In 1859, Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessman travelling through northern Italy, witnessed the grim aftermath of a battle in and around the city of Solferino. Deeply moved by the suffering of thousands of wounded and dying soldiers left without any medical care, he put forward two proposals for improving assistance for war victims:

- to set up, in peacetime, in every country, relief workers and societies composed of volunteers ready to take care of wounded soldiers in wartime; and
- to get countries to agree to the idea of protecting the wounded and sick on the battlefield and those caring for them.

The first proposal led to the establishment of a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in almost every country around the world.

The second proposal set the stage for the establishment of a system of internationally recognized symbols of the movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence or the hardships endured the trauma of armed conflict and humanitarian crises. For communities enduring the trauma of armed conflict and other situations of violence or the hardships endured, these emblems symbolize impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action to people in need. Whether displayed on the badge of a doctor working in a field hospital, the side of a vehicle transporting wounded people, or a plane delivering relief supplies, these emblems signify impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action to people around the world.

But they are also about much more. In times of armed conflict, the red cross and the red crescent together with the red crystal, are internationally recognized symbols of the protection that is due to the armed forces’ medical personnel, facilities and vehicles and to authorized civilian medical services. This includes the medical services of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies when acting as auxiliaries to armed forces’ medical services or when duly authorized by the authorities in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.

The emblems are free of any religious, political or national affiliation. They may be put to two different uses:

- As a sign of protection, which informs the people, vehicles, or facilities displaying these emblems that they may never be targeted or attacked. This is also the indicative use of the emblems.
- To indicate the affiliation of a person, vehicle or facility with the organization that makes up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This is known as the protective use of the emblems.

The red cross and red crescent emblems are a universal sign of hope for people in humanitarian crises. For communities enduring the trauma of armed conflict and other situations of violence or the hardships endured, the emblems signal that help is on its way. Whether displayed on the badge of a doctor working in a field hospital, the side of a vehicle transporting wounded people, or a plane delivering relief supplies, these emblems signify impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action to people around the world.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world’s largest volunteer-based humanitarian network. With 190 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide, we are in every community reaching 160.7 million people annually through long-term services and development programmes, as well as 110 million people through disaster management and early recovery programmes. We are at the front, during and after disasters and health emergencies in the world; and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality to all nationalities, races, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

ENDURING EMBLEMS

In 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was established as an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusive humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the activities of the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

In 1949, States party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions adopted an additional emblem: the red crystal. The red crystal enjoys the same legal status as the red cross and the red crescent. It is used in missions, in institutions and organizations of the Movement and under the conditions laid down in the Geneva Conventions.
HOW CAN THE EMBLEMS BE USED?

Use of the emblems is strictly regulated under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005. They can be used in two ways:

For protective purposes

In times of armed conflict, they can be used for protective purposes to ensure the safety of:
- medical services and religious personnel of the armed forces;
- medical personnel, facilities and vehicles of National Societies when placed at the disposal of the medical services of the armed forces and subject to military laws and regulations;
- with the express authorization of the authorities to ensure proper use of the emblems.

During times of peace, the emblems may be also displayed individually and in their pure form, as a symbol of protection by:
- medical services and religious personnel of the armed forces;
- National Society staff, medical facilities and vehicles that could be mobilized in the event of armed conflict, with the authorities’ consent.

For indicative purposes

In times of peace the emblems can be displayed with the Movement’s seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. People understand that their work is not linked to any political, religious, military or economic agenda and should therefore be accepted, trusted and respected by all.

Those in the Movement who display these symbols are committed to carrying out their humanitarian mission in accordance with the Movement’s seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. People understand that their work is not linked to any political, religious, military or economic agenda and should therefore be accepted, trusted and respected by all.

This understanding is critical because it means that people of all backgrounds, and on all sides of an armed conflict, have trust in these workers’ intentions. This in turn helps Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers to reach all people and communities in need safely, even during wartime and other humanitarian crises.

MISUSE OF THE EMBLEMS

Any misuse of the emblems may diminish their protective value and erode respect for them in times of armed conflict. This could endanger the lives of those entitled to display an emblem for their protection while providing medical care, and undermine the safe access of the Movement’s humanitarian workers and relief. Here are some of the ways in which the emblems must not be used:

Perfidy

The use of the emblems during an armed conflict to protect combatants and military equipment and with the intent to mislead the adversary. When causing death or serious personal injury, perfidious use of the emblem is considered a war crime.

Improper use

The use of an emblem inconsistent with international humanitarian law. The use of an emblem by unauthorized persons or entities (commercial enterprises, pharmacies, private doctors, non-governmental organizations, individuals, etc.) for purposes that are likely to undermine the prestige or the respect due to the emblem.

Imitation

The use of a sign which, owing to its shape and colour, may be confused with one of the emblems.

SYMBOLS OF THE HUMANITARIAN ACTION BY THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

By displaying the emblems of the red cross or the red crescent to show their association with the Movement during armed conflict, natural disasters or other emergencies, a National Society’s staff and volunteers are sending a very important message: the work they are carrying out is purely humanitarian and their safe access to people and communities affected by crisis must be respected at all times.

In order to ensure universal respect for and protection of the emblems, each State party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions has an obligation to enact national legislation with the aim of regulating the use of the emblems and of preventing and punishing their improper use both in times of war and peace.

National authorities must also take steps to inform the public, businesses and the medical community of the proper use of the emblems.

National Societies also cooperate with the authorities to ensure proper use of the emblems.

For indicative purposes

In times of peace the emblems can be displayed for indicative purposes by:
- volunteers, staff or property affiliated with the Movement (the National Societies, the ICRC or the International Federation);
- as an exceptional measure by ambulances and first-aid stations exclusively assigned to providing free treatment to the wounded and sick in line with domestic legislation and with the express authorization of the National Society.

When used as an “indicative device” by any of the Movement’s organizations as part of their logos, the emblem must always be accompanied by their name or symbol, and not simply the words “red cross” or “red crescent.” The emblem must also be displayed in small dimensions and may not be placed on armlets or on roofs of buildings in order to avoid any confusion with the emblems used for protective purposes.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) now use the emblems at all times (in times of peace and armed conflict alike).

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