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The American Red Cross and International Humanitarian Law Dissemination

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We heard about Nuremburg—and stuff about World War II in other classes in school, but it didn't really mean anything . . . now I understand why it's important.

Introduction

For well over a decade, the American Red Cross (ARC) has been telling the United States civilian population that international humanitarian law (IHL) is an important subject about which everyone needs to be knowledgeable. The ARC outreach occurs primarily at a grassroots level, through our chapter network around the country, and focuses on dissemination to the general public. It is our hope, and a goal of our dissemination, that the majority of students—as well as adults—in the United States will be able to say, as the high school student quoted above did, that they know what IHL is and they understand why it's important.

IHL Dissemination in the US Context

Since the attacks of 9/11 and the US engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq there has been a marked increase in organizations speaking to the American public about IHL. I think this is very much a “good news/bad news” phenomenon. It is wonderful that Americans are much more interested in a subject that not many found

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relevant only a few years ago. What is unfortunate is the reason they find it relevant—that armed conflict now affects many more people in this country.

The Role of the American Red Cross

We are often asked, especially by those in the military, why we say “international humanitarian law” instead of “law of armed conflict” or “law of war.” The answer is that while we sometimes use the terms interchangeably, our perspective is the humanitarian one and it is focused primarily on teaching the Geneva Conventions. In our courses we situate IHL within the wider context of international law, including Hague law. Our objective, however, is to increase protection for vulnerable groups in armed conflict and facilitate humanitarian work by raising awareness within the general public about the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Protocols. While the content of our training overlaps with the military’s law of war training, the military understandably has an additional emphasis on Hague law, focusing on the means and methods of warfare.

In our dissemination we also explain the role of the Red Cross Movement—what it is and what it is not. We have learned that many people think the Red Cross is a human rights organization, and that IHL is synonymous with human rights law. We explain to them, for example, that while the Red Cross is not a human rights organization as such, much of the work it does benefits people’s human rights.

Sometimes members of the public are surprised to discover the Red Cross is not an organization whose primary purpose is to promote peace. However, we discuss how a byproduct of Red Cross efforts in conflict regions can help facilitate a return to peace, and a byproduct of Red Cross principles being understood and acted on can help promote peaceful coexistence among antagonistic groups.

Sometimes we have to correct the mistaken notion that the Red Cross is responsible for enforcing the rules of IHL against those who commit violations. I think people imagine some kind of international Red Cross police force and expect to see Red Cross staff providing testimony against war criminals. They do not realize how impossible that would be for a Movement based on the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality—whose most powerful weapon may be its ability to be present on both sides of a front line.

One of our challenges over the years is what to call our program. Just the term “international humanitarian law” is a real mouthful and can be very off-putting. That is why we settled on “Humanity in the Midst of War.” That phrase comes much closer to expressing the message we want to convey—that respect for IHL

helps ensure that the principle of humanity, and humanitarian actions themselves, will continue to exist, even in the midst of war.

We let people in our classes know that they, as individuals, have an important role to play in making this happen. Many people feel a profound sense of helplessness when faced with the brutality and suffering of war. They would like nothing more than to turn away. We tell them IHL makes a difference and that they themselves can make a difference—for humanity.

Why Is the ARC Involved in Dissemination?

Our responsibility for dissemination derives from the Geneva Conventions and our role as an auxiliary to the US Government under our 1905 Congressional Charter. The Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement explicitly state that national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies are to “disseminate and assist their governments in disseminating international humanitarian law; they take initiatives in this respect.”

The American Red Cross began its dissemination program with a 1988 grant from the US Institute of Peace that enabled us to develop our educational materials for the general public. Then in 1991 the International Services Department of the American Red Cross received an internal grant to develop an instructor training curriculum. Starting in 1993 we began a series of instructor training courses.

What Is the Message?

We focus on very basic messages that address protection and human dignity. Examples include:

- That those no longer taking an active part in hostilities—wounded, sick and captured combatants, and civilians—must be protected from harm and treated with respect regardless of what side they are on.
- That people in these protected groups are entitled to humane treatment. We ask a class what rules they think should apply in armed conflict. Then we ask: “How should a prisoner be treated if he has just killed your buddy?” and then “What if the prisoner is your brother?”
- Another message is that governments have the primary responsibility for enforcing IHL and that the Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross in particular, has a role in implementing it.
- We point out that the Geneva Conventions are treaties, agreements negotiated by governments, and they therefore reflect a balance between humanitarian protections and military objectives. This comes as a surprise to some people, who wonder why IHL doesn’t just outlaw war.

