

Welcoming address

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On behalf of the Henry Dunant Institute, allow me to present my warmest greetings to the distinguished participants at this Seminar on International Humanitarian Law for representatives of Governments and Academic Institutions of the Asian and Pacific area. May I thank you for joining us at this important gathering.

We appreciate the fact that so many governments and academic institutions of countries in the Asian and Pacific area are represented here today and the high qualifications of their representatives, not only show the great interest they take in this Seminar, but also are the best guarantee for active participation and success.

First and foremost, I wish to express all my thanks to the Australian Government for the constant support it has always expressed and given in bringing about this meeting. I wish to take advantage of this opportunity to underline the initiatives and actions taken by the governmental authorities of this country together with the Australian Red Cross Society to promote and disseminate the knowledge of International Humanitarian Law.

I also wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Australian National University, our host and partner, for their interest and dedication, and to pay special tribute to the Australian Red Cross Society, to its President and collaborators without whom this Seminar would never have come about. And I wish to associate in my warmest thanks the International Committee of the Red Cross for its continuous and substantial support. I am delighted at the presence of their eminent delegates as well as that of the representative of the League of Red Cross Societies.

It is indeed a recognized fact that, legally speaking, the responsibility for disseminating the content of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols lies with the governments of the States bound by these instruments. But the Red Cross, which has to cope with the tragic consequences of conflicts, has a very direct interest of its own in doing all it can to help governments to fulfil their obligations in the work of dissemination within their own boundaries. This is the main reason why the International Red Cross institutions, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies, have set up over the past few years a worldwide programme aiming at promoting the dissemination of International Humanitarian Law among the armed forces, government officers, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, academic circles and schools, and the public in general.

As a research and training centre of the International Red Cross, the Henry Dunant Institute has endeavoured in recent years to contribute to the research on and the teaching of International Humanitarian Law. Together with academic

institutions it has periodically organised, since 1977, regional seminars in Africa and in Latin America which have been attended by representatives of Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Education of the countries concerned, as well as by University professors and law experts.

Encouraged by the results of the previous Seminars, the Institute thought it appropriate to extend them to other parts of the world. And again we consider it as a privilege that the Australian National University and the Australian Red Cross Society have shared with us the interest of organising such a Seminar in Canberra for representatives of Governments and Academic Institutions of the Asian and Pacific area.

For this "premiere", we are also indebted to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Malaysian Red Crescent which organized in 1978 in Kuala Lumpur a Seminar on International Humanitarian Law for representatives of Asian National Societies. We are also indebted to the National Societies and institutes of this region which over these last years have initiated national meetings on humanitarian law.

Based on our previous experiences a number of fundamental truths have been discovered which I should like to share with you : we must realise that, if dissemination is so important to governments, it is because it has very direct and concrete consequences on the victims of armed conflicts. It may indeed mean, in any given armed conflict, the difference between life and death for civilians, whether women and children will be protected, wounded combatants treated, it may save prisoners from being tortured or starved to death, as well as hospitals and medical personnel from being harmed for caring for the sick and wounded from any side, and so forth.

Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law, if properly done, literally means the saving of countless human lives, and therefore merits our utmost concern.

Concern of government ministries and of civil servants because they are the ones responsible for the implementation of the rules laid down in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols as the agents of a government which has pledged itself to respect and apply them when ratifying these instruments.

Concern of the academic world because of its educational responsibilities. Not so long ago the few existing specialists in International Humanitarian Law could be found mainly in Geneva and in a very small number of other places in the world. Thanks largely to the Diplomatic Conference which took place in Geneva from 1974 to 1977, a growing number of University professors worldwide have shown genuine interest in the matter and endeavoured to specialize in it. This trend must be encouraged, if only to provide each country with its own specialists in International Humanitarian Law. Besides, national specialists in each country are invaluable assets for dissemination efforts to the public.

The great interest of such meetings is not only to explain or clear up such important but complicated matters as the status of combatants, prisoners of war, the enforcing of International Humanitarian Law, but to allow free debates between experts from different disciplines or various schools of thought which can give rise to fruitful exchanges of views and enriching contacts. We must believe in the multiplying effect of such meetings, considered as long-term investments for the inculcation of humanitarian values.

I would also like to underline here an answer to an odd statement heard from time to time, namely that International Humanitarian Law is not worth being considered in some parts of the world because it is Western and Christian. This statement does not stand up to close scrutiny. Each civilisation of our planet throughout history has shown that these rules exist in Islam, the African traditions and in Asian civilisations and religious systems as well. This is a very basic truth that we should keep in mind: whatever their colour, uniform, religious belief or political creed, victims everywhere are equal in their sufferings and undergo exactly the same pains. They all need mercy, help and care. Thus, whatever the language used to express them, the needs are the same, and so are the answers to these needs.

Our experience through similar seminars in Africa and in Latin America has shown us how important it is for the dissemination of International Humanitarian Law to take roots in the traditions and cultures of the various regions of the world, and fully justifies the decentralization of the teaching of International Humanitarian Law, also taking into account the political, socio-economic and eventually the conflictual context of the region concerned.

This is finally a condition necessary for efficient dissemination at all public levels.

The countries of the Asian and Pacific area have paid a heavy tribute in suffering through man-made disasters and have paid the price of these sufferings: they have a long tradition of solidarity but nevertheless can avail themselves of spiritual values which coincide with the precepts of Humanitarian Law. I am convinced that this Seminar will again produce proofs of this spirit through the participation of eminent experts of this region, invited to introduce and comment on the various aspects of Humanitarian Law and to put emphasis on the traditional Asian approaches to the protection of victims of armed conflicts and their relationship to modern International Humanitarian Law.

Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen, your presence at this Seminar indicates how much each one of the Ministries and Academic Institutions which you represent is aware of the importance of the dissemination of International Humanitarian Law and bears witness to the interest he or she has or intends to have, in this problem. We would therefore be very pleased if, by the end of this regional gathering, you will go back to your countries with an even better perception of International Law. We sincerely hope that you will feel yourselves as "dissemination agents", convinced and better prepared to convince, that the universal values embodied in the Conventions and Protocols appeal to what is best in man and can successfully meet the challenge of that which is most evil in him.

Thank you.