



# DISCOVER THE ICRC



ICRC

**Cover photo: One of the ICRC's key services to people affected by crisis is to help them re-establish contact with family members. Here, a young girl is reunited with her uncle in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She was separated from her family when fighting broke out in 2009.**



**ICRC**

International Committee of the Red Cross  
19, avenue de la Paix  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
T +41 22 734 60 01 F +41 22 733 20 57  
E-mail: [shop@icrc.org](mailto:shop@icrc.org) [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)  
© ICRC, March 2018

Front cover: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/ICRC

**DISCOVER THE ICRC**



Why the ICRC? .....	4
What is the ICRC? .....	6
<i>Story of discovery: Engineering solutions</i> .....	8
International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement .....	10
Where does the ICRC work? .....	12
<i>Story of discovery: A new career for Karima</i> .....	14
Who we are .....	15
Assistance .....	16
Economic security .....	18
Water and habitat .....	20
Health care .....	22
Contamination by explosive devices .....	24
<i>Story of discovery: Holmes gets back on his feet</i> .....	26
Protection .....	28
Presence and dialogue .....	30
Promoting protection for detainees .....	32
Protecting the vulnerable .....	34
<i>Story of discovery: Beyond first aid</i> .....	36
Restoring family links .....	38
<i>Story of discovery: A former prisoner finds answers</i> .....	39
Prevention .....	41
Getting the message to the front lines .....	42
Towards a more humane future .....	44
Limiting the human toll of war .....	46
Health care in danger .....	48
Discovering the future .....	50

In places where health care is virtually non-existent because of conflict, ICRC staff use whatever means they can to reach people. Here, the *Saocruz* is speeding up the Guaviare River in Colombia.

# WHY THE ICRC?

As long as people resort to conflict to settle their differences, there will be a need for independent organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to come to the aid of people affected by the violence.

Today, sadly, this need is as great as ever. International and internal armed conflicts alike continue to tear apart communities and entire countries in all corners of the globe. And as the world's population becomes increasingly urban, conflicts are often waged in the streets and the very places where people live and work.

Meanwhile, other types of violence – between criminal networks, gangs and police forces, and ethnic groups – are causing ever greater suffering, in part because military-style weapons are increasingly available.



During times of conflict, people's health can deteriorate. This is especially true for children. In response, we provide medical services to families such as the one pictured here, which fled the violence in Iraq.



The ICRC was founded over 150 years ago after the Battle of Solferino in 1859.

## Heavy toll

In all these cases, those not involved in the fighting continue to be killed indiscriminately or even targeted, and large groups of people are forced to flee their homes, leaving them with no access to food, water and shelter.

At the same time, new technologies such as remote-controlled and robotic weaponry, the emergence of cyber-warfare, and the proliferation of conflicts involving non-State armed groups raise questions as to whether the rules of war are sufficient or need to be further developed.

## The law of war

The rules governing how war can be waged and who is protected are codified in a body of law largely based on the Geneva Conventions and known as the law of war or international humanitarian law. This body of law includes a number of treaties that, among other things, limit the use of force, prohibit certain weapons and protect civilians, prisoners of war and wounded, sick and shipwrecked members of the armed forces.

As conflicts of the twenty-first century unfold, the ICRC will continue striving to provide vital assistance and protection. We will also play a central role in promoting humanitarian law and clarifying, developing and strengthening this crucial body of law in response to the realities of modern warfare.

## Emerging needs

The ICRC constantly seeks creative ways to address today's complex and evolving crises. The plight of migrants around the world is one such example. More and more people are leaving their homelands in search of food, work or a safe place to live, and the risks they take to improve their lives all too often have tragic consequences. That is why we will continue to seek new ways to help migrants and meet other critical, emerging needs.

# WHAT IS THE ICRC?

The ICRC is a neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian organization. We have a mandate to help and protect people affected by armed conflict and other violence or – as our mission statement puts it – “other situations of violence.” By “other violence” or “other situations of violence” we mean violence that has not reached the threshold of an armed conflict but is carried out by large groups and has consequences in humanitarian terms. This mandate was given to us by States through the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, their Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005 and the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement of 1986.

Our mandate and legal status sets us apart from both intergovernmental organizations (such as the specialized agencies of the United Nations) and non-governmental organizations. This status allows us to function independently from governments and to serve, with complete impartiality, the people most in need of protection and assistance.





# WHAT WE DO

The ICRC's actions are aimed at protecting the lives, health and dignity of people affected by violence. In doing so, the ICRC takes a holistic, integrated approach in which three distinct areas of action – protection, assistance and prevention – are closely interlinked. Work done in any one of these areas informs, reinforces and complements actions taken in the others.

## Assistance

We help people affected by armed conflict and other violence by providing water and shelter; fostering economic security; improving health care (including war surgery and care for detainees); ensuring proper handling and identification of the dead; and helping victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance. See page 16.

## Protection

The ICRC strives to safeguard the life, health and dignity of civilians affected by armed conflict and other violence, including detainees. We do this by encouraging government authorities and other groups to shoulder their responsibilities under international humanitarian law and other rules that protect people affected by violence. See page 28.

## Prevention

The ICRC takes action at the global, regional and local levels to promote compliance with international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles. We work to raise awareness on critical issues of humanitarian concern. See page 40.

In much of our work, we cooperate closely with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other key partners in humanitarian action. Learn more at [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)

**In times of crisis, the ICRC does everything it can to help people meet their daily needs. In Ukraine, we supplied flour to local bakeries to make bread. We handed out the loaves, together with the Ukrainian Red Cross, to people displaced by the fighting.**

## STORY OF DISCOVERY

# ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS

Water-and-habitat engineer Khaled Mushara has long worked to improve the lives of his fellow countrymen in Yemen. Before joining the ICRC in 2012, he worked for a development agency improving the country's road system. He recalls how, when he first heard of the ICRC, he was a bit wary of the Swiss organization and its distinctive red cross emblem.

"At first," he recalls, "I thought 'What do they do? Are they really humanitarians or are they here to try and change people's religion?' But when I looked into it, and learned for myself what the ICRC was all about, I discovered it was really something very different."

What Khaled discovered, he says, was an organization committed to helping the most vulnerable people, regardless of their race, creed or religion. "The way the ICRC sees it: If you're a human being, you deserve to live. It was a great change in my thinking about the ICRC."

Since then, he has seen how our principles of impartiality and neutrality allow us to reach people in areas directly affected by fighting. "This is because all the groups involved in the conflict trust the ICRC to be neutral, not to take sides. So we can work where others can't."

