

*On 17 October 2001, the ICRC has published Women Facing War, a study on the impact of armed conflict on women. At this occasion, the President of the ICRC, Jakob Kellenberger, has made the following declaration:*

### **Women Facing War — An ICRC study**

The International Committee of the Red Cross has just published *Women Facing War*, a major study of the impact of armed conflict on women. Why women? The answer is simple: women are affected in many ways by war, some of them very specific to women, yet their plight does not receive the attention it deserves and the law which protects them is frequently not observed. The aim of the ICRC in starting this study more than 2 years ago was to change that situation. The ICRC wants to see far greater awareness of the problems women face in armed conflict and to ensure that the protection afforded by law becomes a reality.

In 1999 the ICRC made a pledge at the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to make alleviating the plight of women in wartime one of its priorities. This study is one of the outcomes of that commitment, but it is only a beginning. It provides facts and realities of the dramatic situation faced by women gathered by the ICRC from women themselves. Because it is based largely on the ICRC's own field experience from operations in many parts of the world, the information is both extensive and credible.

The study reveals how women go through harrowing and totally unacceptable abuse — mutilation, sexual violence, the disappearance of their husbands and sons. The level of protection and assistance they receive is all too often inadequate. Many are also forced into new roles by the absence or disappearance of men. They become heads of households, breadwinners and leaders of associations.

Many women have demonstrated enormous strength and courage during armed conflicts. Their efforts also help the ICRC in very concrete ways, since women play an important role in the assistance and protection of vulnerable groups such as children and elderly

people. This study pays tribute to their resilience to which I gladly add my voice.

International humanitarian and human rights law is clear about the protection women have a right to expect. The ICRC has already been active in drawing attention to the particular needs of women in its promotion of international humanitarian law, which provides comprehensive provisions to protect women. This study gives the ICRC a more solid base in its efforts to raise awareness among combatants of the importance of protecting women. This is particularly important in conflicts where armed groups are fighting government forces, or each other, and where the basic principle of humanity and the respect of humanitarian law have been among the first casualties. In those situations women have been very visible victims of serious violations of the law.

The ICRC itself has learnt much from this study and has already drawn concrete conclusions for its own operations and is resolved to bring about significant change. It cannot do so alone and calls on other organizations, governments and arms carriers both to recognize the specific problems women face in conflict and to act to ensure respect for their rights under law. The terrible abuse this study reveals is not inevitable. It can and must be prevented.

#### INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

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French and Spanish versions forthcoming

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