Definition: Red Cross from Philip’s Encyclopedia

International organization that seeks to alleviate human suffering, particularly through disaster relief and aid to war victims. It consists of more than 150 independent national societies in most countries, with central headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. It is staffed largely by volunteers. The name comes from its symbol: a red cross on a white background. The International Red Cross received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917 and 1944. The organization is known as the Red Crescent in most Muslim countries.

Summary Article: Red Cross
From The Columbia Encyclopedia

International organization concerned with the alleviation of human suffering and the promotion of public health; the world-recognized symbols of mercy and absolute neutrality are the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, and the Red Crystal flags and emblems.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The blanket agency for all Red Cross groups, formerly known as the International Red Cross, changed its name in 1986 to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in order to encompass a number of branches in Islamic nations. It sponsors the International Red Cross Conference (instituted 1867), the highest deliberative body of the organization. The conference meets every four years, and its membership consists of representatives from each national society and from several international committees. There are national Red Cross societies in over 180 countries of the world, each a self-governing organization, and two international groups with headquarters in Geneva: the International Committee of the Red Cross (established in 1863), composed of 25 Swiss citizens and serving as a neutral intermediary in time of war, with special interest in the welfare of prisoners of war; and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (founded as the League of Red Cross Societies in 1919), a federation of national societies for mutual help, cooperation, and program development, especially in time of peace. All societies are supported by membership fees and popular subscriptions, and a number receive government subsidies in addition.

The work of the Red Cross has been greatly expanded since the end of World War II, and it has moved into many fields. It has taken on extensive refugee relief activities, helping to care for refugees of warfare, drought, and ethnic conflicts all over the world, including Hungary (1956), Somalia (1992), Rwanda (1994), and the former Yugoslavia (throughout the 1990s). During the Korean War, the International Red Cross suggested (1952) the first exchange of prisoners and sick and wounded combatants. The group also coordinated international relief efforts following natural disasters, such as the massive cyclone and storm surge that hit East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1970 and left almost a half million dead, the hurricane that hit Honduras in 1974, and the earthquakes in Armenia (1988) and Turkey (1999).

The American Red Cross

The American Red Cross was organized (1881) by Clara Barton and received its first federal charter in
In 1900, it was brought into closer relationship with the government when a new congressional charter was granted. The charter was revised in 1947. The organization, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., is supported entirely by voluntary contributions. The president of the United States is honorary chairman of the society, responsible for the appointment of its president and seven other members of its board of governors. The American Red Cross puts special emphasis on disaster relief, services to the armed forces and veterans, and public health and safety programs. The nationwide Red Cross blood program is a comprehensive system designed to collect, store, treat, and distribute blood and blood products to the ill and injured throughout the United States (see blood bank).

History

The creation of the Red Cross was spurred by the publication of *Un Souvenir de Solférino* (1862), an account by Jean Henri Dunant of the suffering endured by the wounded at the battle of Solferino in 1859. Dunant, a Swiss citizen, urged the formation of voluntary aid societies for relief of such war victims. He also asked that service to military sick and wounded be neutral.

The Société genovoise d'Utilité publique, a Swiss welfare agency, actively seconded Dunant’s suggestion, the result being the formation (1863) of the organization that became known as the Red Cross. The next year, delegates from 16 nations met in Switzerland, and the Geneva Convention of 1864 for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field was adopted and signed by 12 of the nations represented. It provided for the neutrality of the medical personnel of armed forces, the humane treatment of the wounded, the neutrality of civilians who voluntarily assisted them, and the use of an international emblem to mark medical personnel and supplies. In honor of Dunant’s nationality, a red cross on a white background—the Swiss flag with colors reversed—was chosen as this symbol.

The original Geneva Convention, its subsequent revisions, and allied treaties such as the Hague Convention for naval forces and the Prisoner of War Convention have been signed (although not always ratified) by almost all countries and their dependencies. The International Committee of the Red Cross was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917, 1944, and, with the League of Red Cross Societies, in 1963.

The Red Crescent, which was first used by the Ottoman Empire in 1876, was formally recognized by the League of Red Cross Societies in 1929. Iran used the Red Lion and Sun, formally recognized in 1949, until 1980. The adoption of the Red Crystal symbol in 2005 (effective in 2007), although occurring primarily as a means to provide an emblem under which Israel’s Magen David Adom could become a full member (2006) of the international movement, also established a neutral emblem that could be used by any national society that preferred to avoid using the Christian cross or Islamic crescent.

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