### Stories of discovery

This is just one example of how people around the world come to discover the ICRC. And it shows how staff members such as Khaled work with local communities to discover new ways to meet our basic goal – alleviate the suffering caused by war. In this booklet, you will discover the ICRC through stories about people such as Khaled and through short explanations of exactly what the ICRC is, what we do, and how, when, where and why we take action.

Learn more at [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



*“Projects have to be sustainable. This approach has won the ICRC my respect. We really care about our projects helping people over the long term.”*

Water-and-habitat engineer Khaled Mushara



Khaled Mushara works to provide pumps, pipes and water tanks to local communities, set up temporary water-distribution points and repair and upgrade hospitals, electrical systems and irrigation systems damaged by conflict.

# INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT



## ICRC

The ICRC is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which also comprises 189 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The National Societies operate within their respective countries while the Federation coordinates the international response of National Societies to disasters not involving armed conflict. The Federation is a key partner for the ICRC, particularly where conflicts overlap with natural disasters. We also work closely with the National Societies, which share their professional skills, first-hand knowledge of the local terrain and familiarity with local cultures and languages.



## NATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

The National Societies help the governments of their respective countries to do humanitarian work. They provide a range of services, including disaster relief and health and social programmes. In wartime, the National Societies deliver relief to civilians and, where appropriate, they support the army medical services.



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

## INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

The Federation is made up of 189 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that together comprise the world's largest volunteer-based humanitarian network. The Federation acts before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people, through long-term services and development programmes, disaster response and early recovery initiatives.

The ICRC, the Federation and each National Society are independent entities. Each has its own set of statutes and exercises no authority over the others.

In our work, we are always guided by the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

## **FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES**

### **Humanity**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

### **Impartiality**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

### **Neutrality**

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

### **Independence**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

### **Voluntary service**

It is a voluntary relief Movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

### **Unity**

There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

### **Universality**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

Learn more at [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)

# WHERE DOES THE ICRC WORK?

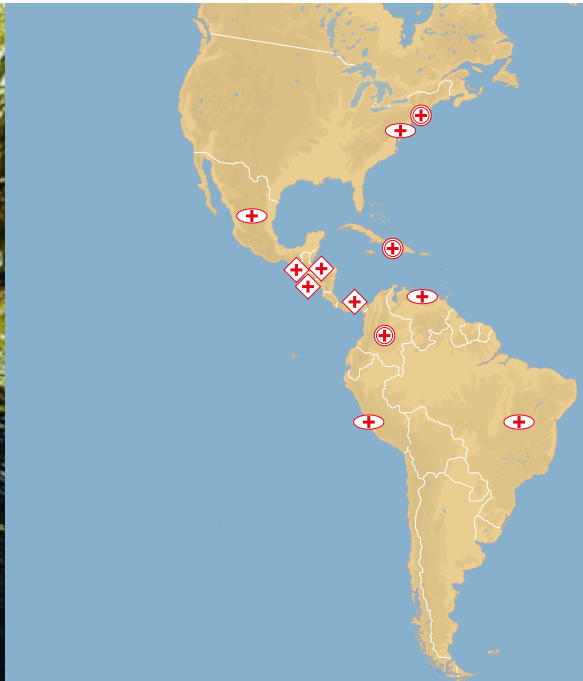
When fighting breaks out, people caught up in the violence need help quickly. For this reason, the ICRC maintains an operational presence in areas of armed conflict and other violence, as well as offices and delegations in key capitals and cities that serve as important regional hubs for the coordination and distribution of aid.

We have delegations and missions in some 80 countries around the world. The vast majority of our 14,000-plus employees are nationals of the countries in which they work.

At our headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, almost 900 staff draw up and implement organization-wide policies and strategies in addition to providing vital support and oversight for our field operations.



Jonathan Torgovnik/ICRC



This map is for information purposes only and has no political significance.

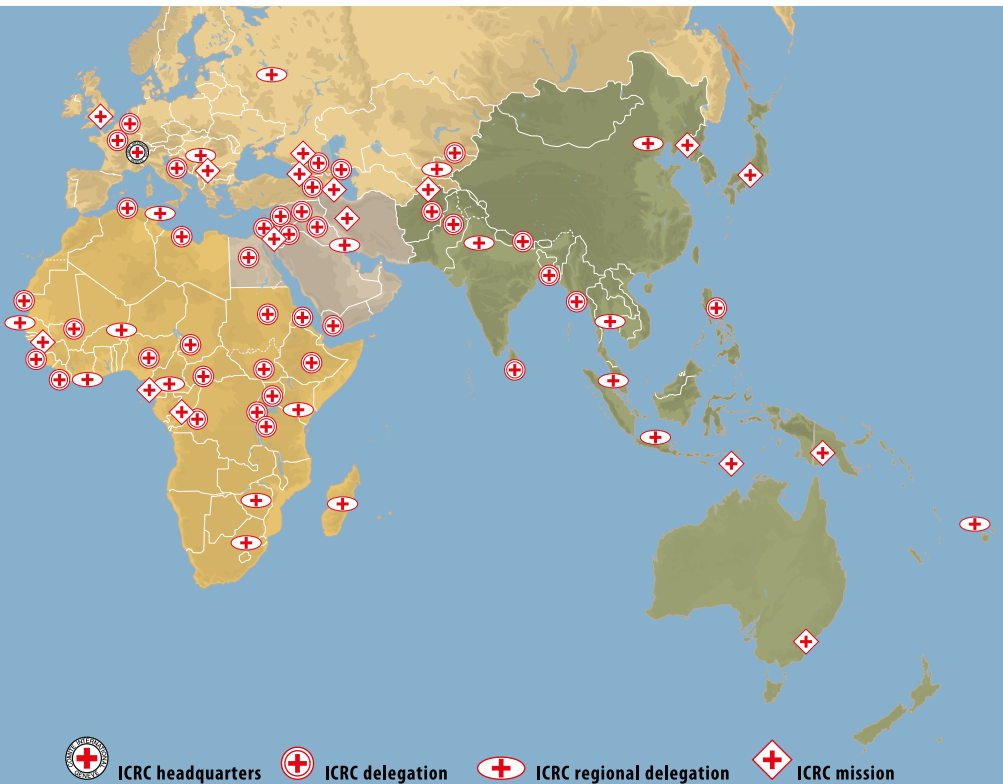
Valid as of January 2015.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ICRC staff and local Red Cross volunteers use canoes to reach people affected by violence.

