In 1859, Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessman travelling through northern Italy, witnessed the suffering of thousands of wounded and dying soldiers left without any medical care, he put forward two proposals for improving assistance for war victims:

- to set up, in peacetime, in every country, relief societies composed of volunteers ready to take care of wounded soldiers in war;
- to get countries to agree to the idea of protecting the wounded and sick on the battlefield and those caring for them.

The first proposal led to the establishment of a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in almost every country around the world. The second proposal set the stage for the adoption of the Geneva Conventions.

The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

The red cross and red crescent emblems are a universal sign of hope for people in humanitarian crises. For communities enduring the trauma of armed conflict and other situations of violence or the hardships of natural disasters, the emblems signal that help is on its way.

For further information, please go to www.icrc.org/war-and-law/emblem/
Protocols of 1977 and 2005. They can be used in two ways.

How can the emblems be used?

For indicative purposes

In times of peace the emblems may be displayed individually and in their pure form, as a symbol of protection by:

- medical services and religious personnel of the armed forces;
- medical personnel, facilities and vehicles of National Societies when placed at the disposal of the medical services of the armed forces and subject to military laws and regulations;
- with the express authorization of the authorities to ensure proper use of the emblems.

During times of peace, the emblems may also be displayed individually and in their pure form, as a symbol of protection by:

- medical services and religious personnel of the armed forces;
- National Society staff, medical facilities and vehicles that could be mobilized in the event of armed conflict, with the authorities’ consent.

Misuse of the emblems

Any misuse of the emblems may diminish their protective value and erode respect for them in times of armed conflict. This could endanger the lives of those entitled to display an emblem for protective purposes.

Perfidy

The use of the emblems during an armed conflict to protect combatants and military equipment and with the intent to mislead the adversary.

In order to ensure universal respect for and protection of the emblems, each State party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions has an obligation to enact national legislation with the aim of preventing and punishing their improper use both in times of war and peace.

For protective purposes

In times of armed conflict, they can be used for protective purposes to ensure the safety of:

- medical personnel, facilities and vehicles that could be mobilized in the event of armed conflict, with the express authorization of the authorities to ensure proper use of the emblems.

Any misuse of the emblems may diminish their protective value and erode respect for them in times of armed conflict. This could endanger the lives of those entitled to display an emblem for protective purposes. Their protection while providing medical care, and undermine the safe access of the Movement’s humanitarian workers and relief. Here are some of the ways in which the emblems must not be used:

Imitation

The use of a sign which, owing to its shape and colour, may be confused with one of the emblems.

Improper use

The use of an emblem inconsistent with international humanitarian law. The use of an emblem by unauthorized persons or entities (commercial enterprises, pharmacists, private doctors, non-governmental organizations, individuals, etc.) or for purposes that are likely to undermine the prestige or the respect due to the emblem.

Symbols of the humanitarian action by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

By displaying the emblems of the red cross or the red crescent to show their association with the Movement during armed conflict, natural disasters or other emergencies, a National Society’s staff and volunteers can send an important message: the work they are carrying out is purely humanitarian and their safe access to people and communities affected by crisis must be respected at all times.

This understanding is critical because it means that people of all backgrounds, and on all sides of an armed conflict, have trust in these workers’ intentions. This in turn helps Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers to reach all people and communities in need safely even during wartime and other humanitarian crises.

For indicative purposes

In times of peace the emblems can be displayed for indicative purposes by:

- volunteers, staff or property affiliated with the Movement (the National Societies, the ICRC or the International Federation);
- as an exceptional measure by ambulance and field stations exclusively assigned to providing free treatment to the wounded and sick in line with domestic legislation, and with the express authorization of the National Society.

When used as an “indicative device” by any of the Movement’s organizations as part of their logo, the emblem must always be accompanied by their name or initials, and not simply the words “red cross” or “red crescent.” The emblem must also be displayed in small dimensions and may not be placed on emblems of rosettes of flags or seals in order to avoid any confusion with the emblems used for protective purposes.