

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Memorandum concerning the Dissemination in Latin America of Knowledge on the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949

GENEVA, 15 June 1970

To the High Contracting Parties

Following the conflict which broke out on 14 July 1969 between Honduras and El Salvador, the delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross successfully intervened to arrange repatriation of prisoners of war and interned civilians detained by each of the Parties to the conflict. These operations were completed on 6 October 1969 when the last Honduran civilians detained in El Salvador were repatriated.

Such events give new impetus to interest in the ever present problem of disseminating knowledge of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 for the protection of victims of war.

True, direct conflict between States Parties to these Conventions is unusual, but there can nevertheless be a number of related situations which, although of less importance and on a lesser scale, call for the application of certain provisions of humanitarian law. Those situations are a cause of concern to the International Committee of the Red Cross which is convinced that, to meet them, the best

safeguard is the dissemination of knowledge of the Geneva Conventions of 1949.

On the grounds of the right of initiative conferred on it by articles 9 (or 10) common to the four Geneva Conventions and by its long tradition, the ICRC has the honour to submit some proposals to the authorities concerned in Latin American States which are Parties to those Conventions.

In all countries, the problem of disseminating knowledge of the Geneva Conventions is twofold: basic instruction in schools to young people and the population in general, on the one hand, and practical instruction on conduct in certain situations in the event of operations by armed forces on the other hand.

In the first case, namely basic instruction, the Fourth Meeting of Presidents of National Red Cross Societies of North America, Mexico, Central America and Panama, which met in Mexico from 18 to 22 November 1969, adopted a number of resolutions with which the International Committee fully associates and which it recommends to the attention of the authorities concerned. The same applies to like resolutions adopted by other Red Cross Conferences. They were concerned essentially with the introduction into school programmes, and into programmes of military instruction, of courses on the history and fundamental principles of the Red Cross and on the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

Concurrently with that basic effort, the International Committee would suggest as another practical measure the issue to each soldier in the field of a booklet summarizing the essential rights and obligations arising from accession to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. At the same time the soldiers should be given appropriate explanations. If deemed expedient a coloured illustrated booklet could replace the printed text which might be issued to officers only. In each case suitable explanations could also be given.

In regions as large as the American continent the soldier in the field may often be considered the authorities' sole representative in the most forward position, confronted by a mission calling for application of the humanitarian principles. The International

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

Committee is of that opinion, but it has no power to decide in place of the authorities nor should it undertake a task which is beyond it.

It has however prepared documentary material which it makes available to all Parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions with a view, in particular, to the application of the essential provisions of article 144 of the IVth Convention relating to dissemination, and which reads as follows:

The High Contracting Parties undertake, in time of peace as in time of war, to disseminate the text of the present Convention as widely as possible in their respective countries, and, in particular, to include the study thereof in their programmes of military and, if possible, civil instruction, so that the principles thereof may become known to the entire population.

Any civilian, military, police or other authorities, who in time of war assume responsibilities in respect of protected persons, must possess the text of the Convention and be specially instructed as to its provisions.

The International Committee expresses beforehand its thanks for all replies which are sent to it. It will not fail to contact the authorities concerned to convey to them the result of this first consultation.

The President
Marcel A. NAVILLE