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Sixty years on: why the Fundamental Principles must be lived, not just remembered

October 23, 2025, Analysis / Conduct of Hostilities / Generating Respect for IHL / History / Humanitarian Action / Humanitarian diplomacy / Humanitarian Principles / IHL / Law and Conflict

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This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary

service, unity and universality. Proclaimed in Vienna in 1965, they were born not as abstract ideals but as the direct result of over a hundred years of humanitarian action. They have enabled aid to cross frontlines, families to be reunited, and hope to reach places of despair. Yet today, the world in which they must operate is under extraordinary strain: conflicts drag on for years, humanitarian workers face record levels of attack, climate shocks compound existing crises, digitalization reshapes the battlefield, and politicization erodes the fragile space where help can reach those who need it most. The human consequences of war remain devastatingly constant, and the Principles that have guided the Movement since 1965 are under growing pressure.

In this post, ICRC's Director General Pierre Krähenbühl reflects on the enduring relevance and importance of the Fundamental Principles in a rapidly shifting world. He argues that they are not self-sustaining ideals to be admired from afar, but living commitments that must be exercised and defended. Drawing on his three decades of humanitarian work, he makes the case that the Principles resist the dangerous normalization of war, safeguard access to people in need, and fuel the courage necessary to channel indignation into lifesaving action. At sixty, the Principles will only remain vital if we choose to live them, and in so doing, keep humanity alive in the darkest of times.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Sixty years on: why the Fundamental Principles must be lived, not just remembered

We are all, in some form, connected to war.

Some of us have a personal family history defined by conflict. Others were born in countries where the sound of gunfire was never far from childhood. Many of us have known war through stories, films, books, and lessons in history class that reveal how battles and peace treaties shaped our cultures and our civilizations. Even those who have never lived through it directly know, if they look closely, how war's butterfly effect has touched their lives.

When I began my humanitarian career in the early 1990s, the world felt like it was turning a corner. The Berlin Wall had fallen, apartheid was coming to an end in South Africa, and there was a sense of possibility in the air. Hope mingled with fragility. My first assignments in El Salvador, Peru, Afghanistan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina taught me that even in times of promise, war has a way of lingering, scarring, and reshaping lives.

At that time, the Fundamental Principles^[1] were already thirty years old. Like many young ICRC delegates, I absorbed them not as abstract ideals but as a daily practice. Humanity and impartiality guided the purpose of my actions. Neutrality and independence gave me the tools to turn those actions into reality – to negotiate across frontlines, to visit prisoners, to reach communities that otherwise would have been left alone to face devastation.

These Principles were never a theory. They were – and still are – a motivation for action, and a lifeline.

A different world, under greater strain

This month, we mark sixty years since the Fundamental Principles were proclaimed in Vienna in 1965. The world has continued to evolve, and so have many of the [features of war](#).

Conflicts continue to drag on for years, sometimes decades, without resolution. Civilians are intentionally targeted or casually disregarded as “collateral damage”. Contemporary armed conflicts are increasingly defined by the pervasive use of new technologies such as [autonomous weapons](#), [cyber operations](#), and “[information warfare](#)”, all of which risk blurring legal boundaries and intensify threats to civilians. [Dehumanizing rhetoric](#) erodes respect for even the most basic protections

under international humanitarian law (IHL). And too often, permissive interpretations of IHL are used not to protect civilians but to justify the very abuses inflicted upon them.

At the same time, principled humanitarian action is under grave threat, and pressured in new ways by the digitalization of societies. *Aid is manipulated*, recast as an arm of military or geopolitical agendas, with deadly consequences for civilians. *Harmful information* spreads faster than facts, sowing distrust and endangering access to those in need. Last year was also the *deadliest ever recorded for humanitarian workers*, and 2025 is on the same trajectory.

What remains the same in war

And still, at the most essential level, war remains unchanged. It is not, first and foremost, about geopolitics, strategy, or weaponry.

