

sider the advisability of some kind of regulation to prohibit or limit weapons whose principal effect is to irreversibly blind combatants.

The law of war at sea

The ICRC took an active part in the round table of experts on international humanitarian law applicable to armed conflict at sea. The meeting was held in Toulon, France, and was organized by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in conjunction with the Mediterranean Institute of Strategic Studies and the French Red Cross. It was the second of a series of meetings under the plan of action adopted in Madrid in 1988, which provides for the drafting of a document indicating the present state of treaty and customary law and, where appropriate, some proposals for its amendment and development. The Toulon meeting discussed methods and means of combat in naval warfare. This included both general principles and specific rules relating to the use of sea mines and long-distance weapons, precautions that must be taken in the event of attack, the use of blockades and the establishment of special zones.

The ICRC also took part in a symposium on the law of naval warfare which was held by the Naval War College in Newport, USA, from 1 to 3 February 1990. The meeting, which discussed the targeting of merchant shipping, had 62 participants, half of whom were US Navy officers. The other participants were academics or military personnel from the USA and a few other States.

Humanitarian assistance

The development of international law in the area of assistance to the victims of natural and technological disasters continued to be of keen interest to the ICRC.

The institution, whose mandate primarily concerns armed conflict, made a point of stressing that humanitarian assistance in such situations is governed by detailed provisions of international humanitarian law. By laying down the relevant procedures, those provisions establish the principle that civilians who lack the basic necessities for their survival must be enabled to receive impartial humanitarian assistance.

Relations with other institutions in the realm of international humanitarian law

The ICRC kept in close touch with the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in San Remo, Italy, and, as in previous years, helped in the preparation and running of several courses and seminars organized by the Institute. Thus, it was closely involved in the *15th Round Table on current problems of international humanitarian law* (4-8 September 1990) which brought together over 150 people representing governments, the academic world, international organizations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The meeting examined specific means of improving respect for international humanitarian law and discussed topics such as:

- the contents and scope of the obligation to ensure respect for the law (Article 1 common to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Protocol I of 1977);
- the role of the future International Fact-Finding Commission (Article 90 of Protocol I);
- the usefulness of a system of periodic reports on the application of international humanitarian law;
- the role of the United Nations in implementing that body of law.

The meeting ended with a day of discussions, organized jointly by the Institute and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on the subject "Refugees — a continuing challenge for humanity: for a realistic approach in asylum policy".

As usual, the round table was followed by a Red Cross and Red Crescent symposium, this time devoted to "National laws and policy as a factor in the development of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies".

The ICRC was also involved in a number of courses, conferences and seminars organized by institutions and associations concerned with international humanitarian law, such as the *American Society of International Law* (Washington, 28-31 March), the *International Institute of Human Rights* in Strasbourg, France, the *Inter-American Institute of Human Rights* in San José, Costa Rica, and the *United Nations Institute for Training and Research*, which held a series of courses in The Hague in July.

Relations with other international and regional organizations

The high point of 1990 came when the ICRC was granted observer status with the United Nations General Assembly (resolution 45/6 adopted by consensus on 16 October). Until then, the ICRC had had consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council; this did not reflect the institution's specific character nor its growing cooperation with UN bodies in New York.

The new status takes due account of the ICRC's specific nature and of the mandate conferred on it by the 1949 Geneva Conventions; it also means that the institution will henceforth have access to

all UN meetings and to the documents relative thereto.

The ICRC started making representations to bring about the change in July 1990. Delegates in New York and in Geneva called on about one hundred Permanent Missions, and the institution's field delegations contacted many governments, at the same time enhancing awareness of the ICRC, its mandate and activities and its specific role in today's world.

Observer status having been obtained, delegates from the ICRC's International Organizations Division adopted a new approach at the forty-fifth session of the UN General Assembly, making the ICRC's position better known on a number of questions, such as the new international humanitarian order, the United Nations Decade of International Law, and the United Nations Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons. The delegates emphasized the need to strengthen compliance with existing rules rather than to supplement them, reminding those concerned that the ICRC stood ready to work towards that end. They also encouraged States to ratify the Additional Protocols and stressed that the ICRC attached great importance, in peacetime as well as in war, to dissemination of knowledge of the rules of international humanitarian law.

As an observer, the ICRC was able to attend sessions of the UN Security Council, which met to discuss issues such as the situation in the Middle East. In addition, the ICRC again attended meetings organized by the UN on human rights issues, questions concerning refugees and displaced and repatriated persons, and detention matters. In the latter field, the Eighth Congress for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, organized by the UN from 27 August to