

Jim Backwell

'An ounce of prevention – International Humanitarian Law Dissemination in times of armed conflict and peace'

The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, ('the Movement') is the largest humanitarian network in the world. Involving over 96 million volunteers, the Movement works to prevent and alleviate suffering in times of natural disaster and armed conflict. It is made up of 179 National Societies, the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC is present in over 80 armed conflicts across the globe. It is an impartial, neutral and independent organization that has an exclusively humanitarian mission. The prevention of war or the creation of peace is not its mandate. Humanitarian action, from a Red Cross perspective, is not designed to resolve the conflict but to protect human dignity and save lives.

But does the ICRC and the Movement as a whole, have a role to play in peace making, keeping or building? The answer is yes. While Red Cross humanitarian work must never be used for political action, its secondary effects may prevent conflict breaking out or resuming. International Humanitarian Law is the basis of our action. IHL is about the protection of victims of armed conflict and the limitations on methods of warfare required in instruments such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. The dissemination and communication of IHL is a core responsibility of the Movement. Dissemination of IHL attempts to influence the behaviour of combatants demanding that they must protect the victims of armed conflict.

This paper reflects on the role of IHL dissemination in peace making and building from theoretical and practical perspectives. The practical reflections will review the author's work in dissemination in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to Palestinian civilians. The successes and failures of dissemination to an audience who has experienced 36 years of occupation will be explored.

The Australian Red Cross involvement in military exercises with the Australian Defence Force, in peacetime, will also be considered. This paper will articulate the role that a civilian organisation such as the Red Cross can have in influencing military training and doctrine. The conclusions drawn underline how critical dissemination of IHL and the promotion of humanitarian values are in attempting to prevent atrocities and the consequent exacerbation of conflict.

Jim Backwell is a Lawyer who graduated from Melbourne's Monash University with a degree specialising in International Law. He is currently studying a Graduate Diploma in International Law at Melbourne University.

He joined the Australian Red Cross Victorian Division in 1998 as the Coordinator of IHL and was the acting National IHL Manager in 2001 before leaving for the middle-east as the Legal Coordinator for the ICRC Israel, Occupied and Autonomous Territories Delegation based in Tel Aviv but regularly working in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Prior to the Red Cross he was an Industrial Officer with the Victorian Branch of the State Public Services Federation. Before that he was the General Secretary of the Campaign for International Cooperation and Disarmament. He has had published in academic journals, a variety of publications on Australian industrial law and International Humanitarian Law.

As the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Co-ordinator at Australian Red Cross Victoria's Head Office, his work involves co-ordinating the dissemination and promotion of IHL for the Victorian community. Dissemination is directed towards the Australian Defence Force, lawyers, medical professionals, emergency service personnel, the media, Australian Red Cross staff and volunteers, students at all levels and non-government organisations.