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THE ICRC IN ACTION

By virtue of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols of 1977, and on the basis of the Movement's Fundamental Principles, the ICRC provides 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 international 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 not covered by international humanitarian law, the ICRC has a statutory right of initiative entitling it to offer its services to visit people arrested 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 international 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 ICRC 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.

Central Tracing Agency

The 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. To carry out its work, the CTA relies on a staff of more than 100 in the field plus some 60 at its Geneva headquarters.

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

- to arrange for the exchange of family correspondence 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 separated families;
- to issue, for a limited period and a single journey, ICRC travel documents for persons without identity papers;

- 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 general or regional training courses for the National Societies to help them increase their efficiency in both operational and technical terms.

Material assistance and health activities

The primary aim of ICRC relief operations is to protect the lives and health of victims of armed conflict, to alleviate their suffering and to ensure that the consequences of such a situation — disease, injury or hunger — do not jeopardize their future.

In order to attain that goal and to enable the entire population to regain its self-sufficiency, the ICRC may also set up, maintain or restore community services.

If these objectives are to be achieved it is essential that the ICRC maintain its independence throughout the various stages of every relief programme.

The ICRC must also make sure at all times that the relief supplies intended for the victims are distributed in compliance with the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality.

The General Relief Division at headquarters plans and supervises all relief activities in the field. Its Geneva-based team comprises over 30 specialists in purchasing, food aid, transport, agronomy, construction and veterinary medicine. At the end of 1994 an additional 150 expatriate specialists in relief, logistics and technology from both the ICRC and National Societies were working in the field to carry out the various material assistance programmes.

The General Relief Division is in charge of obtaining all the resources required for the ICRC's aid programmes, whether by purchasing them or through donations. It organizes the dispatch of relief supplies by air or sea and manages stocks in Geneva, in northern Europe and in the field. The division also manages and maintains a fleet of around 2,000 vehicles used by the ICRC in its field operations.

The ICRC furnishes medical and material assistance in situations of armed conflict and internal disturbances or tension, providing it can:

- assess the urgency and the nature of the victims' needs on the spot;
- carry out field surveys to determine the categories and number of people needing assistance;
- organize and monitor the distribution of relief supplies.

The Medical Division at headquarters plans and supports health activities in the field. These include emergency preparedness, training of personnel, initial assessment of health problems in conflict situations, implementation of medical programmes for war victims (the wounded, prisoners, the civilian population, war disabled) and evaluation of the results. The Medical Division has specialists in areas as varied as water supply and sanitation, nutrition, pharmacology, prosthetics, war surgery and health problems specific to detainees.

Medical activities in the field, carried out by the ICRC and National Society personnel, are not limited to providing medical care or taking action in areas such as sanitation, nutrition and rehabilitation. ICRC policy is to encourage the people it assists to achieve autonomy, especially by reinforcing or supporting local medical facilities.

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 ICRC 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 closely follows all developments in methods and means of combat, in particular weaponry, in order to assess their consequences in humanitarian terms and, whenever necessary, to prepare for the adoption of new rules of humanitarian law. The ICRC’s 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 of international humanitarian law and of the Movement’s principles and ideals

The dissemination of international humanitarian law is primarily the responsibility of the States, which undertook to make this law known, to

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

respect it and to ensure respect for it when they became party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and to their two Additional Protocols of 1977.

The ICRC's dissemination activities are based on the primary responsibility in this regard conferred upon the institution by the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Statutes state 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;
- to work for the understanding and dissemination of knowledge of international 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 International 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 international humanitarian law and the Movement's principles, ideals and activities. 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 international humanitarian law;
- to ensure the security of humanitarian operations and the safety of Red Cross and Red Crescent personnel so that help may be brought to the victims;
- to strengthen the identity and the 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.

² Article 5, paras. (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.

To be respected, international humanitarian law must be known. To be supported and accepted, Red Cross and Red Crescent activities must be understood. Civilians are frequently unaware of their rights and obligations under international 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.

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 also has to maintain close relations with all governments and National Societies.

To supplement the contacts established at headquarters and at its operational delegations, 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 monitors the work of the United Nations; this office also maintains relations 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 start 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. They also visit security detainees and provide tracing services in the countries covered by the delegation.

Regional delegations also 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 international humanitarian law and foster cooperation — which varies in form depending on needs and priorities — with the National Societies.