

The World's Largest Humanitarian Network

The American Red Cross extends its humanitarian mission around the world through its work as part of the global Red Cross network – the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and 186 national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

This network is entrusted with powerful symbols. As determined in the Geneva Conventions, the red cross, red crescent or red crystal on a white background protects certain people and objects in war.



Education about international humanitarian law is critical to protecting lives and dignity in times of war. (A. Gutman/ICRC)

How You Can Help

Ask your American Red Cross chapter for more information about taking IHL classes. If you are interested in becoming an IHL instructor, please contact hopek@usa.redcross.org.

To learn more about Exploring Humanitarian Law, a program to educate students about the importance of IHL, visit www.redcross.org/ehl.

War has been around a long time. So has the idea that suffering should be limited in war. For example, more than a century ago, Abraham Lincoln banned the Union Army from using torture and poison, and established rights for prisoners from the Confederate Army.

The United States was not alone in calling for basic protections. In 1864, in the first Geneva Convention, several nations agreed to provide relief to wounded soldiers on the battlefield without discrimination and to offer protection to medical assistance units. Atrocities in World War II prompted governments to update these rules, resulting in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949.

Today, these Conventions are the core of international humanitarian law (IHL) and have been adopted by every country in the world. Respect for IHL makes humanitarian work in war possible.

Limiting the Impact of War

International humanitarian law is a set of rules that seek to restrict the means and methods of warfare, while protecting civilians, prisoners of war and wounded soldiers.

According to IHL, attacks may be made solely against military targets. People who do not or can no longer take part in hostilities are entitled to respect for their lives and for their physical and mental well-being. To elaborate –

- It is forbidden to kill or wound an adversary who surrenders or who can no longer take part in the fighting.
- It is forbidden to use weapons or methods of warfare that are likely to cause unnecessary civilian losses or excessive suffering.
- The wounded and sick must be collected and cared for by the party to the conflict which has them in its power. Medical personnel and medical establishments, transports and equipment must be spared.

What We Do

As a party to the Geneva Conventions, the United States has an obligation to teach IHL to its armed forces and to the civilian population. The American Red Cross supports this mission by educating the American public.

- We provide support for educational efforts at chapters, offering IHL courses and providing training opportunities for IHL instructors.
- We are working to implement the Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) curriculum in educational institutions across the country.
- We partner with public and private organizations to ensure that IHL education is as widespread as possible.

For more information, please visit www.redcross.org/ihl.