Our field delegations may cover one country or, in the case of regional delegations, several. They carry out a range of activities, depending on the situation and the needs. These include:

- material aid for people affected by existing or emerging armed conflicts or other violence and striving to ensure they are protected; and
- preventive action, work with the Federation and National Societies, and “humanitarian diplomacy” (using our influence with States and others to effect improvements).

Our delegations also act as an early warning system to enable a swift and effective response when armed conflict or other violence erupts.





## ***STORY OF DISCOVERY***

# **A NEW CAREER FOR KARIMA**

When Karima (above) was just 12 years old, she and her brother were caught in cross-fire during fighting near their house in Kabul, Afghanistan. Four bullets pierced her leg, requiring an immediate amputation just above the knee.

Back then, the ICRC represented one thing to Karima: a chance to walk again. What she ended up discovering was a new life and a new career. “I came to the ICRC’s physical rehabilitation centre to have a prosthesis made and learn to walk on it. But later, when I returned to have it repaired, the centre was looking for physiotherapists.”

Now, almost two decades after losing her own leg, Karima is a physiotherapist and helps run the centre in Kabul. She helps the young and old alike in learning to cope with disabilities, adjusting to prosthetics, and strengthening wounded limbs.





Many ICRC employees have experienced the consequences of conflict first hand. Having lost a leg herself, Karima (left), understands what her patients are going through.

## WHO WE ARE

Around the world, there are more than 11,500 people who, like Karima, work for the ICRC in their own country. These invaluable staff members carry out the bulk of our work, contributing their locally acquired knowledge and skills.

Growing numbers of staff recruited in one country are also being sent to work in delegations in other countries. Today we have over 1,800 expatriate staff members working in the field. Half of them are delegates, i.e. the men and women who carry out visits to detainees, design and implement aid programmes and promote knowledge of and compliance with international humanitarian law. The others are specialists, such as doctors, nurses, engineers, IT specialists, veterinarians, agronomists, interpreters and administrators.

To learn more about our staff, including employment opportunities, go to [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)

# ASSISTANCE

## **Saving lives, safeguarding the future**

Wherever conflicts occur, the ICRC acts to preserve people's lives and livelihoods. We meet their immediate material needs and seek to ensure that some common consequences of conflict – disease, injury, hunger, loss of income and exposure to the elements – do not jeopardize their survival or their future.

## **Wide-ranging help**

Our help takes a variety of forms, depending on the region and the nature of the crisis. It may mean providing material relief (such as food, cash, seeds, tools and medicine), repairing water-supply and -treatment systems, or building medical facilities. We also furnish training for primary-care staff, surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses and prosthetic/orthotic technicians. In all our efforts, we aim to enhance the capacity of local institutions to provide essential services such as water, sanitation and health care.

## **Providing for themselves**

While emergency aid saves lives and mitigates the most immediate effects of conflict, we always try to keep sight of our ultimate aim: restoring people's ability to provide for themselves. In some cases, aid takes the form of small cash grants so that the families themselves can choose how to meet their needs; local markets and producers also benefit indirectly from this aid. In other cases, we help people start a small business or produce their own food.

A girl carrying water in a refugee camp in South Sudan.







**This man in Thailand's Pattani province received a small boat and fishing equipment to help him rebuild his life as a fisherman after being held in detention.**

## ECONOMIC SECURITY

Where armed conflict or other violence breaks out, the ICRC helps people meet their essential needs by providing food, cooking utensils, shelter, clothing and hygiene items, etc. When we do this, we take into account all the household's basic economic requirements.

### **Longer-term needs**

But we don't stop there. We also consider how families and entire communities can once again become self-sufficient and economically secure. Our goal is to ensure people are able to take care of themselves and make ends meet over the long term.

Because our mandate covers people deprived of their liberty in connection with conflict, we also strive to meet the nutritional and sanitation needs of detainees wherever necessary.

To learn more, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



Đrina Mrazikova/ICRC

Casamance, Senegal, is just one area where the ICRC has supported projects and provided seed and tools to help people start small farms and livestock businesses.

The ICRC's economic security work includes distributing food, giving livestock vaccinations, repairing irrigation systems, providing seed and tools to help people resume farming, organizing cash-for-work programmes, and giving cash grants to start up a small business (such as a hair salon or an automotive or bicycle repair shop).

Abdul Majid used to get up early every morning to go door to door searching for work. "Most people didn't want to hire a 43-year-old," he recalls. "I have three children, and times were tough when I couldn't find work." But all that changed after he received a cash grant as part of an economic-security programme to help people living in south-eastern Bangladesh become self-sufficient.

Through the programme, the ICRC and the Bangladesh Red Crescent provide training and guidance in addition to cash grants that foster agriculture, livestock and small-business initiatives. "Now I can send my children to school," says Mr Majid. "My dreams have come true beyond all my expectations."



Dhiman Tripura/Bangladesh Red Crescent Society



## **WATER AND HABITAT**

### **A public health approach**

Our water-and-habitat programmes are all about public health amid conflicts – aiming to ensure a healthy living environment. We strive to guarantee that essential public services (clean water, shelter, proper sanitation, etc.) function properly.

The impact of armed conflict can be direct or indirect, and the consequences can be brief or long-lasting. Urban areas, where the population density is high and the systems complex, are particularly vulnerable.



Brecht Goris/ICRC

## Poor services, poor health

When water, power and sanitation systems do not function properly, the health of the people dependent on them suffers and living conditions deteriorate. Those services may be overwhelmed by an influx of displaced people, or maintenance may be impossible because fighting has blocked access to infrastructure.

## Interconnected services

Many of the ICRC's activities depend on each other. Providing water to a population requires electricity as well as a waste-water treatment system, and caring for the sick and wounded requires water, electricity, and waste disposal at the hospitals. Nor does our involvement end when the conflict does – we maintain those services until the government is able to step back in.

Access to clean water is vital, especially during times of crisis. After Typhoon Haiyan wiped out the local water-supply network, the ICRC provided drinking water to people in Samar province, the Philippines.



Omar Saad/ICRC

War is increasingly waged in urban areas. As a result, our water-and-habitat engineers repair and maintain large and complex water, power and waste-treatment systems in cities, such as this one in Baghdad, Iraq.

# HEALTH CARE

There are few times when health care is more badly needed than in times of war. While combatants and civilians are suffering and dying, entire communities may be forced to flee for safety. In such cases, the infrastructure and supply systems needed to provide health care to communities may be disrupted, damaged or destroyed.

