ICRC communication: Generating support

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Abstract

The environment in which the ICRC works and communicates is constantly changing. The ICRC is also constantly seeking support that will allow it to gain access to victims, carry out its work, generate the diplomatic and financial backing needed for that work and ensure the safety of its delegates. The primary aim of communication is not merely to pass on messages from the organization effectively. It is just as necessary to understand the issues concerning the various audiences and how they perceive those issues as it is to inform them. The ICRC draws on a wide array of communication strategies and resources, depending on their complementarity and their potential impact, ranging from meetings with local armed groups to the use of mass communication tools. Communication is thus an integral part of the ICRC's decision-making process, both at headquarters and in each context in the field.

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Humanitarian organizations have long been protected by the very nature of their work. Helping people in need, especially in severe crises — armed conflicts or natural disasters — has always tended to arouse a sense of solidarity and support. Since the early 1990s the situation has become considerably more complex.[1] The increase in the number of humanitarian agencies or of others working in the humanitarian field — together with confusion over the specific identity and objectives of each humanitarian agency, how some of them behave, the need to raise more funds and the competition for visibility resulting from that increase — and insecurity have made it necessary to rethink some of the strategies aimed at obtaining and establishing support for humanitarian work.

* The article reflects the views of the author alone and not necessarily those of the ICRC.

Like many other humanitarian organizations, the ICRC is faced with this challenge and its staff[2] encounters it daily. Whether the task in hand is to negotiate a passage between the lines for a relief convoy, to set up a field hospital, to broach the subject of detainee treatment or respect for the Geneva Conventions, they have to establish a minimum amount of trust between themselves and their contacts. None of the contexts in which the ICRC[3] works constitutes an exception to this rule. From Kabul to Luanda, from Jerusalem to Colombo, from Washington to Khartoum and from Muzafarabat to Moscow, the ICRC has thus established a working method that is backed by more than 140 years of experience and evolves further with each new experience gained.

Its approach is based first on a direct, face to face dialogue between the parties to armed conflict and ICRC delegates. To set up and manage that relationship is a fundamental consideration of all the ICRC's communication strategies and activities.[4] The changing environment in which its teams work has nonetheless compelled the ICRC to supplement and expand that approach with a view to broadening the support base for its work and the principles that govern it.[5] The organization must be able to project a coherent identity and manage its reputation, both locally and globally, in a dynamic process geared both to long-term objectives, which must be targeted, and to the very short-term nature of real-time communication.

The ICRC must be capable of identifying the key audiences whose support it would like to obtain and, if possible, to have their support before it is needed so that it can count on them when the time comes — regardless of whether those audiences are political or military authorities, leaders of opinion in civil society, donors, or men and women affected by conflict. Thus, it is not enough to be able to respond appropriately when news concerning the ICRC breaks.

This article describes and analyses certain factors influencing the environment in which the ICRC works and communicates and the impact those changes have had on its communication activities. It goes on to examine the communication strategies being put in place by the organization today to meet

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1   A number of authors have described this phenomenon. They include Pierre Hasner in *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemma in Humanitarian Intervention*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Oxford 1998; Larry Minear in *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, Conn., 2002; David Rieff in *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarians in Crisis*, Simon & Shuster, New York, 2002; or David P. Forsythe in *The Humanitarians*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

2   At the end of 2005 the ICRC had a total staff of 11,375.

3   The ICRC is working in more than 80 countries. See *Emergency Appeals 2006*, ICRC, December 2005.

4   ICRC communication is made up of two complementary parts: public communication and the promotion of international humanitarian law. Public communication is aimed primarily at informing and raising awareness among the ICRC's priority audiences. It seeks to strengthen support for international humanitarian law, the work of the ICRC and the positions it adopts, and to present a consistent image of it. The main purpose of promoting international humanitarian law is to ensure that law's incorporation in particular in the doctrine, education and training of the armed and security forces and in university and school syllabuses.

5   The work of the ICRC and the various components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is based on the Movement's Fundamental Principles, the main ones being humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality.

the challenge of gaining support for its work, with particular emphasis on its public communication policy.

Support for the ICRC's work: Reality, perceptions and symbolic dimension

The people with whom ICRC delegates interact form an opinion of the organization and its work. That work and its relevance to the situation and the needs of the people give rise to reactions, comments and judgements which the organization needs to address.

Perceptions

ICRC delegates are required daily to convince the various parties to armed conflict of their independence, of the impartiality of their approach to assist and protect people without any discrimination and of the appropriateness of their intervention. They know that the local trust derived from humanitarian activities and their impact on beneficiaries can be influenced positively or negatively by perceptions due to various factors, such as the delegates' attitude, the media reporting on the ICRC and its work, or by the people's own perception of their needs and situation and by their sense of outrage, humiliation or even helplessness.

