

To mark the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions

ICRC testing opinions on war to prompt worldwide debate

From November 1998 to August 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will be gathering the opinions of thousands of people in a dozen countries who have been directly affected by armed conflict. They will be asked to share their views on the limits to warfare set by international law and on how to improve compliance with the Geneva Conventions and other humanitarian treaties. These will be published along with the results of a parallel survey conducted in countries at peace. The participants' personal stories will be portrayed in publications, the media and on an interactive web site. The project is intended to increase awareness around the world of the rules that already exist to protect people in wartime and to encourage discussion of humanitarian law in the context of modern-day conflict.

In Colombia, the first round of the study is currently being conducted among displaced civilians, former hostages, soldiers, guerrillas, security detainees, medical personnel and members of the general public. The interviews conducted so far have yielded a fascinating insight into how people perceive the conflict in Colombia and its consequences for their country, as well as their views on the limits set by humanitarian law and the dilemmas that arise in practice.

The project, entitled "People on war", reflects the ICRC's desire to give a voice to those who have personal experience of war as well as to stimulate discussion. It will also mark the 50th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, on 12 August 1999. For the ICRC, the anniversary is an opportunity for the world to reflect on what has occurred in the half-century since the Conventions were adopted, to take stock of the present and to consider the future of international law and humanitarian action.

The survey in each country will result in an individual report published both locally and worldwide. The findings will then be summarized in a final report drawn up at the end of the process. This will be presented at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, scheduled to take place in Geneva in November 1999. (The International Conference brings together the 188 States party to the Geneva Conventions, 175 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of those Societies, and the ICRC itself.)

The various surveys will be conducted by means of a questionnaire among a representative sample (involving at least 1,000 individuals in each country) of the populations concerned. The opinions of people directly affected by conflict — refugees, prisoners of war, relatives of missing people, soldiers, war-wounded, etc. — will also be sought by means of detailed interviews and group discussions. This work will be carried out by ICRC staff and volunteers from the respective National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, supported and assisted by local professional agencies. The ICRC has engaged an international opinion-survey specialist to advise it on methods, to help draft the questionnaires and to analyse the results.

International Committee of the Red Cross
Press release 98/36
10 November 1998
