

Dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law

Summary of activities in 1978

In October 1977 the Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference at Bucharest adopted a number of important resolutions relating to a more extensive dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law and Red Cross principles. The Conference laid emphasis on the capital importance for the Red Cross of promoting its ideals among youth and of getting young people to take part in its dissemination efforts, so that they, in their turn, may contribute to the spread of this message of humanity, mutual understanding and peace (Resolutions VII and XIX).

This was the spirit in which the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies had drawn up—well before the Conference—the “Red Cross Teaching Guide”, a publication that aimed to guide and facilitate the teaching of the principles and ideals of the Red Cross and the rudiments of international humanitarian law. The “Red Cross Teaching Guide” was also the subject of a resolution adopted by the Bucharest Conference (Resolution XVIII).

In response to the wishes expressed in the resolutions, the ICRC and League, in co-operation with several National Societies, organized in 1978 a number of seminars, regional meetings and training courses, all with the purpose of disseminating and teaching the principles of the Red Cross and of humanitarian law. International Review regrets that it cannot give a detailed account of each of those meetings and must restrict itself to enumerating some of them with a short reference to the main results obtained.¹

¹ The ICRC has issued separate brochures containing summaries of the principal seminars, together with the full text of the decisions and resolutions adopted at those seminars.

The “Fourth European Regional Meeting of National Red Cross Youth Directors” was held from 31 March to 4 April in Norway; the “Sub-Regional Training Seminar for National Red Cross Youth Leaders and Instructors in Eastern and Southern Africa” was held from 16 to 27 April in Zambia; the “Sub-Regional Training Seminar for National Red Cross Youth Leaders and Instructors of the English-speaking National Societies of West Africa” was held from 1 to 10 August in Ghana, and the “Arab Regional Meeting of National Red Cross/Red Crescent Youth Leaders” was held from 24 to 29 September in Kuwait. The Lebanese Red Cross presented at the Kuwait meeting its Arabic translation of the “Red Cross Teaching Guide”.

Seminar at the Henry Dunant Institute

From 16 to 24 May 1978, thirty leaders of French-speaking National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Europe, Africa and Latin America attended a seminar in Geneva, in the course of which they were introduced to the international activities of the Red Cross. They listened to accounts of recent developments in international humanitarian law, the position of the Red Cross confronted by contemporary world problems, and the dissemination of the principles of the Red Cross; each lecture was followed by a discussion.

The seminar was directed by the Henry Dunant Institute, with assistance from the League and ICRC.

Mombasa Seminar

The “First African Red Cross and Red Crescent Seminar on the Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law” took place at Mombasa (Kenya) from 11 to 26 August 1978. It was jointly organized by the ICRC and the Kenya Red Cross Society and attended by representatives of twenty English-speaking African National Societies. The League sent three delegates, while the British and Swedish Red Cross Societies were each represented by an observer. The purpose of the seminar was, first, to give participants a general idea of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and, then, to seek with them the best way to ensure its dissemination among the various groups concerned (armed forces, universities, schools, the general public), while taking into account the characteristics and needs of each country.

The first week was devoted to the study of the basic principles underlying international humanitarian law. Papers on subjects such as

“History and nature of international humanitarian law”, “International humanitarian law and African customs”, were read by specialists from Geneva and various African countries.

For the second week of the seminar, the participants split into two working groups. One of the groups studied dissemination among the armed forces and in universities, schools and other governmental institutions. It also examined leadership training, the role of the National Societies in those circles and their possibilities and methods of action. The other working group studied dissemination methods among the National Societies and general public and also considered the question of leadership training.

The discussions of the two working groups were summarized in the form of conclusions, which were then adopted at a plenary meeting of all the seminar participants. These conclusions constituted an inventory of the dissemination methods considered to be appropriate for the different circles studied by each working group.

At the plenary session, the participants adopted a document on the basic principles underlying each dissemination action. It laid emphasis on the importance of motivation of persons responsible for the dissemination of international humanitarian law; it mentioned the responsibility of governments which were bound, under the Geneva Conventions, to make the law known as widely as possible. It stressed the role of the National Societies, ICRC and League which shared a statutory and moral responsibility in this sphere and pointed to the need to adapt dissemination to the social, cultural and economic factors in each country.

Gdansk Seminar

A “European meeting on Red Cross teaching of humanitarian principles to young people” was held from 2 to 12 October 1978 at Gdansk (Poland). It was organized jointly by the Polish Red Cross and the ICRC. National Societies of sixteen European countries sent representatives. The League, too, was closely associated in the work of the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting was, first, to compile an inventory of suitable dissemination methods among young people, and second, to take action on resolution XVIII adopted by the Bucharest Conference, recommending that National Societies should encourage the use of the “Red Cross Teaching Guide”, adapt it to the sections of the population to be reached and train persons responsible for disseminating it in their countries.

Before closing, the meeting adopted a document which stated in its preamble the principle that the dissemination of Red Cross ideals should not be dissociated from the propagation, by all members of the Red Cross family, of a spirit of peace.

