

Appeal
by the International Committee of the Red Cross
on the 20th anniversary of the adoption
of the Additional Protocols of 1977

Twenty years ago, on 11 June 1977, the plenipotentiaries of over a hundred States and several national liberation movements signed the Final Act of the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of International Humanitarian Law Applicable in Armed Conflicts. This Conference had been convened by the government of Switzerland, the depositary State of the Geneva Conventions. After four sessions held between 1973 and 1977, themselves preceded by several years of preparatory work, the Conference drew up two Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, relating to the protection of the victims of international armed conflicts (Protocol I) and of non-international armed conflicts (Protocol II).

At present, 148 States are party to Protocol I and 140 to Protocol II. The two instruments constitute a significant development in international humanitarian law and are binding on nearly three quarters of the world's States. Recent conflicts have demonstrated only too clearly that States can become involved at any time in a situation covered by these treaties.

The adoption of the Protocols is a milestone in the long history of efforts to secure better protection for the individual in armed conflicts. This process includes the emergence of the Geneva Conventions in their successive versions of 1864, 1906, 1929 and 1949, which have offered invaluable safeguards for countless people over the years. The 1949 Conventions, comprising some 450 articles, were supplemented in 1977 by the 150 or so provisions of the two Additional Protocols, almost all of which were adopted by consensus.

The 1977 texts represent a considerable advance in the codification of the principles of humanitarian law recognized by all peoples. Today a number of their articles already form a set of rules of customary law

valid for every State, whether or not it is party to the Protocols. Another merit of the instruments lies in their multicultural nature, all the world's major powers having actively been involved in drafting them. The Protocols provide a timely reaffirmation of the respect due to a disarmed enemy and to persons taking no part in the hostilities. They also give those who come to the assistance of victims a more effective basis for their action, which is so vitally necessary.

The International Committee of the Red Cross wishes to take the opportunity offered by the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the 1977 Protocols to launch a solemn appeal to the governments of the 188 States party to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, urging those States which are not yet bound by the 1977 Protocols to ratify or accede to them as rapidly as possible. Governments must be aware of the universal scope of the Additional Protocols, which guarantees effective protection for conflict victims. The international community therefore has a collective responsibility to ensure the universality of the remarkable heritage that the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols represent for mankind.

By becoming party to the Additional Protocols through ratification or accession, and by making the declaration provided for in Article 90 of Protocol I (International Fact-Finding Commission), governments will demonstrate the importance they attach to promoting greater respect for the basic rules of the law of Geneva throughout the world and their resolve to ensure that the law is implemented. In this way they will respond to the wish of all peoples to see the essential guarantees for protection of victims of armed conflict universally accepted, and will help make sure that the barbarous acts perpetrated in recent conflicts will not recur in the future.

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