

Dissemination of international humanitarian law and of the Principles and ideals of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

DISSEMINATION IN THE NINETIES

The dissemination of international humanitarian law is more than an obligation laid down by the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols for all the States party to them. To spread such knowledge is to play a vital part — if not the most important part of all — in limiting the suffering caused by armed conflict.

To promote the Principles and ideals of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is the duty of all members of the Movement. It also and above all means fostering a spirit of cooperation and peace.

In this unstable world of ours, where peace restored as in Angola and Cambodia constantly alternates with unspeakable suffering in places like Somalia and Yugoslavia, we must continue to work energetically on two fronts, seeking to prevent the outbreak of war where possible and limiting the suffering it causes when it cannot be avoided. And there we have two of the main objectives of dissemination.

The adoption of the Additional Protocols in 1977 coincided with a rapidly growing awareness of the importance of dissemination. Since then, the momentum has been maintained throughout three successive programmes of action adopted by the International Conference in 1977, 1981 and 1986.

When the 26th International Conference was postponed, the report that had been prepared for it became a report to the 1991 Council of Delegates. It describes the many dissemination activities carried out in particular by the various States, the National Societies, the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, but also concludes that a great deal remains to be done. We must therefore spare no effort in our continuing campaign to promote knowledge of and respect for this body of law.

But dissemination can do more than meet our obligation to relieve current suffering and to be prepared for future events. Many people in our rapidly changing world have lost their bearings and now need to regain a sense of fundamental values, of legal and ethical stability. While international humanitarian law and the Movement's Principles cannot provide the whole answer, they can make a real, universally recognized contribution. We have to say this loud and clear, and spread knowledge of them accordingly.

In order, therefore, to keep up the momentum of the previous three programmes of action and to meet present requirements, the ICRC and the Federation drew up the "Guidelines for the '90s" for approval by the 26th International Conference and, following its postponement, submitted them to the Council of Delegates in November of last year. In adopting these guidelines (Resolution 8), the Council endorsed a body of advice and rules for action to be taken by all concerned. They suggest a number of universal priorities for the coming decade while being flexible enough for the humanitarian message to be adapted to different cultures and to the technical means available (see pp. 175-178).

To ensure that these guidelines receive the widespread attention they deserve, they are now being published in the Review and will shortly be printed in the form of a booklet.

For the purpose of broader distribution, the report prepared for the Budapest Conference is also being reissued in mimeographed form.

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