It is about your village when the enemy draws near or the drones that appear in the night sky above your home. It is about your family as you flee across a border in the night. It is about your missing loved one, and the phone call that never comes. It is about the panic that takes over when you are blindfolded and led down a prison corridor.

Human suffering caused by war is the one constant through millennia of conflict. And it is this dimension we too often normalize or look away from.

Wars kill, injure, displace, torture, humiliate, and traumatize – whether in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Sudan or Ukraine. Every person impacted deserves the same consideration. When I think of colleagues in Gaza today – surgeons who operate without sleep, staff taking considerable risks to reach people in need, volunteers who dig survivors and bodies out of rubble, nurses who console children whose parents will never come – I am deeply marked by the unbearable weight they carry. If what is happening there is something the world is prepared to tolerate, then our collective humanity is at stake.

From indignation to action

The outrage many of us feel at the state of the world is not only natural; it is necessary. Indignation is the human response to suffering and injustice. But indignation alone is not enough.

One of ICRC's founders, Henry Dunant, transformed his outrage at Solferino into action, leading to the creation of an institution and a Movement that has *alleviated suffering for over 160 years*. My colleagues across this Movement today – from Afghanistan to Yemen, from Colombia to Somalia, and beyond – channel their indignation into action every single day. So do artists, activists, and citizens who refuse to accept a world defined by division and despair.

Indignation must be translated into a constructive and courageous response. For humanitarians in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, courage is rooted in the Fundamental Principles. They are our compass. They keep us grounded and focused when the world feels overwhelming and unsettling.

And in this time of profound crisis, defending them, living them, and refusing to let them be eroded is crucial.

Why the Principles matter in today's conflicts

The Fundamental Principles are not lofty ideals to be admired from afar. They are the very conditions that make life-saving humanitarian action by our Movement possible, and this is only if they are upheld.

Humanity affirms that no life is worth less than another, compelling us to respond wherever suffering is found, and to act decisively to help protect human dignity. Impartiality ensures that help reaches those in greatest need, regardless of who they are or where they come from. Neutrality allows us to keep doors open and dialogue possible, so that protection and assistance can flow across battle lines, and independence helps preserve trust, assuring communities that we act solely on the basis of need, not political agenda. Without these Principles, we could not have [reunited families separated by conflict in South Sudan](#), evacuated the wounded across [besieged towns in Syria](#), or [visited detainees in Afghanistan](#) to ensure they were treated with dignity.

Neutrality, in particular, is often misunderstood as detachment or passivity, when in fact it is [one of the most effective tools](#) the ICRC has for action. Last week, in Israel and the occupied territories, it was neutrality – steadfastly built and upheld over years of engagement – that enabled the ICRC to act as a trusted intermediary between the parties, [facilitating the transfer and return of hostages, detainees and remains of the deceased](#). Operations of this kind are carried out amid immense suffering and polarization. They are only possible because the ICRC is perceived not as a political actor, but as a humanitarian one. Neutrality does not mean silence; it meant presence, persistence, and an unwavering focus on the people caught between forces beyond their control. In a world increasingly polarized, neutrality is what enables the ICRC to act.

The remaining Principles complete this compass and give it depth: the voluntary service of National Society volunteers, who supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), delivered aid to villages cut off by [earthquakes in Myanmar](#); the unity that allows a National Society to serve all people within a country, bridging divides in places as polarized as Somalia; and the universality that binds the Movement together, so that when [Cyclone Idai struck Mozambique](#), volunteers from across Africa and beyond rushed to support the local response.

Principles as a mirror, not a shield

Together, these seven Principles form the scaffolding of humanitarian space – the fragile yet vital room in which the Movement can operate, even in the world’s most complex contexts. Six decades on, their value hasn’t faded; it has deepened. What has changed is not their essence or relevance, but their expression. Applied with nuance and courage, the Principles have evolved with the times – a north star for humanitarian action in a world that never stands still.