The perceived relevance of its work to a given situation or context may thus have a decisive effect on the opinion that audiences targeted by the ICRC have of the organization, and hence on their potential support.

Symbolic contexts as a prism

This notable trend is confirmed worldwide whenever intensive media coverage, be it in the north, south, east or west, endows situations or contexts with symbolic significance. These "symbolic" contexts become the main prisms through which the work of a humanitarian organization such as the ICRC will be judged. They are henceforth a factor determining the degree and strength of the support generated by the ICRC.

A humanitarian organization such as the ICRC is not responsible for determining a context's symbolic dimension. It must nonetheless identify and understand what makes a particular situation or context symbolic and take the possible effect of this phenomenon on its identity and communication into account.

In our view, the symbolic dimension is conditioned by five main factors: the scale[6] of the humanitarian crisis; the existence of powerful images that stir up emotion and indignation; the rapidity with which those images recur;

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6   The scale of a humanitarian crisis is usually "measured" by the number of victims. It can also be determined by its geographic location, the nationality of the victims or by the type or scale of the violations.

over-simplification of the situation and the issues at stake‚ and the ability of different audiences to be able to relate to that humanitarian crisis. These factors combined thus enable certain humanitarian crises to assume a global symbolic dimension, as shown recently by the Asian tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan. Whereas broad coverage has been given to the tsunami, diminishing media attention and the difficulty of producing new images and explaining the situation in Darfur (who are the victims, who are the "baddies," why are they fighting?) has limited that human tragedy's impact and symbolic value.

One of the most graphic examples of crises with a strong symbolic content is found in Cuba. The camp at Guantanamo Bay was opened by the United States authorities in January 2002. As soon as the first detainees arrived there it was given maximum media coverage. Within a matter of weeks the orange jumpsuits worn by the 600 or so detainees at Guantanamo Bay came to symbolize the war against terrorism declared by the United States government. It was a symbol that was sustained by the same powerful images, the same news and debates, but that triggered radically different interpretations depending on the stance adopted. On the one hand it symbolized the need to fight terrorism, and on the other the humiliation of a community.

ICRC delegates have had access to detainees in Guantanamo Bay since January 2002. They visit them regularly to ensure that they are given humane treatment in keeping with the applicable rules and standards of international law. As in every one of the roughly 2,400 places of detention visited by the ICRC in 2004, delegates make the requisite approaches to the authorities to that effect. The content of these approaches and of ICRC reports is confidential and is communicated only to the detaining authorities concerned. In this way delegates are able to create the minimum atmosphere of trust needed for the ICRC's concerns about the situation in places of detention and respective recommendations to be heard and understood, and to ask for necessary changes to be made. Guantanamo Bay is no exception. This course of action[7] has enabled the ICRC to have repeated and regular access to persons interned in Guantanamo Bay and to interview them in private. Its access has also placed the ICRC in the media spotlight on several occasions and necessitated such presence is managed.

Making the ICRC's activities and positions understood

Confidentiality should not be synonymous with keeping silent. It is clearly defined[8] and must be aligned with the objectives of those visits and the terms, conditions and procedure of the ICRC's work. While choosing not to speak about the conditions of detention, the treatment of the detainees and the

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7   See Alain Aeschlimann, "Protection of detainees: ICRC action behind bars," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, No. 857, March 2005, pp. 83-122.
8   See Jakob Kellenberger, "Speaking out or remaining silent in humanitarian work," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86, No. 855, September 2004, pp. 593-608.

nature of the approaches made to the authorities, the ICRC also considers the importance of the political environment in which some of its visits take place, the public nature of it and the significance that may be attributed to its presence and the fact that the US authorities made repeated references to the visits of the ICRC. From 2002 onwards the ICRC therefore felt that it should make clear the purpose of its visits to Guantanamo, its *modus operandi* and the importance it attaches to maintaining quality dialogue with the detaining authorities. It also decided at certain times to make public its analysis of the legal situation in Guantanamo Bay, with particular stress on the importance of applying the available legal rules, international or national, to determine the prisoners' fate. Each time the ICRC took this step, it did so to make sure that its interpretation of the situation and the implications for the detainees and for international humanitarian law would be understood by key audiences around the world. It went public to that effect on Guantanamo Bay, just as it did, for example, on its detention-related work in the Russian Federation.[9]

The interest shown in the ICRC's statements has varied considerably, depending on the context. The symbolic dimension of Guantanamo and the resultant polarized debates have kept media and stakeholders attention centred on the ICRC's work there and its communication, whereas interest in matters relating to Russia in general and Chechnya in particular, as well as their symbolic value for those dealing with current events, has waned.