These situations are extremely challenging – and dangerous – for anyone seeking, or trying to provide, health care. Facilities that manage to remain operational are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who are wounded, stricken by infectious disease, or suffering from malnutrition. Meanwhile, mass violence can easily make access to health care extremely difficult, dangerous or simply impossible.

## A comprehensive approach

As a result of these challenges, many essential, everyday needs (vaccinations, maternal care, treatment of chronic diseases, etc.) go unattended. Basic sanitation systems, clean water sources and food supplies are often affected as well, leaving communities even more vulnerable to infectious disease and malnutrition.

In responding to these complex, interconnected needs, we take a comprehensive approach, placing the individual at the centre of our action and striving for a continuum of care from the moment a person becomes injured or sick, through that person's treatment at a health post or hospital, and ending with the person's recovery and rehabilitation. Every step of the way, we work closely with local communities and health agencies in assessing needs and then meeting them.

In armed conflict, the ICRC provides surgeons, equipment and supplies for local hospitals. Here, at Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan, surgeons operate on a young man suffering from severe burns.

War makes it harder for people to get medical treatment, just when they need it most. Above right, an ICRC doctor examines a boy at a hospital in South Sudan.



Jacob Simirira/ICRC





## A broad range of health services

### First-aid training and support

Care starts with those who are closest to the people in need. To this end, the ICRC trains community members, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers, local health-care workers and others in first aid so that they can stabilize patients until they reach more expert care.

### Primary health care

We adapt our support to local needs, and our work usually comprises both preventive action (promotion of good health practices for instance) and treatment. Our priorities are vaccination, reproductive health and clinical and psychosocial care for the victims of sexual violence.

### Hospitals and beyond

Because conflict affects all aspects of community health, we take a comprehensive approach to hospital care. We address such issues as hospital management, surgery, internal medicine, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, and in-patient care for people with infectious diseases.

### Mental health and psychosocial support

The mental well-being of people traumatized by violence is also a major concern for the ICRC. We include psychological and psychosocial support for victims as part of our efforts to help communities heal from the scars left by war and other violence.

### Health in detention

To ensure that detainees benefit from basic health care, we address their individual needs while also working to improve the prison's water, sanitation, nutrition, health-care and hygiene systems. In addition, we address the mental health needs of people deprived of their liberty, especially those who have suffered from torture or other forms of ill-treatment or who have a psychiatric condition.



Children keep their distance from a pile of unexploded bombs left near a football field in Basra, Iraq. We work to prevent mines and unexploded devices such as these from causing harm.

## CONTAMINATION BY EXPLOSIVE DEVICES

Mines and unexploded ordnance can dramatically boost danger levels for people living in war zones and those who come to their aid. Our munitions experts therefore work as part of ICRC operations to ensure the safety of our staff and others. They also contribute their findings to our reports on the conduct of hostilities.

We carry out a wide range of activities, including risk education, clearing mines and unexploded ordnance, and taking care of victims. This begins during the conflict and may continue long after hostilities have ended.

**Families who lost loved ones during the years of fighting in Peru finally found out what happened to them thanks to the combined efforts of the country's forensic service and the ICRC.**



Shadow Pro//ICRC

We set up the Special Fund for the Disabled in 1983 to ensure the continuity of ICRC-sponsored projects. The Fund also supports physical rehabilitation centres in low-income countries. At the Artificial Limbs and Polio Centre in Gaza, a technician teaches a young boy to walk using his new custom-made boots.

## Physical rehabilitation and social inclusion

Our physical rehabilitation programme provides physiotherapy and mobility devices (prosthetics, orthotics, walking aids and wheelchairs). We help local organizations develop their own ability to deliver such services. This reduces the barriers that people with disabilities face in their path towards social inclusion.

## Forensic science and humanitarian action

The bodies of people who die during war, natural disaster or migration must be handled with respect. They need to be located, recovered, recorded and identified. Humanitarian work has come to include these tasks, which our forensic unit carries out using the latest tools and methods. Our forensic specialists help local agencies manage human remains both during and immediately after conflict, as well as in subsequent efforts to recover and identify remains – sometimes long after the fighting has ended.



Rodrigo Abd//ICRC

## STORY OF DISCOVERY

# HOLMES GETS BACK ON HIS FEET

In October 2010, Holmes Fabian Ordonez was on his way to a course in environmental management not far from his home in Caquetá department in southern Colombia when he stepped on a mine and lost a foot. This could have shattered his dreams. But Holmes went on to study at university thanks to his own perseverance and to support from the ICRC, the Colombian Red Cross and other local organizations.

When a conflict ends or moves from one area to another, explosive devices – mines, unexploded bombs, shells and cluster-munition bomblets – continue to kill and maim. Those who survive can lose their livelihood and their ability to perform even basic tasks. They often lose hope. And with wars increasingly being fought in densely populated cities, contamination by explosive devices is a growing concern.

“There is the explosion itself, which wounds and mutilates, and there are the lesser-known consequences – the psychological ones,” says Luis Arturo Rojas, a surgeon in Caquetá who was trained by the ICRC to help survivors of such explosions. “When you lose a limb, the biggest loss can be the desire to go on living.”



Andrés Cardona/ICRC



Holmes Fabian Ordonez's courage and strength, along with support from the ICRC and local organizations, has helped him rebuild his life.

The ICRC's response draws on expertise gained in numerous disciplines – including mine clearance and ordnance disposal, health care, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial support and international humanitarian law – to help individuals and entire communities cope with the effects and prevent future injuries.

“The ICRC has been everything to me,” says Holmes. “They were the first to approach me after the accident. Thanks to their support I’ve learned to walk again. Having lived through this, I believe that there are no limits in life.”

### **Prevention**

To put an end to the devastating impact on civilians of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions, we call upon States to ratify and incorporate into domestic law the treaties that prohibit production, transfer and use of these weapons. We also remind the States that have adopted these treaties of their obligations to clean up areas under their control that have been contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance.

### **Protection**

As conflicts unfold, the ICRC is in constant dialogue with weapon-bearers in an effort to ensure they do not use weapons banned by international law. We also remind them of their obligation to clear areas of explosive devices once the conflict has ended.

### **Direct help**

Around the world, the ICRC offers physical rehabilitation, artificial limbs and orthotics, crutches and wheelchairs to people injured by explosive devices. At the same time, we provide operational expertise to help clear civilian areas of such devices. All this prompts us to redouble our efforts to promote compliance with rules – and where necessary to advocate new rules – that ban or limit the use of such weapons.

