

IN THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT WORLD

ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

The dissemination of humanitarian law One of our major concerns

Although it was ushered in by the 1970s, it was not until this decade that the dissemination of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and the basic rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) became firmly established among the many activities of the Belgian Red Cross.

In addition to undertaking successful national initiatives, such as the organization of the *Symposium on the Implementation of the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949* held in Brussels in November 1986, the French-speaking community of the Belgian Red Cross has endeavoured to make its own original contributions to the dissemination drives and programmes launched by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The means and methods of dissemination described below are those chosen and applied by the French-speaking community of the Belgian Red Cross. For a comprehensive view of the situation in Belgium as a whole, the present outline should be read in parallel with the report written by Mr. Vandekerckhove, Director-General of the Flemish-speaking community of the Belgian Red Cross¹.

The informational and educational activities carried out by the French-speaking community of the Belgian Red Cross have been supervised since 1980 by a special body, the Commission for the Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law, which is composed of representatives not only of the Belgian Red Cross, but also of the country's French-speaking academic and scientific community, the office of the Judge-Advocate General, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Military Academy. The Commission's first

¹ Vandekerckhove, Carl, "Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law—The Belgian Situation", *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 258, May-June 1987, pp. 277-281.

task was to design a dissemination programme. After determining its major priorities (target groups and methods of arousing their interest), the Commission's members established guidelines to ensure the programme's success. Indeed, many projects undertaken by the dissemination service so far have been based on the Commission's ideas.

We have thus gradually attained our goal, that is, to become an effective tool for the dissemination of IHL.

Internal dissemination

The role assigned to all Red Cross Societies in the event of conflict requires that their staff and some of their volunteers be taught the fundamental rules and certain specific provisions of IHL (particularly those relative to the rights and duties of medical personnel).

For several years, therefore, our relief services have made a point of including in their training programmes for volunteers a period reserved exclusively for teaching the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. A similar measure has been taken by the Red Cross Youth and the Social Service Department.

Furthermore, IHL is included in the training courses and other seminars organized for local branch presidents. The internal aspect of dissemination is also important in terms of its multiplier effect. Thus, when the opportunity arises in the course of their regular activities, volunteers may in turn pass on the knowledge they have acquired of humanitarian values and basic principles.

External dissemination

Our most recent external dissemination activities fall into two categories, that is, the preparation and distribution of brochures, and the organization of educational events.

1. In addition to ensuring the wide *distribution* of ICRC brochures, we have produced our own publications, some of which are described below.

1.1 For all volunteers

The columns of *Contact* magazine (12,000 copies published every two months) are always open to interviews and articles about IHL in relation to current events. For example, on the occasion of Mr. Hay's and Mr. Sommaruga's recent visits to Brussels *Contact* published interviews on topical issues; it has also given wide coverage to the ratification by Belgium of the Additional Protocols, the role of ICRC delegates around the world and the appeals for a humanitarian mobilization.

1.2. *For youth*

Every year the periodical produced for the Red Cross Youth devotes one full issue to IHL. It also publishes information on available teaching materials (“Le DIH, un chemin vers la paix” — IHL: a road to peace; “L’action des délégués du CICR: efficacité dans la discrétion” — The activities of ICRC delegates: efficiency with discretion; showings of the film “Pax”; etc.) and on the organization of contests. Moreover, an issue of the magazine is sent once a year to all the schools in the French-speaking Belgian community.

The humanitarian law dissemination service has so far published two brochures for the general public, entitled “Face à la détresse” (In the face of human distress) and “La Croix-Rouge, une idée actuelle” (The Red Cross, a modern concept), and two others specifically for schoolchildren entitled “Croix-Rouge, qui es-tu?” (Red Cross, who are you?) for primary-school pupils, and “Vous avez dit Croix-Rouge?” (Did you say Red Cross?) for young teenagers. Thanks to their format and language tailored to their young readers, these brochures have been well received in educational circles. A new brochure concerning minimum humanitarian standards and the points of convergence between human rights and IHL will soon be going to press.

1.3. *For more in-depth knowledge*

The Honorary President of the Community Council of the French-speaking community of the Belgian Red Cross, Mr. Valère Bleiman, began in 1983 to write a series of textbooks, the third volume of which has just been published, on various themes of IHL. The author begins with a general outline of the fundamental rules of IHL, the Law of Geneva and fundamental principles, and the components and missions of the International Red Cross, then turns to issues more closely related to current events, such as the difficulty of achieving peace and the questions raised by the practice of torture and the use of various types of weapons.

2. The humanitarian law dissemination service has organized, among other educational events, a *contest* and *various series of conferences*.

2.1. The humanitarian law contest, first held in 1982, is open to university students, particularly future lawyers, doctors, army officers, diplomats and graduates in political sciences. Participants are invited to present a research paper on one of the IHL subjects proposed by the jury, itself composed largely of members of the Dissemination Commission.

2.2. An annual lecture tour of universities and similar institutions by an ICRC legal adviser is being planned. It is felt that these lectures, at the very least, will provide basic information to a large number of students of the law and political science departments of the country's French-speaking universities and, at best, will enable the students to grasp the practical importance of certain abstract concepts dealt with in public international law courses.

3. The latest step in our dissemination effort has been the introduction of a course on IHL in training programmes for first-aiders. Children (young first-aiders), teenagers (junior first-aiders) and adults undergoing training for personal or professional reasons are automatically given a two-hour talk on the Movement, the Geneva Conventions, etc.

This brief survey of the dissemination activities of the French-speaking section of the Belgian Red Cross would be incomplete without mentioning the existence of a specialized IHL library open to anyone wishing to engage in research. The library also stocks and circulates ICRC publications. Among its most frequent users are officers responsible for teaching IHL to the armed forces, and students.

In conclusion, let us recall the important role that was played by the National Society in promoting ratification by Belgium of the two Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions. Throughout the process, we also did our utmost to increase awareness of the issues among political figures in a position to speed up the legislative procedures involved.

This brief survey shows the variety of our activities and demonstrates our interest in ensuring the widest possible dissemination of humanitarian law, a difficult but essential task calling for perseverance and imagination.

Guy Hullebræck
Director-General
Belgian Red Cross
(French-speaking community)