Communicating in symbolic contexts

Communication about major humanitarian issues or the ICRC's work in symbolic contexts obviously arouses immediate reactions from all parties concerned, resulting in closer and more public scrutiny of the ICRC's work and methods, especially its confidentiality and the impact of its work on the victims.

This pressure is further increased by the voracious appetite of media machines, their monitoring of the latest events around the clock and their quest for anecdotes and scoops. The pressure is even more complex because the original sources of a news item tend very quickly to become obscured. In this way the views of anonymous sources about the ICRC or its work can, in the next dispatch, metamorphose into the organization's "official" position, although this has not in fact been expressed. The speed and momentum of this process often make it difficult to manage. The ICRC has tried as far as possible to do so by explaining, for example, what it is doing at Guantanamo Bay, how it does it and the limits to its work, and by rigorously deciding when and on what subject it will or will not communicate within the confines of its confidential approach.

9   See Press Release 04/65, 12 November 2004 and interview with Pierre Krähenbühl, ICRC Director of Operations, 18 November 2004, available at: <http://www.gva.icrc.priv/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/iwpList74/ BC9F68471D89883941256F56004C228A> (last visited on 2 February 2006); *Emergency Appeals 2006*, ICRC, December 2005, p. 215.

Global and local

The emergence of the media from so-called peripheral areas[10] to become global players, capable of influencing decision-makers and of showing an armed conflict or a set of issues in a different light, together with easy access to the Internet as a means of spreading and receiving news, means that global news items swiftly filter through to the local level. This was confirmed above all during the 2003 war in Iraq. The result for the ICRC is that perceptions of it cease to be shaped by local factors alone, but are also influenced by ICRC presence in the public domain in high-profile contexts. This phenomenon has become much more marked in recent years, although it is not new as such, for it has been faced by ICRC delegates since the late 1990s. For example, several of them have even been directly threatened in the hours and days that followed the assassination of six ICRC delegates in Novye Atagi, Chechnya, in December 1996 such as in Tajikistan and a remote district of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On each occasion very precise local threats referred to a tragedy that had just taken place thousands of kilometres away but the scale and atrocity of which had led to immediate worldwide media coverage.

Identity and new communication technologies

The advances in communication technology, even if the pace of development differs from one region to another, have heightened the interaction between global and local levels. The existence and emergence of new peripheral[11] media of regional or international scope have accentuated this phenomenon. Yet despite these advances in technology and sources of communication, which give more people around the world direct access to information, the need to try to understand, to decode, to make sense of that information is greater than ever, all the more so because its sheer quantity and omnipresence cannot explain a world that is generally perceived as being more complex, more dangerous, and beset by increasingly acute differences of identity.[12]

Thus the growing volume of information facilitated by the new communication technologies paradoxically renders communication more difficult and is tending to deepen the distrust of the various audiences. In such circumstances the ICRC needs to have a clear idea of its identity, especially the identity it wishes to convey through its work and communication and the identity perceived by its various audiences.

The ICRC therefore started research several years ago into these questions of identity, in most cases working on a local or regional basis and conducting a series of interviews with persons representing the various audiences of interest

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10   Peripheral with regard to the western "centre," which appears to regulate (economic, financial, political and media) globalization.
11   *Ibid.*
12   Dominique Wolton, *Il faut sauver la communication*, Éditions Flammarion, 2005, pp. 39-46 and pp. 124-135.

to it. This research, which is termed qualitative, enables the ICRC to better distinguish any difference between the identity it seeks to convey through its work and communication, and the identity as perceived by those audiences. Such work is continuous and its findings guide the formulation of communication strategies designed to reduce any difference identified, so that the support needed for its work can be generated, access gained to the people affected by armed conflicts and internal violence and their needs for protection and assistance met. The said research work is generally preceded by quantitative surveys which allow the main trends in perception of the ICRC's identity to be discerned.

