

## **THE ICRC'S HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

*The current war in the Middle East shows the extent to which the world is now beset by disruption and uncertainty. The humanitarian work of the ICRC is obviously seriously affected by this situation. Being particularly sensitive – both by its nature and because of its mandate – to the state of international affairs, the ICRC is having to cope not only with the immediate effects of an international conflict but also with the implications in humanitarian terms of internal conflicts and disturbances which continue to prevail in many regions and which equally require the constant presence of delegates from our institution.*

*The ICRC's presence has admittedly found expression in recent years in the form of protection and assistance for a large number of people, of relief programmes and medical care for many civilian and military victims of conflicts. Yet although this involvement gives cause for satisfaction, it must not obscure our delegates' difficulties when they are confronted by ignorance or misunderstanding of humanitarian law, by the consequent violations of the law and by the all too frequent dichotomy between States' intentions and how they actually behave. How, too, could one neglect to mention how ICRC activities are being affected by increasingly radical ideologies which undermine certain fundamental humanitarian concepts by disputing their universality, or by portrayals of violence as a commonplace, everyday event? As the President of the ICRC pointed out in the Foreword to the 1989 Annual Report: "That two ICRC delegates were kidnapped in Lebanon during devoted service there is eloquent testimony to the context of extreme tension in which the ICRC has to work".*

*In this highly unsettled state of affairs, the ICRC must continually reconsider and readjust its approach if it wants to remain true to its original mission. More than ever before, its activities must be kept under constant critical review if it is to solve problems not necessarily covered by existing legislation and deal with new situations.*

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*Hence, many questions arise in regard to the ICRC's humanitarian policy:*

*How can the ICRC's presence be ensured when the authorities are reluctant to accept its help? How does the ICRC go about making approaches or entering into negotiations with the parties concerned to gain acceptance or at least be tolerated? When humanitarian law and human rights are being contemptuously ignored, how can misinterpretation of the ICRC's discretion as silent collusion with the offending authorities be avoided?*

*Do protection and assistance always go hand in hand? How did the ICRC's aid policy evolve? How can aid be provided without making people so dependent that they eventually lose part or all of their sense of self-sufficiency? How can material aid be effective if it is not accompanied by legal guarantees and political concessions? How can the ICRC shield its activities from occasional misrepresentation in the spate of media coverage? How can it co-ordinate its operation with those of the United Nations specialized agencies in complex situations rendered explosive by political and security problems? In what way is the ICRC, faced with a proliferation of private and sometimes interventionist humanitarian institutions, modifying its position?*

*All these questions on the ICRC's operational policy call for careful consideration; this is all the more essential in view of the constant demands being made upon the ICRC in a wide variety of fields, for its policy must be consistent and it must act accordingly. The ICRC's credibility depends upon this, and so too does the confidence placed in it by the international community.*

*Apart from these aspects of general policy, we realize that readers of the Review, whether representatives of diplomatic missions, dissemination officers with a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, lecturers in political science or journalists, are also interested in more practical or topical subjects such as methods of analysing an emergency situation and assessing humanitarian requirements, or organizing an operation together with its logistic support while bearing in mind the safety of the victims and that of the ICRC's delegates. Questions that have been asked are how do surgeons at an ICRC hospital or prison-visiting delegates organize their work and what is it like for them on mission and how has the Central Tracing Agency or the ICRC telecommunications network adapted to new requirements?*

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*The Review intends to give its readers greater insight into this process of thought and analysis and make them more familiar with life at headquarters and in the field.*

*To that end, in the section headed "International Committee of the Red Cross", it has included a new item entitled "Humanitarian policy and operational activities".*

*As regularly as possible, the Review will publish reflective articles, analyses, case studies, descriptive narratives, eye-witness accounts and experiences connected with various aspects of the ICRC's operational activities. By so doing, the Review will attempt to give readers a clearer idea of the link between the ICRC's humanitarian activities in an ever-changing geopolitical context and the underlying principles and law which provide its inspiration and impetus. It will also try to convey a better understanding of the ICRC's approach in various spheres; how it paves the way legally, diplomatically and logically for its interventions and the difficulties it encounters; and how it co-ordinates its operations with other institutions.*

*In this way, the ICRC hopes to be able to answer – within the framework of the principles which govern its work – the general or specific questions which it is frequently asked and, as objectively as possible, to explain why it has intervened and how it carries out its mandate. Similarly, the ICRC deems it useful to keep a record of its operations which can be consulted by its decision-makers and its delegates to enable them to evaluate their humanitarian work and benefit from previous experiences.*

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*This issue of the Review contains a general article by the ICRC Director of Operations and by the former head of an ICRC delegation in Africa and the Middle East on a subject which is very much to the fore today, namely ICRC activities for refugees and displaced civilians.*

*The authors first outline the general approach to, and principle aspects of, the protection afforded by international humanitarian law to civilian refugees and displaced persons, and go on to examine the various services and operational activities deployed by the ICRC in exercising its mandate to protect and assist war casualties; they then review some of the main problems of humanitarian policy upon which the ICRC has taken a stance in recent years and which are again of current concern today: access to victims in war zones and the question of an international convention on humanitarian assistance and inter-*

*vention; co-operation between humanitarian agencies; the protection of large concentrations of refugees who are at present being invited to return to their own countries (notably Afghanistan and Cambodia); and finally the limitations of food aid programmes which, geared too exclusively to providing material assistance, lack the political and diplomatic dimensions to ensure that the victims' fundamental rights will be restored.*

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*The Review will also publish articles more exclusively devoted to individual activities and how they are being carried out, and to highlighting operations within a specific country or region.*

*Readers and researchers who wish to have the latest or more detailed information on current operations can naturally consult other ICRC publications: the ICRC Bulletin, the Annual Report and also a full reference document on ICRC activities, which will henceforth appear yearly as an extra issue of the Review.*

*In their usual place, readers will find reports on the ICRC's activities at headquarters and on missions by the President.*

*We hope that this new editorial policy will enable readers everywhere to participate more fully in the protection and assistance activities of the ICRC and in the lives of the men and women who serve it.*

### **The Review**

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