We use all sorts of communication tools to raise awareness of the rules of war. This image is from an animated video produced by the ICRC on international humanitarian law entitled "Rules of war (in a nutshell)." The video explains how law protects civilians, health-care facilities and detainees in armed conflicts. To watch the video, go to: [www.icrc.org/en/document/rules-war-nutshell](http://www.icrc.org/en/document/rules-war-nutshell).



# PROTECTION

Too often, it is the people not involved in the fighting who suffer the most from conflict and other violence. They could be killed or wounded in large numbers, or be forced to flee through dangerous territory in search of safety. In many cases, homes, villages and – increasingly – even entire cities are destroyed, along with people's means of feeding and sheltering themselves.

## Protection enshrined in law

When mass violence erupts, civilians are extremely vulnerable and require protection. The ICRC strives to ensure that those involved in the fighting comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. For example, States must meet their responsibility to treat detainees humanely. Respect for family unity, dignity and physical and mental integrity are also central to these obligations.

## Compliance with the law

The difficulty faced by the ICRC in trying to ensure protection of civilians in today's conflicts cannot be attributed to shortcomings in humanitarian law. The real problem is the failure by the parties to the conflict to comply with these fundamental rules.



# PRESENCE AND DIALOGUE

Under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols of 1977, civilians and anyone not taking a direct part in combat may under no circumstances be attacked. Rather, they must be spared and protected.

To help ensure that the safeguards embedded in these laws are respected, the ICRC endeavours to maintain a constant presence in areas where civilians are particularly at risk. We remind all parties concerned of the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, as well as the rules relating to the use of force in law-enforcement operations.

## In the field

When our delegates are able to document violations of the law, they inform the authorities and ask them to take action to end the violations. Wherever possible, the delegates provide aid to people affected by the conflict. They also keep up a regular dialogue with all weapon-bearers, whether members of the armed forces, rebel groups, police forces, paramilitary forces or other groups.

**An ICRC staff member explaining the rules of international humanitarian law to members of an armed group in the remote Chocó department, Colombia.**



Juan Arredondo/Getty Images/ICRC





The ICRC raises humanitarian issues at the highest levels of government. Above, ICRC President Peter Maurer addresses the 12th assembly of States that have agreed to ban anti-personnel mines.

## Highest diplomatic levels

We also work at the highest diplomatic levels to ensure that civilians and detainees are protected. Diplomatic efforts often focus on specific humanitarian goals, such as delivering aid to people trapped in combat zones, gaining access to prisons and facilitating temporary humanitarian truces between the warring parties. These and other efforts help safeguard the fundamental rights of the people we strive to protect – rights that include access to health care and the ability to earn a living.

Even in peacetime, the ICRC maintains a constant dialogue with armed forces. We encourage them to incorporate the rules of humanitarian law in the planning and execution of military operations.



Nick Danziger/ICRC

With the ICRC looking on, Afghan soldiers take part in training on how to treat detainees in accordance with international humanitarian law. The ICRC sometimes plays the role of observer during training exercises.

## PROMOTING PROTECTION FOR DETAINEES

People deprived of their liberty are in an extremely vulnerable position. This vulnerability is particularly acute in the event of armed conflict and other violence, when excessive use of force and deficiencies in prison life may be exacerbated.

The ICRC therefore works to prevent or end forced disappearances, summary executions, torture and other forms of ill-treatment. We restore contact between detainees and their families and act to improve conditions of detention when necessary and in accordance with international law and standards.

### Private interviews

Regular visits to places of detention are crucial to our work to help detainees. On the basis of our findings, we submit confidential reports to the authorities and, if necessary, provide material or medical aid to the detainees.

During their visits, ICRC delegates conduct interviews with detainees in private. They note down the detainees' details so that their cases can be monitored. The detainees describe any problems of humanitarian concern they may have.

The ICRC refrains from taking a position on the reasons for the detainees' arrest or capture. We simply try to ensure that detainees benefit from the judicial guarantees to which they are entitled under international and domestic law.

## Looking at the whole system

In advising prison authorities, we look not just at individual cases but also at deficiencies across the system that have an impact on the health and well-being of detainees. Our advice to authorities is therefore based on a thorough assessment of their detention system, including legislation, prison structures, management practices, the prison food chain and the quality of health care.

To learn more and see a list of the requirements for the ICRC to carry out a visit, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



James Nachtwey/ICRC/MI

## A recognized right

In international armed conflicts, the Geneva Conventions recognize the right of the ICRC to visit prisoners of war and civilian internees. Preventing our delegates from carrying out their mission is a violation of humanitarian law. In non-international armed conflicts, Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions authorizes us to offer our services to parties to the conflict. Many accept our proposal to visit detainees, in part because of our well-earned reputation in this field. In situations that have not reached the threshold of an armed conflict, we offer to visit detainees on the basis of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

# PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

Among the civilian population, there are certain categories of people (women, children, refugees and displaced people) who are specifically protected by international law. Our efforts to protect these vulnerable groups focus on enhancing their ability to cope. We do our best to leave these people with the tools they need to live in dignity and safety.

## Displaced people

Armed conflict often means large numbers of civilians are forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere in their country. In most cases, displaced people have to leave behind all but a few of their possessions. They often lose the means of earning a living too. Given their extremely precarious situation, displaced people are among the main beneficiaries of our help.

## Refugees

People who flee across international borders, and are recognized as refugees, are entitled to protection and aid from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In such cases, the ICRC plays a support role, particularly where refugees are protected by humanitarian law. We also provide a Red Cross message service that helps refugees get back in touch with family members from whom they have become separated.



Didier Revol/ICRC

The ICRC helps displaced people and refugees, who often have to leave everything behind when they flee armed conflict or violence. These people left Syria for neighbouring Jordan in 2013.



During conflict, children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, an ICRC staff member talks to a young boy at a transit and orientation centre for children recruited into armed forces and armed groups.

## Children

Because of conflict and other violence, children may be separated from their families, forced to leave their homes, killed, maimed, sexually abused or exploited. They may also be first-hand witnesses to atrocities committed against their parents or other family members.

And, despite protection by law, children continue to be recruited by armed forces and armed groups in some parts of the world. They often carry weapons and actively take part in the fighting. Or they may be used in other roles that put them in great danger, such as carrying supplies.