A recent example is the ICRC's participation in the "Voice of the People" survey. In this survey, conducted by Gallup International once a year, 50,000 people are interviewed in over 60 countries around the world; according to the polling institute, the views of more than a thousand million people are thus represented. The questions asked by the ICRC in 2005 related to the activities and terms associated with the organization itself, with neutral and independent humanitarian action and with the ICRC's reputation in comparison with other organizations working in the field of humanitarian aid or in similar fields. Some of the most significant results are summarized below:

- The two activities most frequently associated with the ICRC throughout the world are those to "provide medical aid and first aid" (65%)[13] and to "help the victims of natural disasters" (64%), while the activities least associated with it are "reuniting families separated by armed conflicts" (34%) and "promoting international humanitarian law/the Geneva Conventions" (34%).
- "Humanitarian" is the term most frequently associated with the ICRC throughout the world (65%).[14] Half of the respondents see the ICRC as "global" (51%), "honest/trustworthy" (48%) and "neutral and impartial" (47%). The term least associated with the ICRC is "inefficient" (mentioned by 8% of those interviewed).
- Worldwide, half of the respondents (49%) think that humanitarian agencies should work in complete independence rather than be coordinated by political or military authorities; 22% of them support the idea that humanitarian organizations should be coordinated by the armed forces; 12% think that coordination should be carried out by the political authorities.
- The ICRC is the best known humanitarian organization among those appraised;[15] this is the case in all the different regions of the world. Three-quarters of the respondents had heard of the ICRC, and 74% of these people have a positive view of the organization, as opposed to 4% with a negative view.

13 65% of the respondents selected this activity from a list of 11 activities connected with the ICRC to a greater or lesser extent (multiple choices). The margin of error in this survey was + /- 4%.
14 65% of the respondents selected this term from a list of 10 terms defining the ICRC (multiple choices).
15 World Food Programme (WFP), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amnesty International.

Once this information has been analysed, further details are enriched by field studies, which help to identify the problems on which the ICRC must focus in its reputation management.

This research work and the evolution of certain factors — the importance of the perceptions of a large number of audiences influenced by the quality of the ICRC's presence in the media, the symbolic nature of certain situations or humanitarian crises which suddenly become the gauge by which the work of an organization such as the ICRC is judged, and the emergence of new technologies and new media — have prompted the ICRC to adapt its communication strategies over the past few years.

Changing nature of the ICRC's communication strategies

In this changing environment, the main purpose of communication is no longer solely to convey the ICRC's messages effectively. It is just as necessary to understand the problems affecting the various audiences and how they perceive those problems as it is to inform them. For the ICRC, therefore, communication cannot merely be a matter of providing information and sending out its messages. It must also be mindful of the conditions in which the communication is received, reshaped in accordance with the receiver's cultural, political, emotional and identity horizon and responded to. The ICRC thus goes beyond one-way communication and step up efforts to listen to and engage in dialogue with its priority audiences, stressing its capacity to understand and analyze their perceptions of the ICRC, its identity and its work.

This development is essential for the ICRC's communication to achieve its primary objective, namely to increase understanding for and acceptance of the organization among its priority audiences so as to enable them to support its activities, the principles that guide them and rules of international law they promote. In other words, if the ICRC does not know and understand the concerns of its audiences and what they think about it, its chance of exerting a significant influence upon them is severely reduced.

Changing nature of armed conflicts

This work to discern and comprehend the environment and problems which might affect the ICRC's ability to act is indispensable in view of the changing nature of the conflicts in which its delegates are deployed. Many of today's conflicts are characterized by the multiplicity of parties involved in them and by the constant interconnection of the various local and global factors influencing their development. An analysis of the conflicts in Sudan, for example, would be incomplete without taking into account the interests of the international petroleum companies working in that region, or the effects of the referral by the UN Security Council of the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court.

The extreme diversity of situations of conflict or armed violence and the diversity of needs of the people affected by them is thus the daily challenge

that the ICRC has to face. Relations with all parties to an armed conflict and all those with influence upon them are consequently more essential than ever to the ICRC's work. What used to require first and foremost contact and dialogue with official armed and security forces and clearly structured opposition groups now calls for approaches to and communication with a wide variety of actors, ranging from radical armed groups through urban gangs or private security companies to powerful conventional armies.

Wide array of communication strategies and tools

To meet that challenge, the ICRC develops and uses a wide array of communication strategies and tools that extend from meetings with local armed groups — some of which only control a crossing point or a few square kilometres of territory, as for instance in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo — to interviews with heads of State or opinion-leaders in capital cities. The next generation of decision-makers is being reached by including international humanitarian law in the school syllabus wherever a structured environment exists,[16] and by incorporating it into the doctrine and training of the armed and security forces[17] and the curricula of faculties of law, journalism and international relations at universities around the world.

Mass communication

To complement and support its work to promote good relations and direct contact, the ICRC's communication strategies also favour the use of mass communication tools. These include radio, which is an essential means of transmission in large areas of Africa or in Afghanistan, publications and images — whether photos or videos — and its icrc.org website,[18] which has been expanded considerably in recent years and whose average annual audience has risen by 500% since 2002. These means of communication allow vast audiences in different contexts to be reached and enable the spotlight to be trained on a situation of humanitarian concern or on the human cost of conflicts receiving little coverage, such as those in Uganda, Yemen, Nepal, Colombia or Myanmar.