This document then set forth a certain number of recommendations, arising from the discussions: the appointment and training, by the National Societies, of permanent officials to be in charge of dissemination operations; the elaboration, by the ICRC and League, of a catalogue of existing dissemination equipment available for National Societies, listing all material issued by the ICRC, League and National Societies; the organization of summer camps for young people at which they could attend courses; and the introduction of educational games to inculcate in children such sentiments as respect for others and hatred of war.

A number of conclusions were also adopted with the aim of spreading the utilization of the Red Cross Teaching Guide.

The participants took note with interest of the fact that the Teaching Guide has been translated into Arabic by the Lebanese Red Cross and into Spanish by the Spanish Red Cross, and that the National Societies of several other countries had started work on translation into their national tongue.

Kuala Lumpur Seminar

The "First Asian Seminar on Humanitarian Law", organized by the Malaysian Red Crescent and the ICRC, was held in Kuala Lumpur from 14 to 24 November. Some 50 delegates from 19 countries in Asia and the Pacific, a delegation from the League of Red Cross Societies and observers from several international organizations (such as the HCR, ICEM, the Asia Foundation) were present.

In the first week, after the opening ceremony in the presence of the Malaysian Minister for Foreign Affairs, the delegates listened to seven lectures on different aspects of international humanitarian law, delivered by specialists from countries taking part in the seminar and from the ICRC (Geneva). Each lecture was followed by a discussion allowing the participants to express their views on the subjects in hand.

During the second week, the delegates divided into two working groups. The first dealt with dissemination of knowledge of humanitarian law among the armed forces, in government institutions and in universities and schools, and also with the role of the National Societies in this field.

The group reached numerous constructive conclusions. International humanitarian law should be included in courses for armed forces as a subject complementary to the law of war. At university level, it was felt that it would be more difficult to introduce international humanitarian law as an extra course, but the participants considered that it should be possible to allocate a few hours a term to this subject in the course on international law. Students might be given the possibility of studying it as an optional subject or as a thesis subject. Schoolchildren—who, after all, might be called upon to serve one day in the armed forces—should be taught the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and of the Red Cross. The need to inform government circles at all levels was stressed; this should be done through the National Societies, which could become the “conscience of the nation” in this matter.

The second working group also considered what the National Societies might do in the field of dissemination, and the methods to be used. All the participants agreed that a person should be placed in charge of dissemination in each Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. The need for supporting texts was stressed. However, in the case of Asia and the Pacific, it would be necessary to take into account the importance of the vernacular languages and to acknowledge that the best means of communication were radio and television. Dissemination material should therefore be translated into the local languages if the general public was to be reached. Finally, it was suggested to set up committees to co-ordinate with various sections of the public (teachers lawyers, civil servants, government organizations, etc.) to improve the dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law.

Skopje Meeting

From 12 to 14 June a meeting of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Balkan countries took place in Skopje (Yugoslavia). Its purpose was to examine the role of National Societies within the frame of Protocol I.

The ICRC and the Henry Dunant Institute had prepared a 40-page document on this subject. The participants found it most stimulating as a starting point for discussions and hoped that all National Societies would be able to obtain copies for their members.

Two national seminars

Mention should be made of two national seminars, one organized by the Netherlands Red Cross at The Hague on 25 and 26 September and the other by the New Zealand Red Cross in Wellington in December 1978. The ICRC was represented at both seminars, which were attended by the staff of the organizing National Society, as well as by a large number of members of the armed forces and representatives of various ministries. The subjects studied gave rise to stimulating discussion.

San Remo Institute

The International Institute of Humanitarian Law held in San Remo its Fifth Round Table on contemporary problems of international humanitarian law from 6 to 9 September. The opening address was delivered by Mr. J. Pictet, Vice-President of the ICRC.

Among the subjects discussed, each of which was introduced by one or more rapporteurs, were the following: international humanitarian law; human rights; disarmament; and the implementation and dissemination of international humanitarian law and of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross.

Concurrently with the Round Table, the first course on the teaching of humanitarian law for English-speaking army officers took place at the Villa Nobel from 6 to 13 September. It was opened by Mr. Pictet, who delivered an address. Mr. Pilloud was among the speakers at this course, which was organized by Mr. de Mulinen and attended by more than thirty officers from countries of every continent.

A similar course for French-speaking officers had been previously held from 14 to 21 June 1978.

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In conclusion, it may be said, in connection with this list of the meetings which were organized in 1978 by the Red Cross or in which the Red Cross took an active part, that the growing interest that was generally shown in the knowledge and spread of international humanitarian law was genuine and extremely keen. That was a positive phe-

nomenon which was bound to happen in a world afflicted by the upheavals we have witnessed in recent years.

A second point noted by the participants in the seminars related to the relatively scant acquaintance which they themselves had with the Geneva Conventions, the Protocols and international humanitarian law in general. This ignorance was met with at all levels of the Red Cross. In order to remedy this, the participants asked to be provided with teaching material that was simple and easy to understand, and that would put within the reach of everyone—of members of the Red Cross and of the public alike—an international humanitarian law which, it has to be acknowledged, has not become simpler with the passing of time.
