

## EDITORIAL

Ever since it was first held in 1867, the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has been a unique forum for discussing issues of humanitarian concerns with the Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and the states. The thirty Conferences held in more than 140 years bear witness to the birth and development of the law of war and the history of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Humanitarian challenges, humanitarian norms, and the relations between governments and the Red Cross and Red Crescent form the backbone of the International Conference.

Many issues arising at the Conference are dealt with in other international fora, but the specific Red Cross and Red Crescent angle and the added value justify addressing similar issues such as environment and migration. The orientation towards victims – and what each issue means for them – remains hereby the deciding parameter.

By reaffirming the responsibility of all states to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, the Conference regularly explores new challenges and trends as observed in contemporary armed conflicts. The ICRC's mandate and the whole Red Cross and Red Crescent history are indeed inextricably linked to the origins and development of international humanitarian law, and the challenges to it are of essential importance for the International Conference. The predominant preoccupation is certainly to ensure access to and protection and assistance for victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence. Constraints in a changing conflictual environment increase the difficulty in gaining such access – hence, the importance of acceptance and understanding by all belligerents of the rules on international humanitarian law and of the respect due to humanitarian action, in particular when undertaken under the protection of the red cross, red crescent, and red crystal.

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The Conference brings together, at equal level, the 194 states parties to the Geneva Conventions, the International Committee, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (currently numbering 186), and their International Federation. In this four-yearly Conference, more than 2000 delegates, including a great number of observers, gather for five days to debate and share views and experiences, both formally and informally. The participation of nearly all states in the International Conference testifies to the recognition of the Red Cross and Red Crescent specificity as a universal and privileged humanitarian actor, distinct from the

UN system. It underlines the partnership between the components of the Movement and governments, in particular the auxiliary role of National Societies to their public authorities in the humanitarian field. Together with the Movement – their main partner in protecting and assisting the victims of armed conflicts and natural or technological disasters – states seek to increase the effectiveness of international emergency response and to build local capacity to address the most vulnerable members of their own society.

Politically loaded discussions about the participation of states, National Societies, and/or observers have sometimes overshadowed the content of the Conference and even led, in 1991, to its cancellation, when the participation of Palestine could not be solved beforehand. Usually, however, the Red Cross and Red Crescent character and careful preparation have succeeded in avoiding a politicization of the Movement. The Conference is part of a complicated and lengthy process, which starts with the elaboration of the agenda, followed by the drafting of the reports and a broad consultation process, and finishing with the implementation of the decisions after the Conference. This preparatory and follow-up process facilitates an ongoing dialogue between the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the states on humanitarian issues.

Plenary sessions and commissions are the main formal forum for participants to debate and discuss the items on the agenda and form the basis of the most important Conference ‘outcomes’. Often, however, the decision-oriented drafting committee is the most salient part of the Conference: the dry language of the resolutions is but a partial reflection of the process of decision-making that largely shapes the future orientation of humanitarian law and humanitarian action in the long term.

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