

Understanding the Movement



The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

This umbrella term refers to all the national and international organizations allowed to use the Red Cross or Red Crescent emblem and all the activities they undertake to relieve human suffering throughout the world. The International Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement is one of the largest humanitarian networks in the world with a presence and activities in almost every country. It is unified and guided by seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. All Red Cross and Red Crescent activities have one central purpose: to help those who suffer, without discrimination whether it be during conflict, in response to natural or man-made disasters, or to alleviate the suffering brought by conditions of chronic poverty.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the national societies are independent organizations. Each has its own individual status and exercises no authority over the others.

The International Committee of the Red Cross

Established in 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The ICRC is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusive 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 conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. Among its many activities, the ICRC searches for missing persons, exchanges messages to and from members of separated families, helps establish hospital and security zones in embattled areas, visits prisoners of war and civilian detainees, spreads knowledge and monitors compliance of humanitarian law, organizes international aid programs and provides medical assistance for refugees, displaced people, and other civilian victims of armed conflicts. It also endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Founded in 1919, the International Federation is a coalition of individual Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies that coordinate relief efforts throughout the world occurring outside the theater of war and other forms of armed conflict. Currently, the Federation comprises 181 member Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, a Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland and regional delegations strategically located to support activities around the world. The Federation's activities include organizing and coordinating international disaster relief actions, providing assistance to refugees outside areas of conflict, promoting national disaster preparedness programs and strengthening the capacities of its member national societies.

The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

These are the individual societies of nearly every independent country in the world. Chartered, as they must be, by their respective governments, they provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programs, and assistance to people affected by war within their own borders and cooperate with other national societies bilaterally, regionally, and through the Federation and the ICRC on relief and development projects. They also assist their own governments in carrying out each nation's humanitarian treaty obligations. Each country is allowed to charter only one Red Cross or Red Crescent society within its territory. Together, the National Societies have 97 million members and volunteers and assist some 233 million beneficiaries each year. The promotion of humanitarian values is an intrinsic part of all Red Cross and Red Crescent activities. They also promote awareness of international humanitarian law and advocate internationally through the Federation and with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The American Red Cross is one of the 181 national societies throughout the world and shares most characteristics with other national societies. It is dedicated to the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, participates in all activities of the Movement, supports the role of the ICRC in conflict zones, and works alongside other national societies in the Federation and in bilateral arrangements on a wide variety relief and development activities.

Israel's Magen David Adom (MDA)

The Magen David Adom (Red Star of David) is the equivalent of a national Red Cross or Red Crescent society in Israel. The MDA is considered a part of the Movement although the society doesn't have full recognition by the Movement or voting membership within the Federation. The conflict revolves around the society's use of a six-pointed Star of David as an emblem rather than a red cross or red crescent—both protective symbols recognized under the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

MDA has sought recognition of the Red Star of David by the Movement since 1949. The American Red Cross remains committed to a close working relationship with MDA and steadfast in its support of MDA's quest for equal status in the Movement. In 2000, the Board of Governors of the American Red Cross adopted a policy of withholding dues to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Federation) until such time as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recognizes and the Federation admits MDA as a full voting member. For more information on American Red Cross support of MDA go to http://www.redcross.org/services/intl/0,1082,0_453_,00.html