To learn more about specific legal protection for children, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)

## STORY OF DISCOVERY

# BEYOND FIRST AID

Antoinette Mkindo Mbila's first encounter with the ICRC came in the late 1990s when war broke out in her country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She was 18 years old. "The ICRC was helping reunite children separated from their families," she recalls.

Nearly a decade later when war re-erupted, she saw the distinctive Red Cross emblem in action again. "I remember seeing men with Red Cross vests going into the bush, where a lot of people had fled because of the fighting, and taking out the injured on stretchers."



### **Beyond the physical wounds**

But as Antoinette got to know the ICRC further, she realized that we were concerned not only with treating the immediate wounds, but also the longer-term physical effects and psychological trauma caused by violence.

Antoinette had already founded an organization to promote women's health and economic interests. In 2008, she decided to attend one of our courses to raise health and safety awareness among women who had been raped during the conflict.

Since then, Antoinette has trained as a psychosocial assistant and worked as head of a maison d'écoute, a place where women who have suffered from sexual violence can talk about it and receive counselling without fear of recrimination or stigma. "We have received very good training on how to identify the symptoms of sexual violence and come up with solutions," she says.

## Help for victims of sexual violence

In certain crises, we provide post-rape kits. They contain emergency contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies, anti-retroviral drugs to prevent HIV transmission, treatments against sexually transmitted infections and vaccinations against tetanus and hepatitis B. We also give counselling to victims to help them recover from the psychological scars left by sexual violence.

## Women and girls

The ICRC helps all victims of conflict. But women and girls have specific health, protection and other needs that we seek to address in our activities. We emphasize how women and girls must be protected in conflicts, and we raise awareness among fighters that sexual violence in all its forms is prohibited by humanitarian law.

To learn more about women and war, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



Catalina Martin-Chico/ICRC

When women are detained, we seek to ensure that their particular needs are met in accordance with international law.

# RESTORING FAMILY LINKS

Every year, many thousands of families are separated by conflicts, natural disasters or the growing phenomenon of migration. People can suffer terribly when they lose contact with their loved ones, and don't know where they are, if they are safe or even if they are alive.

The ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies work together around the world to locate people and put them back in touch with their relatives. We try to find family members, restore contact, reunite families and find out what happened to those who went missing.

## Central Tracing Agency

These tasks are coordinated by our Central Tracing Agency, which was created for the purpose of restoring contact between family members dispersed by armed conflict and other violence. Hundreds of thousands of new cases – involving displaced people, refugees, detainees or missing people – are opened each year. Our Restoring Family Links website also allows people to make tracing requests easily as emergencies arise.

To learn more, see [www.familylinks.icrc.org](http://www.familylinks.icrc.org)



After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the ICRC provided satellite phones to help people get in touch with loved ones.



## STORY OF DISCOVERY

# A FORMER PRISONER FINDS ANSWERS

When Dr Patricio Bustos was imprisoned in 1975 under the military dictatorship in Chile, he says visits from one of our delegates helped him avoid the fate of many of his compatriots.

“The fact that the ICRC registered me and told my family that I was alive helped to guarantee that I would not be killed,” he says. Now, more than 40 years later, Bustos is the director of Chile’s forensic service. One of their main tasks involves helping the families of those who disappeared during the dictatorship to get answers about their missing loved ones.



Hector Gonzalez de Cunco/ICRC

Today, Chile’s forensic service serves as a model for other States that are using forensic science to identify the remains of missing people. The ICRC is a key partner in these efforts, which have included identifying people killed in a devastating earthquake in 2010 and in a prison fire that claimed 81 lives in Santiago later that year.

Through his work with the ICRC, Bustos has gained an even deeper appreciation for the breadth of our humanitarian commitment. “Before the ICRC came to visit me in prison, I knew about their founder, Henry Dunant, and their work during wars. But visiting detainees, that was new to me,” says Bustos.

After the dictatorship ended in 1990, he says, the ICRC’s consistent support and neutral and impartial stance were critical to building the public’s trust in efforts to help families of the missing. Part of our work is reminding States, armed forces and armed groups of their moral and legal obligation to provide information that might help families find out what happened to missing loved ones.

## Missing people: The right to know

Under international humanitarian law, States bear primary responsibility for preventing “disappearances” and meeting the needs of the families. We offer advice to governments on how to investigate cases of missing people. At the same time, we help manage human remains and support forensic investigations carried out to identify the dead. All along the way, we provide a helping hand to those families struggling for answers.



## PREVENTION

The ICRC aims to contain the harmful effects of armed conflict on people's lives and dignity by strenuously reminding all parties to a conflict that even in times of war, there are rules that must be followed.

The rules of war are contained in a body of law generally referred to as the law of war, or international humanitarian law. The purpose of this law is to prevent and limit human suffering in the event of armed conflict by requiring States and non-State armed groups to use force with restraint, and only to the extent necessary to weaken the military potential of the enemy.

### **Promoting respect for the rules of war**

The rules of war must be observed not only by governments and their armed forces, but also by organized non-State armed groups. For this reason, we work with all parties to a conflict to make sure they understand their obligations under humanitarian law. In promoting the whole range of humanitarian law, we seek to prevent – or at the very least limit – the worst excesses of war.

**An ICRC staff member talking about international humanitarian law to soldiers in Mali.**



# GETTING THE MESSAGE TO THE FRONT LINES

When widespread violence broke out in the Central African Republic in 2014, the ICRC's first mission was to bring first aid to the wounded and vital relief for people displaced by the fighting. We did this by working closely with the Central African Red Cross and other members of the Movement.

As in many conflicts, alongside our aid operations we worked to prevent or at least minimize the suffering of people caught in the crossfire. To do so, we engaged in regular dialogue with all parties to the conflict and sought to persuade them to comply with humanitarian law.

As the conflict wore on, we met with members of the international forces, the national military, armed groups, the gendarmerie and police, as well as armed civilians to promote greater respect and protection for the wounded, the sick and detainees, and the civilian population in general.

In an environment steeped in feelings of anger, hatred and vengeance, the task can be daunting. "It will take time," says Jean-François Sangsue, head of the delegation in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. "But we must never tire of explaining and promoting compliance with humanitarian law. Better knowledge of the law can stop people from breaking it."



Romarie Belcourrou/ICRC

An ICRC delegate explaining international humanitarian law and human rights law to soldiers and police officers in the Central African Republic.

