Background: International Humanitarian Law
International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules that seek for humanitarian reasons to limit the effects of armed conflict.

IHL protects persons who are not or who are no longer participating in hostilities and it restricts means and methods of warfare. IHL is also known as the law of war and the law of armed conflict.

A major part of international humanitarian law is contained in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which have been adopted by every nation. The Conventions have been developed and supplemented by three further agreements: the Additional Protocols I & II of 1977 relating to the protection of victims of armed conflicts, and the 2005 Additional Protocol III, relating to the adoption of an additional “distinctive emblem” (an emblem recognized by law as a symbol of protection).

It is important to know that international humanitarian law does not ask why a conflict exists. Its primary concern is to alleviate the human suffering that results from conflict.

Background: Red Cross Movement
The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Red Cross Movement) is composed of three parts:

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- Over 185 Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies; and
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

The mission of this global Red Cross and Red Crescent network is to relieve human suffering, whenever and wherever it occurs, and to promote respect for human dignity. Its day-to-day activities are carried out by almost 97 million people.
Relationship between International Humanitarian Law and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

In 1863, Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross Movement, focused the world’s attention on the horrors of war. He called for governments to respond to the humanitarian plight of victims of war.

The first Geneva Convention in 1864 was a response to his call to action. This international treaty included provisions for the care of the wounded and sick on the battlefield by medical relief workers who would be identified and protected by the symbol of a red cross on a white background. The symbol, the reverse of the Swiss flag, honors the Swiss origin of this initiative.

In addition to the red cross emblem, the red crescent and red lion and sun were recognized by nations in 1929 as alternate emblems, although the red lion and sun is no longer in use. In December 2005, governments adopted a Third Additional Protocol, creating an optional emblem, known as the red crystal, which is equal in status to the red cross and red crescent emblems.

The Conventions and Protocols specifically name the ICRC and national societies as impartial humanitarian organizations with the right to carry out relief activities for victims of armed conflicts. The nations that have universally adopted the Geneva Conventions recognize the right of the ICRC to intervene on behalf of wounded, sick, and shipwrecked combatants; prisoners of war; and civilians in conflict areas.

While governments are responsible for enforcing the laws, the ICRC seeks compliance with the Geneva Conventions by working with all sides of a conflict to help raise awareness of the rules of IHL, to gain access to prisoners of war and detainees and to provide humanitarian assistance to civilians.
The Red Cross Movement’s Roles and Responsibilities under International Humanitarian Law

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
The ICRC is a private Swiss institution that acts as the “guardian” of the Geneva Conventions and serves as a neutral intermediary to protect victims of armed conflict. Established in 1863 and based in Geneva, Switzerland, the ICRC is the founding member of the Red Cross Movement.

During armed conflict, the ICRC endeavors to:
- Protect and assist victims of armed conflict;
- Visit prisoners of war and civilian internees;
- Transmit Red Cross Messages to and from family members;
- Establish hospital and safety zones for the civilian population;
- Participate in relief programs for displaced persons; and
- Actively disseminate the rules and principles of IHL.

In times of international and non-international armed conflicts, and widespread internal disturbances, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the lead agency for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Activities include offering assistance, such as food, medical and shelter, as well as protection to all victims, including civilians, detainees and wounded soldiers. The national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies carry out their normal and emergency response activities where and whenever possible, and support the ICRC in its lead agency role.

Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies
The founders of the Red Cross in the 1860s set themselves the task of fostering the creation of national societies and established 22 during the Red Cross Movement’s first decade. Today, nearly every nation has established its own national society. The more than 185 national societies offer a range of services to their communities, which often include health education, social welfare, safety instruction and disaster relief. In the majority of countries the societies are known as the Red Cross. In most Muslim countries, they are known as the Red Crescent. In Israel, the national society is called the Magen David Adom (Red Shield of David).

During armed conflict, many national societies also:
- Support relief operations by channeling needed goods and monetary contributions;
- Provide medical and relief workers; and
- Serve as the global link with ICRC efforts to locate separated prisoners of war and civilians, reestablish family communication and, when possible, reunite relatives.

In times of internal tensions caused by political, religious, racial, social, economic or ideological factors, the national society of the affected country is the lead agency. Their
role is to provide protection and assistance to victims as a voluntary relief society duly authorized to use the emblem. The ICRC may step in if tensions escalate.

National societies play a vital role in the emergency communication process. They are directly involved in tracing activities and the exchange of Red Cross Messages through the ICRC delegations working in conflict areas. Using the vast, growing resources of the ICRC’s Central Tracing Agency—containing millions of records—national societies continue to bring together relatives separated by conflicts as far back as World War II.

Nations that have adopted the Geneva Conventions are required to educate their military and the public about IHL. In many countries, the responsibility for public education, referred to as dissemination, is undertaken by the Red Cross. General audiences among the public include youth, government officials, legal and medical professionals, high school and university students, the academic community and the media. Informing and educating the military and the public about the rules and principles of IHL is fundamental to helping ensure respect and adherence to the law. Greater public awareness worldwide helps save lives and reduce suffering.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
The International Federation is an international coalition of national societies. Its primary activities include coordination of relief efforts for victims of natural disasters, advice and assistance in the development of national societies and promotion of health and care in the community. Established in 1919, the International Federation is based in Geneva, Switzerland. In the event of armed conflict, its role is to provide humanitarian assistance to individuals displaced outside areas of conflict in coordination with activities conducted by the ICRC and national societies.

The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
Since 1867, the Red Cross has held regular conferences that bring together delegates from all components of the Red Cross Movement with representatives of the nations that have adopted the Geneva Conventions to examine and decide upon humanitarian matters of common interest. The International Conference is the highest decision-making body of the Red Cross Movement and meets on an average of every four years.
The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is guided by seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

The Seven Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**Humanity**
The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavors, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation, and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

**Impartiality**
It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions. It endeavors to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

**Neutrality**
In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.

**Independence**
The Movement is independent. The national societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

**Voluntary Service**
It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

**Unity**
There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

**Universality**
The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.
Additional Resources:

- International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (http://ifrc.org/)
- International Committee of the Red Cross (http://www.icrc.org/eng/)
- American Red Cross (http://www.redcross.org/)

Program Resources

For more information about the IHL program and EHL curriculum, please visit www.redcross.org or www.redcross.org/ehl or contact us at ehl@redcross.org.