However, even as the Principles continue to guide us, the humanitarian sector today faces mounting criticism. It is accused of inefficiency, of moving too slowly, of being too deeply rooted in [neo-colonial power dynamics](#). Acknowledging this, refusing to shy away from self-reflection, is not an act of weakness; it is a moral necessity. The same currents of inequality and historical imbalance that grip communities around the world, at times, shaped our own institutions as well. The Principles help us face these uncomfortable truths. They call on us to act *with* communities rather than *for* them, to ensure that every voice counts. Guided by them, we are continuously evolving our ways of working, to emphasize genuine partnership, especially with local actors, as an important part of our own action. And above all, they foster an environment where IHL is not seen as an abstraction, but a global good that protects our common humanity.

In this way, the application of the Principles enables us to build a stronger humanitarian space and response, evolving alongside the transformations taking place in the world. In doing so, we contribute to advancing towards a more equitable future and to strengthening the foundation on which we can fully realize our mandate to reduce human suffering in armed conflict.

An appeal to states

For this fragile humanitarian space to endure, the commitment of humanitarians is not enough; states carry a critical share of responsibility. At the 2024 Council of Delegates – our Movement’s highest deliberative body – governments were

explicitly called upon to respect the Movement’s adherence to the Fundamental Principles. Such resolutions are not symbolic; they signal the political will required if humanity is to prevail in war.

Honoring them means ensuring that sanctions and counterterrorism measures include humanitarian carve-outs so that food, medicine, and shelter can reach civilians; strengthening the legal base of National Societies in domestic law to protect their independence and auxiliary role; avoiding political conditionalities on funding; and actively countering harmful information that endangers humanitarians and the people they serve. Without this political will, even the strongest principles cannot stand. With it, humanity has a chance not only to endure, but to reach those who need it most.

Principles must be lived, not assumed

Over the course of my career, I have seen the Principles shape thousands of moments of protection and relief. They help us to resist the normalization of war, insisting on humanity and pushing back against the dangerous idea that conflict is inevitable or beyond restraint. They build trust and access, enabling us to cross frontlines and reach people who would otherwise remain cut off.

But like empathy, truth, or compassion, the Fundamental Principles cannot be taken for granted. They must be exercised, practiced, and defended. They must be carved into our collective muscle memory across the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Principles are not enough unless we live them.

Sixty years ago, the Movement gave words to what many humanitarians had already been doing for a century. Today, it falls to us to continue giving life to those words. We will have to do so in a world of intensifying conflicts, shifting geopolitics, and mounting questions about the stability and fairness of the international order. The humanitarian sector itself is undergoing profound and rapid change against the backdrop of a financial crisis that forces weighty decisions to be made at potentially reckless speed.

If we fail to respond – if we cling to old hierarchies and narratives or let distance or bureaucracy dilute our effectiveness – we risk losing both legitimacy and impact. But if we evolve with honesty and courage, if we open ourselves to new and equitable ways of working, then we can forge a new path toward humanitarian action rooted in shared purpose and mutual respect, and the Principles can continue to do what they have always done: guide us through chaos and uncertainty, and remind us that in war, as in peace, the only true compass point is humanity.

References

[1] The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is guided by seven Fundamental Principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality). In wider humanitarian discourse, four of these – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – are commonly referred to as the ‘humanitarian principles,’ though their interpretation and application vary across actors. For further discussion, see Marina Sharpe’s article “*It’s all relative: The origins, legal character and normative content of the humanitarian principles*”, International Review of the Red Cross No. 925, April 2024.

See also:

- Ariana Lopes Morey and Avigail Shai, [Dialogue, dignity, and the humanitarian contribution to peace](#), October 2, 2025
- Cordula Droeger, [War and what we make of the law](#), July 18, 2024
- Olivier Ray, [Principles under pressure: have humanitarian principles really stood the test of time?](#), July 11, 2024
- Marina Sharpe, [It's all relative: the humanitarian principles in historical and legal perspective](#), March 16, 2023
- Pierrick Devidal, ['Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age](#), February 2, 2023
- ICRC Library, [The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#), 4 May 2021

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