



note from the Editor

Since the end of the Cold War much thought has been given to ways and means of peacefully resolving conflicts among States or between States and sub-State entities. Settling differences by peaceful means implies renouncing another option: recourse to force, with its appalling effect on human life and civil society. The United Nations Charter, of course, places States under the obligation to “refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...”. Two recent publications bear special witness to this major concern of international policy: Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace (1992, with its 1995 Supplement) and the Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997). Moreover, a large body of literature gives much insight into the diverse aspects of peaceful conflict resolution and proposes measures conducive to achieving that goal.

This issue of the Review examines possibilities and limits of preventive action from the perspective of humanitarian policy and law. It must, however, be made clear right from the outset that we do not intend to embrace the vast field covered by today’s research into conflict prevention and peaceful settlement of conflict in general. Preventing conflicts from breaking out is neither the purpose of international humanitarian law nor is it a realistic goal for “humanitarians”. In particular, settling conflicts — an endeavour which is necessarily of a political nature — is not part of the mandate of humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC. The question which is open for discussion is rather the following one: what contribution can humanitarian policy, action or law make to minimizing casualties among those who are not engaged in the war effort, in particular civilians, and to limiting destruction of civilian property, especially of the country’s

infrastructure? In other words, what can be done to prevent serious violations of international humanitarian law from happening in time of armed conflict? That such humanitarian action may also have the effect of helping to preserve peaceful conditions or facilitate a return to normalcy should be noted and further explored.

The main part of this issue of the Review consists of articles examining possible contributions by various disciplines to achieving the goal of limiting the harm inflicted in armed conflict. In the second part, the reader will find a number of texts on a range of different topics, all linked to humanitarian policy, action and law.

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