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- We stress the importance of the principle of distinction (combatant vs. noncombatant), but also discuss how civilians can lose protections by participating in the fighting.

- We talk about the US military's own training for soldiers and give examples of how the provisions of the Geneva Conventions have been incorporated into military operational training. We now show a portion of a US Marine Corps law of war training video in our classes and distribute a handout on the "Basic Principles of the Law of War" as provided to Marines. We believe it is essential that the American public understand how seriously the majority in our military takes this body of law.

These are a few of the basic messages we think an informed public needs to know.

Who Do We Want to Reach—What Target Groups?

Our dissemination program is designed primarily for the general public. It is the audience we reach best, as anyone who is familiar with our first aid, CPR or water safety classes, to name a few, understands. It is seen as part of our organization's mission to help communities prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies.

However, within the general public we have some priority audiences, including: 1) American Red Cross internal audiences and prospective instructor/disseminators; 2) youth and educators; and 3) opinion leaders within the general public, including in the media, academia, and in community leadership positions.

We do offer some programs for more specialized or expert audiences, but these are fewer in number and are mostly dependent upon the level of expertise, motivation and opportunity of individual instructors.

How Do We Do It?

Our dissemination program is based on a national instructor training model through which over 300 American Red Cross instructors have been trained in over 25 training sessions. Since 1993 these instructors have reached over 324,000 people through introductory courses and presentations in communities around the country. These courses and presentations have been organized and coordinated by our network of over 800 local chapters, although, of course, not all our chapters have the capacity to offer IHL instruction. It is important to realize that for the most part instructors are not legal experts, but act instead as *facilitators* to guide and stimulate discussion and learning.

While the IHL courses tend to generate excitement and interest in those who attend, we have had limited human and financial resources from the very beginning of the dissemination effort and our reach has been much smaller than we would like. We hope to change that. We recently streamlined our instructor training model and the IHL course itself to bring them more into alignment with other American Red Cross training models, thereby hopefully expanding the number of people we can reach.

Exploring Humanitarian Law and IHL Dissemination to Youth

A major part of our current strategy is to make IHL dissemination to youth—through a program called “Exploring Humanitarian Law”—a priority.

Why Focus on IHL Dissemination to Youth?

The advantage of exposing young people to the Geneva Conventions at an early age is obvious. As one military lawyer put it rather succinctly, “The last thing we want is for young people to come into the military thinking it’s okay to harm prisoners.”

Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) is the best material I have ever seen for teaching IHL to youth. To date, the feedback from teachers and students has been overwhelmingly positive. As one student said:

It gives you a whole new perspective . . . a bigger perspective. People don’t think about these things because we live in America and war seems so far away . . . but war isn’t really far away and all of this is a lot closer than people think. It changed the way I think . . .

EHL was developed by the ICRC working with the Educational Development Corporation, based in Boston, and the American Red Cross was one of the original pilot sites. It is a resource pack of materials designed to use with adolescents and can be used alone or to enrich existing classroom materials.

EHL teaches students respect for human life and dignity, ethical judgment, life skills, global citizenship, the protections of the Geneva Conventions and the role of the Red Cross. Students learn by actively participating in a series of ethical explorations that look at both historical and contemporary examples and that examine concepts such as:

- Human dignity
- Obstacles to humanitarian behavior
- Dilemmas

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- The chain of consequences
- Multiple perspectives

Exploring Humanitarian Law is currently being implemented in 95 countries through national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies and ministries of education. In the United States, it has been aligned with the national standards for high school social studies; but it is also used in other classes, including: psychology, history, anthropology, economics, global studies, geography and political science. Extracurricular groups have begun using the materials, including some Junior Reserve Officer Training Course classes. These materials resonate at the deepest level with both students and teachers.

The American Red Cross is currently seeking funding to expand the program to reach thousands of teachers and millions of students. We are working on the development of an EHL distance-learning course for teachers and exploring ways to include the study of IHL in the curriculum offered by American high schools. It is not an easy task in a country with, in effect, 50 separate departments of education. However, if we can expand EHL into many more classrooms, it will be a major leap forward for IHL dissemination in the United States. We have shared these materials with individuals at the Department of Defense, who have responded very positively.

Conclusion

A few years ago when I was interviewed by MTV for an article they wrote for their online news titled *What Are the Geneva Conventions?* I explained that whoever said “All’s fair in love and war” only got it half right. My remark was obviously designed to draw the attention of a young audience to the fact that there are widely agreed upon standards for humane treatment in war. Making these standards much more widely known and accepted is a goal worthy of all our best efforts.