

# **The 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

*28 November to 1 December 2011*

## **Statement of Iceland**

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*Agenda item 5.1 - Strengthening international  
humanitarian law (IHL)*



Ministry for Foreign Affairs

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At the outset I wish to congratulate you on your election as the Chairperson of the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and wish you every success in your task ahead.

The history of mankind is indeed a story of wars, power struggles, confrontation and conflicts between nations, peoples and individuals. Millions of victims have lost their lives not to mention all those that have had their dignity forcefully taken away from them. Wars are always indiscriminatory, marked by chaos and savagery. They quell our hopes for progress and development and a better future in a better world.

At the end of the Second World War many wise men and women realised that the international community could not simply go back to business as usual. Lessons had to be learned and these eminent persons were determined to call for a change. The United Nations were established and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted.

War starts when diplomacy ends. Diplomacy, however, can start when war ends. It was therefore a remarkable event when some 58 countries gathered here in Geneva in 1949 to negotiate and sign the four Geneva Conventions with the solemn aim of limiting the horrors of war. The Geneva Conventions, together with the Additional Protocols from 1977, are today one of the most widely ratified international treaties, testifying to their universality. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) plays an indispensable role as both the promoter and guardian of international humanitarian law as enshrined in the Geneva Conventions.

The Geneva Conventions as a basis for international humanitarian law are applicable to all armed conflicts and contain the minimum standards of behaviour in all types of conflict. Persons who do not or can no longer take part in hostilities are entitled to respect for their life, as well as for their integrity, and are to be treated humanely. The most serious violations of the fundamental rights of the individual undeniably occurs during armed conflicts. The common goal of international humanitarian law and human rights law is the protection of the individual and his or her fundamental rights in all circumstances. The rules and legal norms are there and it is both our common and solemn task to ensure that they be widely known and respected.

With that in mind my Government has undertaken in good co-operation with the Icelandic Red Cross to increase the knowledge of the basic

provisions of the Geneva Conventions by distributing them as widely as possible in an Icelandic translation.

In recent years, the world has witnessed a blurring of lines between military and political operations, on one hand, and humanitarian assistance to victims of conflicts, on the other. As a consequence, people, who are living in conflict areas, often do not see the difference between the activities of military units and humanitarian organisations.

When armed forces deliver aid in conflict areas it can dramatically increase the security risk of humanitarian organisations and their personnel. Civilians and combatants, in many instances, cannot see the difference between armed forces and the personnel of humanitarian organisations.

Furthermore, when military actors are engaged in humanitarian actions it raises concern that their assistance is delivered where it is most strategic but not necessarily where it is most needed. Gaining and maintaining access to the victims of armed conflict is crucial to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection. Lack of security of the personnel of humanitarian organisations working in conflict areas remains a predominant obstacle to their access to the population that are most in need of assistance.

Humanitarian actions can best be fostered through increased respect for the rules of international humanitarian law, mainly the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, and through a rigorous preservation of space for independent and humanitarian action. The Government of Iceland emphasises the importance of neutral and independent humanitarian action in conflict zones around the world. It is in our own interest to safeguard the activities of neutral and independent humanitarian organisations.

Our task should be to ensure universal respect for international humanitarian law. We must reaffirm our commitment to the Geneva Conventions in memory of all those men, women and children that have lost their lives or unjustifiably suffered in armed conflicts.

Peace needs to be promoted to ensure the security of mankind. Our public conscience demands that we preserve and strengthen the dignity of the human being. Both courage and determination is needed from each one of us to be able to meet that challenge.

Finally on behalf of the Government of Iceland I would like to pay tribute to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for their untiring, devoted work and noble mission.

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