



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

International Seminar:

60th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions Signing

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Of the three Red Cross Red Crescent anniversaries we celebrate this year, the 60th year of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 is shared with the 194 states that have acceded to them. States agreed to the first Geneva Convention in 1864 – the direct result of Henry Dunant’s experience at Solferino – and the texts as we know them today built on nearly a century of additional knowledge and understanding of the needs of victims of war.

It is easy to think of the Geneva Conventions as a matter for the International Committee of the Red Cross and, in many ways it is. Nevertheless, it is in the same conventions that provide the basis in international humanitarian law for the existence of National Societies, and their role as auxiliaries to the public authorities.

This role, clarified and given a solid foundation in domestic legislation in each country is one of the main sources of the strength of national societies and their capacity to be effective, impartial and independent partners when addressing vulnerabilities and needs among their populations.

National Societies also play an important role in dissemination of International Humanitarian Law, and in explaining what that is about to their own volunteers and staff, to the general public and in conversations with their partners in their respective governments.

Out of those conversations come the mutual confidence and respect that makes it possible to begin addressing today’s challenges – the humanitarian consequences of climate change, or migration, the continuing burden of disease, and new threats such as the influenza pandemic that appeared over the past few months. To meet these “New Solferinos” we need to learn from Henry Dunant at the original battle-field: taking human suffering as a personal matter for each and every one of us, and act accordingly.

This is what we see Red Cross volunteers and staff across the world, and let me end with expressing appreciation and admiration for the work they do to *save*, to *protect*, and *preserve* human life . Which is as close to a definition of the word “humanitarian” as one might come.