

A note from the Editor

The articles in this issue of the Review are intended to stimulate reflection on international humanitarian law in Asia today. Asia is of course a vast continent, and bewilderingly diverse — too vast, and too diverse, to be “dealt with” as a whole. The same is true of international humanitarian law, a notion that currently covers a great multitude of problems and questions. It would be impossible to address them all within the confines of the present survey, or to examine how all the different cultures and civilizations of Asia respond to them. No one will hold it against the editor of the Review that he has had to make some choices. The purpose of this issue is to try and shed some light on a few of the questions raised by international humanitarian law in Asia today, to arouse interest in the problems posed by the implementation of the law in Asia and to broach a number of issues that call for further discussion.

The Review asked several well-known authors from various parts of Asia to share their thoughts on the situation of international humanitarian law on their continent. We are grateful to them for having accepted. In addition to these academics, lawyers and military officers who have contributed to the present issue, a number of ICRC staff members have examined various problems of their own choosing. As seasoned delegates, they have all acquired extensive experience during long periods in Asia, where many of them have served in several conflict areas. We hope that this juxtaposition of points of view — those of authors from various Asian countries, on the one hand, and those of ICRC delegates who enjoy a special relationship with Asia, on the other will be of interest to the reader.

The United Nations has declared 2001 the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The articles in this issue also have a contribution to make in that respect. It is all the more important to understand how international humanitarian law is perceived in one of the great regions of the world as the universal nature of certain of its underlying values is sometimes called into question by considerations specific to regional cultures and civilizations. Such is the case in some parts of Asia, and doubtless elsewhere too. What conclusions can be drawn from this?

In his article entitled Global norms and international humanitarian law: An Asian perspective, Professor Ramesh Thakur says: "Because moral precepts vary from culture to culture, this does not mean that different peoples do not hold some values in common." This statement is an excellent point of departure for building up a concept of universality that takes account of the diversity of our world while reaffirming the basic values which international humanitarian law seeks to protect.

As is the custom, this issue includes a number of articles on other topics. Our Red Cross and Red Crescent section thus contains three contributions from ICRC staff members who express their personal opinions on various issues of major concern to the ICRC today.

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