## **State armed forces**

States have a legal obligation to ensure that their armed forces are fully versed in the law of armed conflict at all levels of the chain of command. They must also ensure that these rules are applied in all situations. The ICRC promotes the respect of international humanitarian law and its implementation in domestic legislation, and helps States fully incorporate it into military doctrine and training.

## **Non-State armed groups**

Most of today's armed conflicts are non-international and involve weapon-bearers who may have little or no formal training. We endeavour, therefore, to establish relations and build contacts with all parties to a conflict, including non-State armed groups. In this way, we can raise awareness of humanitarian law and the activities and working methods of the ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. By increasing the safety of humanitarian workers, we make it easier for them to reach the victims of conflict.

## **Law enforcement agencies**

We also work regularly with police and security forces as they are often called upon to intervene in armed conflict and other violence. We explain our work, and seek to ensure that these forces receive training in how humanitarian and human rights law apply in law-enforcement operations.

## **Global arena**

Our headquarters and delegations engage in humanitarian diplomacy at the national, regional and global levels. We raise issues of concern with those who have influence over critical issues, such as the fate of people caught in the fighting, the delivery of humanitarian aid and access to places of detention.

## **Eye on the future**

We also do our best to raise awareness of humanitarian law in the media, schools and universities, and companies (including those operating in areas of fighting). By raising awareness among the public, we hope to increase the level of respect for and compliance with humanitarian law.

# TOWARDS A MORE HUMANE FUTURE

The original Geneva Convention was signed by representatives from 16 countries in 1864. Since then, the ICRC has played a central role in promoting and developing international humanitarian law, which protects people during conflict and enshrines their right to humanitarian aid.

We continue to play an active role in developing new rules to reduce human suffering, while striving to ensure that the existing rules are upheld. Warfare and weaponry have changed. But the international community is more aware of the suffering caused by war, in part because of work by the ICRC and other members of the Movement.

## Putting the law into action

In 2011, for example, the Movement and the States party to the Geneva Conventions adopted a four-year action plan drawn up by the ICRC. The plan aimed to improve access by civilians to humanitarian aid and enhance protection for certain categories of people, such as children, women, people with disabilities and journalists.



ICRC Archives

The founding of the ICRC is directly linked to the signing in 1864 of the original Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (left). The convention laid the foundation for a body of law that protects people in wartime.

Above right, the ICRC addresses a European Union meeting in 2014 on ensuring protection for health-care workers and facilities.



## Humanitarian law treaties

The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the three Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005 are complemented by other important treaties. These include treaties that prohibit the use of weapons that cause unacceptable harm, such as: exploding bullets (1868), expanding bullets (1899), chemical and biological weapons (1925, 1972 and 1993), munitions using undetectable fragments (1980), blinding laser weapons (1995), anti-personnel mines (1997) and cluster munitions (2008). There are also treaties that limit the use of certain weapons, for example incendiary weapons (1980), without prohibiting these weapons outright.

## New weapons, new means to wage war

Despite the changing nature of warfare and weaponry, humanitarian law must be complied with at all times. Yet applying existing rules to a new technology is not always straightforward. Are the rules sufficiently clear about this technology? What will be its impact? The ICRC regularly contributes to discussions about these weapons and the challenges they pose to humanitarian law.



Marko Kotic/ICRC

A sign warning of the danger of unexploded ordnance in Lebanon.

## LIMITING THE HUMAN TOLL OF WAR

Our concerns about weapons are strictly humanitarian. Throughout our 150-year history, we have drawn on our first-hand observations in the field to alert States to the unacceptably high cost in human terms of certain weapons. Under our mandate to protect and help the victims of armed conflicts or other violence, we have called on States to develop new international rules to address this problem.

### Appeals to States

Some examples: in 1918 we appealed to States to ban poison and asphyxiating gases (which led to the adoption of the 1925 Geneva Protocol); in 1945 we first called on States to prohibit nuclear weapons; in 1994 we called on the States party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) to prohibit blinding laser weapons; in 1994 we called on States to prohibit and eliminate anti-personnel landmines; and in 2000 we called on States to deal with the suffering caused by mines and unexploded ordnance. This led in 2003 to CCW Protocol V, which made States responsible for recording and sharing information about areas contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance, and clearing contaminated areas.



## Private security forces

In recent years, private military and security companies have increasingly provided services in conflict zones. These range from logistical support to managing facilities, and in some cases direct participation in hostilities. Along with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, we launched an initiative that led to the adoption of the Montreux Document in 2008. This reiterates the legal obligations of States and private companies, and sets out how States can best promote compliance with humanitarian and human rights law during armed conflict.

## Regional treaties

We also provide advice and support in drafting major regional agreements that protect people affected by conflict. In 2009, for example, the African Union adopted the Kampala Convention, the first international treaty ever adopted across an entire continent for protecting and helping displaced people.

## Domestic legislation

Through our advisory service on international humanitarian law, we encourage States to pass domestic legislation to give force to humanitarian law.

Unexploded bombs in Laos before they were safely destroyed by bomb disposal experts.



Jim Holmes/ICRC

*“Working with the ICRC was extremely helpful. We were able to combine their expertise in landmines with our ability to bring Member States together. Since then we have continued to work together on a range of issues, especially humanitarian law.”*

El-Ghassim Wane, director of the African Union’s Peace and Security Department



Catalina Martin-Chico is the winner of the first ICRC Humanitarian Visa d'or photojournalism award (23rd "Visa pour l'Image" International Photojournalism Festival – September 2011 – Perpignan, France).

## HEALTH CARE IN DANGER

In armed conflicts, safe access to health care is often among the first casualties. The sick and wounded cannot get the medical attention they need for a number of reasons: they cannot travel around freely because of the fighting; ambulances that should collect them are held up at checkpoints; health-care facilities where they should be treated are damaged or destroyed; and the health personnel who should attend to them may be killed or forced to flee.

Attacks on medical facilities and workers in countries where health care is already under pressure prevent thousands of people every year from being seen by doctors or receiving life-saving vaccinations.

### **The right to provide care**

International humanitarian law and international human rights law protect the sick and wounded and those who care for them. Sadly, these rules are often disregarded. For this reason, the Movement launched the *Health Care in Danger* project in 2011. It aimed to ensure safe access to health care for people living amid armed conflict and other emergencies and to improve safety for workers bravely trying to provide medical services.

## Across the board

The project covered all the key areas of our work – protection, assistance and prevention – and had many features: research to assess the scope and nature of the violence; practical steps to make health-care workers and facilities safer; public statements calling attention to violations and patterns of abuse; and a public-awareness campaign. And we worked hard to persuade governments to improve laws – and enforce those laws – to protect patients and those caring for them.

