

International Humanitarian Law

The American Red Cross has a unique mandate to educate the American public about the guiding principles and *international humanitarian law (IHL)* framework for conduct in warfare as set forth by the Geneva Conventions of 1949. International humanitarian law is the branch of international law that encompasses both humanitarian principles and international treaties that seek to save lives and alleviate suffering of both combatants and noncombatants during armed conflicts. IHL's principal legal documents are the Geneva Conventions of 1949—four international treaties signed by almost every nation in the world. These Conventions provide specific rules to safeguard combatants (members of the armed forces) who are wounded, sick, or shipwrecked; prisoners of war; and civilians; as well as medical personnel, military chaplains, and civilian support workers of the military. The 1977 Additional Protocols, which supplement the Geneva Conventions, further expand these humanitarian rules.

Origins of International Humanitarian Law

International humanitarian law is founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. While its roots are ancient, the development of modern international humanitarian law can be credited to the efforts of a 19th Century Swiss businessman, Henry Dunant. In 1859, he witnessed the aftermath of a bloody battle among French and Austrian armies in Solferino, Italy. The departing armies left a battlefield littered with wounded and dying men. Despite Dunant's valiant efforts to mobilize aid for the soldiers, thousands died.

In *A Memory of Solferino*, his book about the experience, Dunant proposed that volunteer relief groups be granted protection during war in order to care for the wounded. From this idea, the International Committee of the Red Cross was born in 1863. Several months later, diplomats from 16 nations, assisted by representatives of military and medical services and humanitarian societies, negotiated a treaty. Known as the Geneva Convention, this agreement became the foundation of modern international humanitarian law.

Protective Emblems

During the drafting of the Geneva Convention, it was realized there was a need for a universal symbol of protection that would be easily recognizable on the battlefield. In honor of the Swiss origin of the initiative, the symbol of a red cross on a white background (the reverse of the Swiss flag) was identified as a protective emblem in conflict areas. Later the red crescent was also recognized by nations as an additional emblem of humanitarian relief. The red shield of David, although not in the Geneva Conventions, is used by Israel and is also a respected symbol. These emblems are used to identify and protect medical and relief workers, military and civilian medical facilities, mobile units and hospital ships. They are also used to identify the programs and activities of Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies, and those of Magen David Adom (Red Shield of David), the humanitarian response society in Israel.



Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions

After fifty years, the 1949 Geneva Conventions remain the most important international instruments for defending human dignity in war. The Geneva Conventions provide the legal foundation for the vital work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as it seeks to provide protection and assistance to victims of conflict worldwide. An understanding of the implications of international humanitarian law (IHL) is crucial to the success of humanitarian relief programs.

Although governments are responsible for enforcing the law, the Red Cross is the only organization recognized in the Conventions to carry out relief activities for victims of armed conflicts. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is often referred to as the guardian of the Geneva Conventions. As part of its mandate to protect and assist victims, the ICRC disseminates the rules and principles of international humanitarian law to all sides involved in hostilities, while 178 national societies, including the American Red Cross, help the Red Cross fulfill its responsibilities under the conventions. They serve as global links with the ICRC to locate separated prisoners of war and civilians, reestablish family communication and, when possible, reunite relatives. In addition to tracing and Red Cross message activities, Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies around the world often educate the public about international humanitarian law. Last year the American Red Cross educated more than 50,000 people in the principles of international humanitarian law. These courses were taught by more than 250 instructors at American Red Cross chapters across the country.

Why IHL Matters

Over the past 50 years there has been a dramatic change from predominantly international armed conflicts to a proliferation of smaller, but deadly, internal armed conflicts. Instead of belonging to a state's uniformed armed forces, a growing number of combatants belong to the ranks of private armies or militias. With more than 50 international and internal conflict areas across the globe, some which have been raging for decades, humanitarian relief work is increasingly carried out in unpredictable and volatile situations. Despite these changes, the work of the Red Cross continues unabated because it inherently embodies principles that transcend any changes in the nature of conflict. Regardless of political, religious or other differences, all suffering victims of armed conflict require protection, assistance and respect for their dignity as human beings.

Humanitarian workers are increasingly called upon to work in environments where both they and the populations they serve are at risk for becoming targets of violence. From Somalia to the former Yugoslavia, from Chechnya to Rwanda and beyond, aid workers face danger alongside their program beneficiaries. Even in less extreme environments, simmering conflicts can present formidable challenges and concerns both for effective service delivery and for security. The provisions of IHL grew out of the experience of warfare throughout history, and a clear understanding of the practical implications of IHL is crucial to the success of humanitarian relief programs. The American Red Cross has over 60 delegates in more than 30 locations worldwide, working under very demanding and often dangerous environments, fulfilling their commitment to helping vulnerable people overseas. Should hostilities occur, each and all are protected by international humanitarian law as set forth in the Geneva Conventions.

If you are interested in taking an IHL course, contact your local Red Cross station at 06371-47-2171 or email redcross@ramstein.af.mil.