



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 and have been adopted by every country in the world. Respect for these rules makes it possible to deliver humanitarian assistance in the midst of war.

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 International Humanitarian Law, 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 International Humanitarian Law to its armed forces and to the civilian population. The American Red Cross supports this mission by educating the American public.

- We offer courses at American Red Cross chapters across the country and help train the instructors who teach these courses.
- We equip teachers to implement the Exploring Humanitarian Law curriculum in educational institutions across the country.
- We partner with public and private organizations to ensure that International Humanitarian Law education is as widespread as possible.
- We train college and high school students to become International Humanitarian Law Team Mentors who help younger students develop action campaigns, such as theater performances, flash mobs, school newspaper columns or petitions, to teach their peers about the rules of war.

Photo: ICRC

How You Can Help

You can help people affected by disasters like floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes, as well as countless crises at home and around the world, by making a donation to support American Red Cross Disaster Relief. Your gift allows the Red Cross to prepare for and provide shelter, food, emotional support and other assistance in response to disasters.

Visit Redcross.org or call 1-800-REDCROSS. Contributions may also be sent to your local American Red Cross chapter or to the American Red Cross, P.O. Box 37243, Washington, DC, 20013.

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