## Partnerships for safe health care

The ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worked with many governments and international organizations, such as the United Nations, the African Union and the World Health Organization, to make the project a success. We also teamed up with professional bodies, such as the World Medical Association, the International Council of Nurses and the International Committee of Military Medicine, to produce recommendations that could ensure safer access to and delivery of health care in armed conflicts.

To learn more about the Health Care in Danger project, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



Catalina Martín-Chico/Cosmos



At the ICRC, we get our message across in many ways, including our live RSS feed, Twitter account, Facebook page and website ([www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)). We also work with news organizations to raise awareness about humanitarian concerns and to promote the safety of journalists working in war zones or other areas of violence.

For more information, see [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)

# DISCOVERING THE FUTURE

## **Changing technology, tools and challenges**

Technology affects every sphere of life, and conflict is no exception. In the past decade, for example, the world has witnessed the use of remotely piloted drones. More broadly speaking, governments and arms manufacturers are developing a wide range of automated and autonomous weapons as well as cyber-warfare capabilities.

As technology changes how wars are fought, international law needs to keep pace. A clear understanding of how existing laws and treaties apply to new technology must be established, and new areas of international humanitarian law may need to be explored and developed. In pursuit of these goals, the ICRC monitors new developments in weaponry and maintains a constant dialogue with States on these matters.

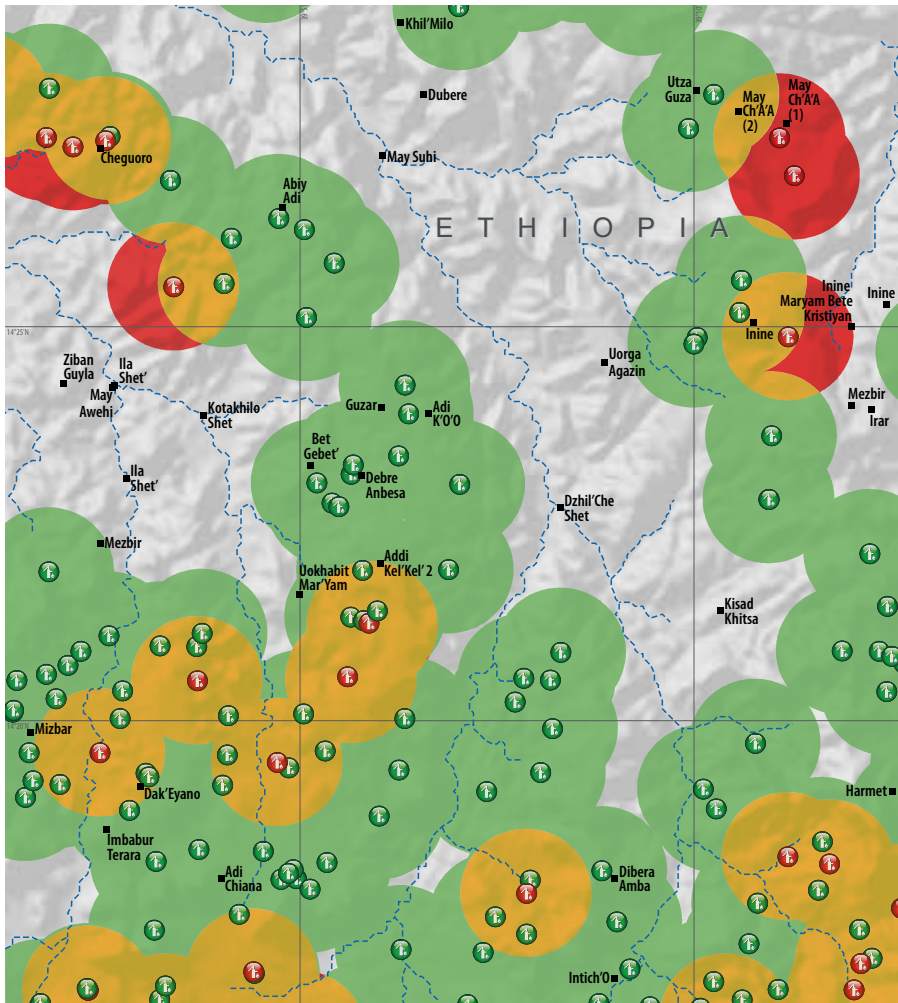
## **New opportunities**

Technological change has other implications as well. Smartphones, laptop computers and improved communications networks offer new ways to respond to complex crises. Digital crisis maps, for example, allow critical information to be charted in real time via the internet or mobile-phone networks. The ICRC also has new ways of sending critical information directly to the people most in need. And victims of conflict can make their needs known more directly and specifically. This allows us to target our aid more efficiently and coordinate better with our partners.

## **Constant improvements**

Our commitment to alleviating suffering in conflict has never wavered. It remains as strong now as when we were founded 150 years ago. And we shall continue to build on our experience to help those most in need to lead healthy, productive and dignified lives.

To discover more about the ICRC, please visit [www.icrc.org/discover](http://www.icrc.org/discover)



### WATER ACCESSIBILITY MAP – Woreda Ahferom, Ethiopia, December 2011

Tigray Water Resource authorities have set themselves a goal: no village in Tigray will be farther than 1.5 kilometres away from a source of water.

The map above was created by the Tigray Water Resource Bureau after an inventory of all the water points in Woreda Ahferom in 2011.

It shows which villages have access to water within 1.5 kilometres and which do not, thereby indicating where water points have to be repaired or constructed.

#### Areas and villages

- Served by functioning water points within 1.5 km
- Served by partially functioning water points within 1.5 km – *Repairs are needed*
- Served by broken water point within 1.5 km – *Repairs are urgently needed*
- Not served by a water point within 1.5 km – *Additional water points are needed*

#### Hand pumps

- Working
- Broken

Data source:  
 Locality: OSM, Gazetteer  
 Rivers: ICRC  
 Water Points: ICRC and  
 Tigray Water Resource Bureau  
 Basemap: SRTM Shaded Relief

0 2 km  
 Property of ICRC. All  
 rights reserved.



This digital map, developed by the Tigray Water Resource Bureau in Ethiopia and the ICRC, enables local water board members to upload data to the cloud on the status of wells and water sources. Then they can track villagers' access to water and whether wells need to be dug or repaired.



## **MISSION**

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 armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours 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 international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



ICRC