

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities in situations of conflict. It also endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863 on the principles of Henry Dunant and the meeting of the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has also originated the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and plays a significant role in providing aid to landmine victims.

ICRC Work with Landmine Victims

The deadliest and most polluting weapons in the world today are nuclear arms and anti-personnel mines.

The systematic use of violence to resolve human conflicts is as old as humanity and shows no sign of going out of fashion. The consequences of laying anti-personnel mines in present day warfare, however, go far beyond purely military activity. Their use affects the physical and psychological health of a society, its social and economic development, and the environment. Anti-personnel mines result in the daily cries of suffering heard in rice paddies, on hillsides and beside the desert watering holes of over 60 countries around the world. More people have been killed or injured by mines than by nuclear weapons. The doctors, nurses and orthopedic technicians of the International Committee of the Red Cross have witnessed and recorded the human faces behind the cries of pain, and the inhumane consequences of what can only be described as a man made public health catastrophe and a worldwide epidemic.

Landmines are indiscriminate and pernicious weapons; they kill and injure more people, women, children and agricultural workers after a cease-fire than during the actual fighting. Many mines contain just enough explosives to maim and horrendously mutilate. Caring for the victims of anti-personnel mines challenges every part of a public health care system at every stage of its development, and the problem is most acute in countries least able to bear the burden. Landmines render whole regions useless for human habitation and activity, they displace populations and create demographic pressures which destabilize neighboring regions. The surgical activities of the ICRC stem from the institution's general mandate to protect and assist the victims of armed conflict. The war wounded are only one category of the victims included in the ICRC's terms of reference.

The widespread use of landmines in many contemporary conflicts compromises post-war reconstruction and development in societies that are already desperately poor, thus creating the conditions for social and economic upheaval and continuing political instability.

The ICRC's main role in relation to the war wounded is not to treat them, for this responsibility is the governments involved in the conflict and hence their army medical services. The task of the ICRC is first and foremost to ensure that all involved are familiar with the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and apply them, meaning they care for members of the enemy armed forces as well as their own and afford medical establishments and personnel the protection to which all are entitled.

Nevertheless, local medical services are often completely overwhelmed in conflict situations and the ICRC is then compelled to step in to help the war wounded. When supplying hospitals with medical equipment and medicines is not enough, the ICRC must set up its own surgical facilities to offer the wounded the care that the authorities cannot provide.

Some countries simply lack the surgical infrastructure necessary to care for war wounded; in others, access to existing hospitals is denied to certain victims for political reasons, or is simply not available because of geographical factors and inadequate means of transportation. The ICRC first attempts to solve such problems by either providing medicines, dressing materials and surgical equipment to local structures or by negotiating with the authorities to obtain access to surgical care for all the wounded, in accordance with the principles of the Geneva Conventions. When these measures are insufficient, the ICRC helps to set up first

aid posts and transportation facilities where possible, send surgical teams to work within existing structures, or open new ICRC administered facilities for surgical care and rehabilitation. Special consideration is given to establishing safe blood transfusion services and prosthetic workshops for the manufacture of artificial limbs, which are both in high demand for landmine victims.

In the last 15 years, the ICRC has organized over a dozen of its own surgical units in conflict zones. Most of them have had to treat large numbers of landmine victims, attesting to the fact that the use of this low technology weapon is becoming more widespread, especially in internal conflicts.

Current Activities

In June 1999 the ICRC launched an appeal for 105 million Swiss francs (U.S. \$69 million) to fund its activities for mine victims over the next five years.

The financial appeal covers all the ICRC's activities relating to mine victims.

Goals:

- ◆ To promote universal adherence to and full implementation of the Ottawa Treaty and amended Protocol II to the 1980 U.N. Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.
- ◆ To reduce the risk of mine-related incidents through mine awareness programs currently being conducted by the ICRC in six countries.
- ◆ To provide mine victims with treatment and physical rehabilitation in 23-limb-fitting centers that the ICRC is running in 11 countries, and to continue its support for similar centers run by ministries of health, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and NGOs in many other countries
- ◆ To collect and analyze, where possible, data for use in the development of appropriate mine action programs.

More than 80 percent of the funds will be allocated to ICRC programs which provide surgical care, medical assistance and physical rehabilitation for mine victims within the context of the organization's overall assistance to the war wounded. The ICRC is about to open three new limb-fitting centers in Tajikistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. It also provides direct medical assistance to health facilities and appropriate training for nurses' doctors and surgeons treating mine victims.

In cooperation with a number of National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC currently runs mine awareness programs in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Similar programs are being drawn up in Angola, Georgia and Sudan. They aim to reduce the risk of mine-related death or injury by providing people in mine-affected areas with information on the precautions to be taken until the mines can be cleared.

Since February 1994, the ICRC and the entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement have been actively involved in the drive to impose a total ban on anti-personnel mines, running public awareness campaigns and encouraging diplomatic and military circles to support their efforts. These efforts will continue in order to achieve universal acceptance of the Ottawa Treaty, to coordinate and improve the care given to victims, and to extend preventive mine awareness programs.

Between 1979 and the end of 1998, the ICRC manufactured over 130,000 artificial limbs, over 175,000 pairs of crutches and close to 9,000 wheelchairs. In 1998 alone, the ICRC manufactured over 11,500 prostheses; of these, more than 6,500 were for mine victims. During the same year it produced over 17,200 pairs of crutches and more than 700 wheelchairs.

The ICRC is currently running 25-limb-fitting and rehabilitation programs in 13 countries: Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Iraq, Kenya, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan and Uganda. Twenty-four ICRC projects in 12 other countries have now been handed over to local or international NGO control, though many continue to receive financial and technical support from the ICRC. In a number of countries, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, supported by their International Federation, care for mine-injured people through health, rehabilitation and social welfare programs.

In addition to these activities, the ICRC and national societies are conducting mine awareness programs in several countries in order to reduce the number of landmine incidents in mine-affected areas.

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