

# Dissemination of international humanitarian law in Ecuador

by **Ricardo Camacho Zeas**

International humanitarian law is the body of rules (the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols of 1977) governing the rights and obligations of the belligerents in war.

In signing and later ratifying the Conventions and their Protocols, the States party thereto undertake not only to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian law in all circumstances, but also to disseminate the relevant texts as widely as possible in time of peace as in time of war, among both the armed forces and police and the civilian population. This is stipulated in Articles 47, 48, 127 and 144 of the four Geneva Conventions respectively, which also require States to include the study of humanitarian law in programmes of military instruction. Moreover, States are duty-bound to incorporate the provisions of humanitarian law in their internal legislation.

In Latin America, unfortunately, and in Ecuador in particular, funds are rarely set aside for introducing such courses into programmes of military instruction, either because the governments in power have made no policy decision in that respect or because scarce financial resources are earmarked for other priorities.

In Ecuador, dissemination activities were few and far between until 1989. Thanks to the initiative of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the National Society, a dissemination and principles department was set up at the Ecuadorean Red Cross in that year. The first thing we had to decide was what to disseminate and what target groups we wanted to reach, questions I think dissemination officers ask themselves the world over.

The answers were obvious. We would promote knowledge of the International Red Cross Movement and international humanitarian law,

and our principal target groups would be the armed forces, the national police and academic circles.

Although the Conventions and their Additional Protocols contain articles on the dissemination of their respective provisions, national authorities and in particular the armed forces see those provisions as far removed from their everyday concerns. Our first objective, therefore, was to sign a cooperation agreement with the armed forces clearly defining the rules of the game for both sides. The declaration of cooperation has two main points (*see below*).

First, the Ministry of National Defence agrees to allow the Red Cross to organize courses and seminars provided that they do not disturb day-to-day routine within the army, navy and air force units concerned.

The second and, in my opinion, key point, is that a coordinator was to be appointed for each branch of the armed forces, that coordinator being the Secretary General of the branch concerned. This was of vital importance because it allowed us to establish regular working relations on a more personal basis. Some months later, the first outside participants in a National Society internal dissemination seminar were members of the armed forces, who mingled with Red Cross members and shared their experiences. At present, the three coordinators are members of the Ecuadorean Red Cross dissemination department.

Once the agreement was signed, our next problem was to decide what to disseminate and how. Many talks and seminars were given to members of the armed forces and the national police before we found what appeared to be the most satisfactory method.

Similar cooperation agreements were signed with the Ministry of the Interior and the National Police. These solemn agreements have made it possible for the Ecuadorean Red Cross to make rapid progress in the dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law among the country's armed forces and police.

Courses and seminars (on average two per month) have been given at all levels, from recruits up to judge advocates of the Supreme Military Tribunal.

It was these agreements that paved the way for our programmes, but the links thus established have since grown closer, and dissemination work is now much more than simply a matter of meeting an obligation.

The talks and seminars do not take the form of *ex cathedra* lectures; they involve active participation and group work. They have aroused great interest and enthusiasm, and the Ecuadorean Red Cross

has received many requests for courses on international humanitarian law as a result.

**Ricardo Camacho Zeas**  
*Secretary General*  
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MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

ANNEX

**DECLARATION OF COOPERATION BETWEEN  
THE ECUADOREAN RED CROSS AND  
THE MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENCE**

**Preamble**

The Republic of Ecuador ratified the 1949 Geneva Conventions in 1954. In 1979 it ratified the two Additional Protocols, being the second Latin American country to do so. It thereby undertook to respect international humanitarian law and to promote knowledge of its provisions, especially among the armed forces and the national police, so as to ensure that combatants, medical personnel and chaplains in particular are aware of the rules pertaining to them.

**Declaration of cooperation**

**Primo:**

In compliance with the undertaking made by the State, the Ecuadorean Red Cross and the Ministry of National Defence have signed this declaration of cooperation for the dissemination of knowledge of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols to army, navy and air force units of the armed forces.

## **Secundo:**

### ***a. The Ministry of National Defence undertakes:***

- To allow talks and seminars to be held for army, naval and air force units provided that they do not interfere with routine activities within those units. The talks and seminars shall take place on premises designated by the branch of the armed forces concerned.
- To appoint a coordinator to work out the schedule for the seminars and talks to be given to the armed forces, with the support of the Training and Education Department concerned. The said coordinator shall be the Secretary General of the branch in question.

### ***b. The Ecuadorean Red Cross undertakes:***

- To provide the staff and audiovisual equipment required for the seminars and talks. It will provide the participants in the seminars with materials consisting specifically of the Conventions, the Protocols, the Essential Rules, posters, etc. During talks it will distribute basic materials such as the *Rules for Behaviour in Combat* and posters.
- To bear the cost of transport, meals and accommodation for its staff and of the materials used in the seminars and talks.

## **Tertio:**

The cooperation provided for in this declaration shall be of a permanent nature, but may be modified or terminated if the Ministry of National Defence feels it has sufficient institutional grounds for doing so.

In witness whereof, the present declaration was signed in Quito on 5 October 1989.

DR. HUGO MERINO GRIJALVA  
*President*  
*Ecuadorean Red Cross*

JORGE FÉLIX MENA  
*Major General*  
*Ministry of National Defence*