

**Preventive action: understanding the concept and defining the
ICRC's role in preventing armed conflicts**

Guidelines¹

Understanding the concept

Preventive action, although subject to different interpretations, includes the following elements which are always present, but in varying degrees depending on the situation:

- signalling the imminence or probability of an event or crisis – alerting, informing, giving early warning;
- preparing (oneself), anticipating possible events, undergoing training, being ready to act;
- preventing violations of international humanitarian law (forestalling harmful acts, excesses or the repetition of violations).

Prevention, whether of conflict, disasters or disease, etc., always implies long-term action. This has two main components:

- acting on systems and on vulnerability, so as to reduce the risk, probability or potential destructiveness of an attack or disruptive event;
- influencing those who are or could be involved in a crisis with a view to informing them, training them and changing their behaviour.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) includes a preventive dimension in all its activities. This is reflected in its structure and internal organization, for instance:

- the active role assigned to regional delegations in analysing situations, anticipating crises, providing extensive training in and information on international humanitarian law, and cooperating with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to improve their emergency preparedness;
- the major efforts undertaken to develop international humanitarian law and promote its implementation, and the ICRC's active

participation in international legal work aimed at providing more effective protection for the individual and preventing excessive violence and the use of excessively cruel weapons and those that cause unnecessary suffering (such as mines);

- the teaching of international humanitarian law in a wide range of contexts — the armed forces, the police and security forces, schools, universities, etc.;
- the important role of the ICRC's Protection Division, which underpins a key area of the ICRC's work to prevent torture, promote decent conditions of detention, etc. The ICRC holds protection workshops with representatives of NGOs and UN agencies in order to share its ideas with others, thereby contributing to an enhanced global perception of protection, of which preventive action is a part;
- the pioneering role of the Assistance Division in developing a comprehensive approach to medical and health care in conflict situations, giving priority to disease prevention, primary health care, protection of the environment and rehabilitation.

Thus the ICRC helps to prevent abuses and uphold human dignity by performing a whole series of long-term tasks.

Preventing armed conflict by strengthening peace

Preventive action does not, however, comprise a pre-established range of activities. It aims to educate and correct, in that it seeks to change situations (reduce vulnerability) or to prevail, by persuasion or dissuasion, on potential perpetrators not to commit violent acts. Various approaches — spreading knowledge of the humanitarian rules and principles, educating (or at least informing) those who play an active part, monitoring developments and taking corrective (or possibly repressive) action — all help to ensure more effective protection for the actual or potential victims of armed conflict. Within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the ICRC sees

¹ The *Review* published in its December 2001 edition (83/No 844 pp. 923-946) an article written by Jean-Luc Blondel entitled "Rôle du CICR en matière de prévention des

conflits armés: possibilités d'action et limites". The following guidelines, adopted by the Assembly Council of the ICRC, define the official policy of the institution in this matter.

an important role for the National Societies in this domain. Hence preventive action in volatile situations, viewed as a long-term commitment, calls for a building-up of local capability, in particular that of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the aforesaid areas of activity. It also means supporting positive community initiatives and, for example, working to bring minorities and fringe groups into mainstream society. Promoting whatever enhances the security of individuals and communities helps reduce the risk of armed violence. Any preventive strategy must involve the vulnerable individuals and communities themselves in the search for solutions.

Role of the ICRC in preventing armed conflicts

With regard to the prevention of armed conflicts, the ICRC feels that its main role is to urge States to adopt the necessary measures and, when appropriate, to supply them with information and analyses to help them assume their responsibilities in a more pertinent way. Owing to the constraints imposed by the principle of neutrality, the ICRC cannot play a role in political negotiations aimed at averting an imminent armed conflict, but it can on occasion make a significant contribution through preventive humanitarian diplomacy, its good offices and creative use of its role as a neutral intermediary. Such action is in the spirit of Resolution X of the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (Vienna, 1965), which encouraged the ICRC to “undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the States concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end”. The ICRC will not, however, take any initiative that could cause a party to a conflict to restrict access to the victims of that conflict, or that might endanger its delegates or employees.

Preventing abuses in situations of armed conflict

When peace initiatives fail and conflict breaks out, the preventive effort does not cease entirely but is transformed into a drive to promote respect for international humanitarian law. This body of law is a

core element of the protection of victims of armed conflict. Its development, dissemination and implementation all form an integral part of protection of the individual. By spreading knowledge of humanitarian law and monitoring its application, it is possible to avert or at least limit abuses and prevent their recurrence. Rules protect, and the purpose of all ICRC activities in this area is precisely to ensure that the rules laid down by humanitarian law are respected, and thus to forestall violations. Compliance with the law enhances security. Preventing violations of its rules protects people, their well-being and their dignity. Respect for humanitarian law also facilitates the resumption of dialogue between the parties, the conduct of the necessary negotiations and the restoration of peace.

The ICRC can also act as a facilitator and lend its good offices to help warring parties to resume contact with each other, either to address humanitarian problems caused by the conflict or to seek a political solution for it, it being understood that the ICRC itself will not take part in political discussions on settlement of the conflict.

Preventing the resurgence of armed conflicts

The end of active hostilities never means that peace is fully restored. Many enormous challenges remain. The capacity of the ICRC to prevent the initial outbreak of armed conflict is limited, although it can do much to create a climate of respect for the individual through its educational work and its efforts to promote human dignity. It can, on the other hand, play an important part in the prevention of renewed conflict, for by helping to establish conditions conducive to reconciliation and social reconstruction it helps to consolidate peace. For the same purpose the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole, thanks to the complementary nature of its components' mandates and expertise, can carry out vital work on a long-term basis.