department of Operations. This structure facilitates the technical coordination of the various aspects of assistance and its integration in overall ICRC protection policy.

According to circumstances, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies take part in these activities in diverse ways (for instance, by making personnel available or carrying out delegated projects).

On the basis of needs and priorities, the ICRC may therefore carry out any number of programmes: these include emergency food aid, nutritional rehabilitation, agricultural, veterinary and fishery programmes, distribution of clothing, blankets and tents, setting up of camps for displaced persons, construction or repair of shelters, dispensaries and hospitals, emergency supplies of water or repair of water treatment and distribution systems, sanitation work, vaccination campaigns, medical supplies for dispensaries and hospitals, organization of systems for first aid and to evacuate the wounded, dispatch of surgical teams, establishment of hospitals for war surgery and installation of prosthetics workshops to provide amputees with artificial limbs and therapy or of special centres for the treatment of paraplegics.

Assistance may consist either of direct aid to people in distress or of support for community services partly or completely disrupted by conflict.

Increasingly often, ICRC assistance is not restricted to the initial emergency phase alone but has to be continued during the post-conflict period until the activities interrupted by the conflict can be resumed, possibly with the help of other organizations. In some cases, the ICRC's position as a neutral intermediary enables it to provide humanitarian aid in countries where multilateral sanctions are still in force after hostilities have ended.

The training of technical, medical and paramedical personnel, both expatriate and local, also forms part of this whole range of assistance activities.

The constant assessment of assistance operations and their impact is increasingly important to the ICRC. It is one of the priority tasks of the General Relief Division and the Health Operations Division, and is needed both to enhance communication with donors, to ensure the quality of assistance and to provide a sound basis for the training of personnel responsible for carrying out such activities.

Development of and respect for international humanitarian law

Through its humanitarian work, the ICRC endeavours to provide protection and assistance to victims of armed conflicts. Its role is also “to work for the faithful application of international humanitarian law” and “to prepare any development thereof”.¹

The ICRC constantly strives to ensure that belligerents respect their humanitarian commitments. Whenever the situation warrants, the institution may also appeal to all the members of the international community to urge the warring parties to meet their obligations.

By the same token, the ICRC keeps a close watch not only on methods and means of combat in order to assess their consequences in humanitarian terms, but also on any other developments that have a bearing on international humanitarian law, so as to prepare for the adoption, whenever necessary, of new rules of that law. Its role consists, especially on the basis of its observations in the field, in gathering relevant information, organizing consultations with experts, and monitoring and fostering debate on the evolution of humanitarian issues.

Dissemination and promotion of international humanitarian law and of the Movement's principles and ideals

By becoming party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and to their 1977 Additional Protocols, the States have undertaken to respect and to ensure respect for humanitarian law and to spread knowledge of its provisions. Accordingly, they bear the primary responsibility for raising awareness of its rules, particularly among their armed forces and all those who may be called upon to implement them.

The ICRC's dissemination activities are based on the responsibility in this regard conferred upon the institution by the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The Statutes specify that the role of the ICRC is, in particular:

- ◆ to maintain and disseminate the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, namely humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality;

¹ Article 5, paras 2 (c) and (g), of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

- ♦ to work for the understanding and dissemination of knowledge of humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts and to prepare any development thereof.²

Assisted in this task by the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and by their Federation, the ICRC focuses on training disseminators in the different countries. In particular, it helps train national instructors within the armed forces and dissemination officers within the National Societies.

Certain target groups – government and academic circles, youth, and the media – are also given special attention.

The adoption of the Additional Protocols in 1977 represented a decisive step towards greater awareness of the importance of dissemination.³

Since then, innumerable activities have been undertaken throughout the world every year to spread knowledge of humanitarian law and of the Movement's principles, ideals and work. The aims of these dissemination efforts are:

- ♦ to limit the suffering caused by armed conflicts and situations of disturbances and tension through improved knowledge of and greater respect for humanitarian law;
- ♦ to ensure the security of humanitarian operations and the safety of Red Cross and Red Crescent personnel so that help can reach the victims;
- ♦ to strengthen the identity and image of the Movement, and to contribute to its unity through greater awareness and understanding of its principles, history, workings and activities;
- ♦ to help propagate a spirit of peace.

Today's combatants are all too often ignorant of the rules of international humanitarian law. By the same token, journalists and the public tend to become aware of humanitarian law and its applications only in the wake of tragedy.

People must know about humanitarian law if they are to respect it, and they must understand Red Cross and Red Crescent activities if they are to accept and support them. Civilians are frequently unaware of their rights and obligations under humanitarian law. When they benefit from the protection and assistance of the Movement, they should be better informed as to the mandate, role and ethical considerations which govern the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

² Article 5, paras 2 (a) and (g), of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

³ Resolution 21 of the Diplomatic Conference of 1974-1977.

Humanitarian diplomacy

In everything it does the ICRC seeks to safeguard the victims of international conflict, civil war and situations of internal violence, whether by bringing them protection and assistance, by taking preventive action such as spreading knowledge of humanitarian law and promoting its development, or by contributing to the growth of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Its work is therefore not limited to the theatres of armed conflict, even though the major – and most visible – part of that work is carried out in war-torn countries, for the ICRC has to maintain close relations with all governments and National Societies.

To supplement the contacts established at headquarters and the activities conducted by its delegates in conflict-stricken parts of the world, the ICRC has set up a network of regional delegations covering practically all countries not directly affected by armed conflict. In addition, it has an office in New York, which remains in close contact with the United Nations and cooperates with regional organizations.

The regional delegations have specific tasks which concern operational activities on the one hand, and humanitarian diplomacy on the other.

In the operational sphere, regional delegates respond to emergencies in the countries they cover, such as outbreaks of violence, sudden heightening of tension or the onset of an armed conflict. They may be called upon to provide logistic support for operations in nearby countries or even to conduct limited emergency operations, especially in the event of conflict. In the countries under their responsibility they also visit security detainees and provide services designed to help restore family ties.

Regional delegations have a major role to play in the sphere of humanitarian diplomacy, particularly in establishing and maintaining regular contacts with governments, regional organizations, and so on. Moreover, they are in a privileged position for sustained dialogue with the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in each of the countries concerned. Finally, all regional delegations actively promote the dissemination of humanitarian law and foster cooperation – which varies in form depending on needs and priorities – with the National Societies.

