

## ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a private funded humanitarian organisation, headquartered at Geneva, Switzerland. The mandate of ICRC is to protect the victims of international and internal armed conflicts. Such victims include war wounded, prisoners, refugees, civilians, and other non-combatants.

The ICRC operates under the tenets of International humanitarian law (IHL). The IHL comprises of the Geneva Conventions and The Hague Conventions, and customary laws. IHL defines the conduct and responsibilities of belligerent nations, neutral nations and individuals engaged in warfare, in relation to each other and to protected persons, usually meaning civilians.

As part of its mandate to promote the implementation and development of international humanitarian law, the ICRC seeks to ensure that weapons in use and under development conform to the existing rules.

Combatants are prohibited to use weapons which are inherently indiscriminate or which are of a nature to inflict suffering greater than that required to take combatants “out of action”. Weapons which violate the “dictates of the public conscience” may also be prohibited on that basis alone. The use of weapons which cause widespread, longterm and severe damage to the natural environment is prohibited. Certain weapons like biological, chemical, blinding laser or incendiary weapons or bullets which explode or flatten easily in the human body are regarded as inhumane.

The work of ICRC to curb the use of biological and chemical weapons in warfare can be traced to the First World War. Apart from its humanitarian efforts, the ICRC in its quest to have humanitarian law adapted to new realities, launched an appeal in February 1918, calling on the belligerents to stop using poison gas.<sup>1</sup>

The ICRC considers any use of biological agents to cause illness, death or fear to be utterly repugnant and abhorrent acts.

The ICRC initiative on Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity was prompted by the risk that new technologies from life sciences could be put to hostile use. The centrepiece of the ICRC initiative is an appeal to governments, the scientific community, the military and industry to recognise the risks, the rules and their responsibilities in this domain.

Moreover, the ‘Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity’ initiative is designed to promote more adaptive implementation of practical measures to prevent the use of the life sciences for hostile purposes, both by individual actors and in improving synergy between them. The ICRC describes this as the ‘web of prevention.’

When launching the appeal in 2002, the ICRC proposed a Ministerial Declaration on Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity. Whilst States were favourable in principle, there was no consensus as to the optimal timing for adoption of such a Declaration. In parallel, successful outreach to the scientific community has been achieved via specific roundtables in London, Moscow and Kuala Lumpur, numerous contacts with scientific institutions and by publication of a brochure “Preventing hostile use of the life sciences”

The centrepiece of the ICRC’s initiative is an appeal to governments, industry, science and medical communities, the military and civil society. This public appeal was launched on 25 September 2002.

Prior to the public launch of this appeal there was a meeting of government and independent experts in Montreux, Switzerland, to discuss issues in the fields of biotechnology, biological weapons, international law, ethics and social responsibility.

Since the launch of the appeal, the ICRC has been working with actors in the life sciences to promote awareness of the norms against

poison and the deliberate spread of disease and the need for preventive action, in conjunction with their responsibilities.

The ICRC initiative on 'Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity' was prompted by the need to reduce the risk that the life sciences will be used to the detriment of humanity. It is intended to provoke thoughtful reflection on the risks, rules and responsibilities related to advances in this area.

## **Endnotes:**

- 1 <http://www.cicr.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/98457d54a6ddbe7cc1257of300431b5e/2fdbd8239od1cd18c1256b66005e78e4!OpenDocument>.