Integrating communication in the decision-making process

The ICRC's communication strategies, including the choice of different channels of transmission, are developed and implemented in the field and at the organization's

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16 The programme "Exploring humanitarian law," to raise awareness of international humanitarian law among young people aged between 13 and 18 has been implemented in 34 countries and is being tested in 65 others throughout the world.

17 In 2005, this work was carried out in more than 100 countries by 22 ICRC delegates specialized in relations with the armed, police and security forces. Its main purpose is to help the armed forces, the police or other armed groups in setting up means and mechanisms conducive to respect for the law and for specially protected persons.

18 The ICRC website, <www.icrc.org>, exists in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Portuguese and Chinese.

headquarters as appropriate for the respective situation and audiences to be reached. They are devised to generate the broadest possible support for the ICRC's work and to sustain that support so that it will be available when needed. And that can happen at any time. The globalization of communication has made it difficult, if not impossible, to forecast exactly when and in what way the spotlight will be turned on the ICRC. In this age of "real-time" communication the ICRC therefore needs to be prepared for the unknown and manage the known. First, by integrating communication as an element to be considered in the ICRC's entire decision-making process — both at headquarters for overall aspects, and in the field for each situation there. Then by applying the key principle that for an organization with worldwide reach, communication takes place with several audiences simultaneously, and that even if the generic messages are the same, the means of communicating with the different audiences and delivering the messages must be adapted to the respective context and the desired impact. And, finally, by not diverging from the principle that what the organization and its representatives say must at all times reflect what they do. That is the most effective way for the ICRC to be prepared in the short term and to convince others on a long-term basis. It is also the most complex challenge in managing the reputation of an organization which shares essential attributes of its public identity with others.[19]

Public communication: ICRC policy

To take account of those factors and the challenges involved in managing its reputation, the ICRC has adapted its communication accordingly, especially its public communication.[20] It has adopted a new public communication policy[21] to manage its presence in the global, local and regional public arenas. This policy defines the priority audiences — political and military authorities, opinion-leaders in civil society, the media, donors, humanitarian organizations, people affected by war, and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies — with which it wishes to interact. The ICRC will focus particularly on decision-makers whose conduct and decisions have a direct impact on the fate of people affected by armed conflicts and internal violence, on its own ability to act and on respect for international humanitarian law, and influential people whose opinions have a direct impact on the degree of support given to the ICRC and to that law.

19 There are 151 National Red Cross Societies and 32 National Red Crescent Societies in the world. Together with the ICRC and their International Federation, they are members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. In the recent "Voice of the People" survey conducted by Gallup International (see above), 42% of the 50,000 persons interviewed replied that the ICRC was carrying out the same activities as the Red Cross or Red Crescent of their country. This percentage differed perceptibly from one country to another.
20 Complementary to its promotion of international humanitarian law (see above).
21 "ICRC public communication: Policy, guiding principles and priority audiences" (internal document), policy adopted by the ICRC Assembly in 2004.

The primary objective of the ICRC's public communication is to foster understanding and acceptance of the organization among these priority audiences. For this reason, public communication plays a strategic role in all ICRC actions including aspects of staff security and is included in operational strategy and practices at local, regional and global levels. This is all the more important since the ICRC's public communication strategies and activities are governed by the same rule that applies to all its other activities — namely that the interests of those affected by armed conflicts must come first.

In order to ensure respect for people protected by international humanitarian law and the ability of the ICRC to have access to them, its public communication must safeguard the confidential nature of certain kinds of information.

Whenever the ICRC coordinates the activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, its public communication must reflect its role as coordinator of the international relief operations carried out by the Movement.

Key messages

The ICRC places the human cost of armed conflicts, how the ICRC and its partners in the Movement respond to it and the need to respect international humanitarian law at the centre of its public communication. Its strategies and activities seek to convey the following key messages:

- The principle enshrined in international humanitarian law according to which limits must be imposed on war is vital for protecting human life and dignity.
- Individuals and groups affected by armed conflict may be extremely vulnerable and their rights must be upheld.
- It is everyone's duty to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law.
- The ICRC is an independent, neutral and impartial organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance.

The ICRC's public communication is governed by three guiding principles: credibility, identity and impact. The ICRC takes care that these guiding principles apply to all its public communication activities so as to ensure their coherence and comprehensibility.

Credibility

The ICRC acts predictably, according to definite terms of reference, and its public communication must reflect its determination to be coherent and predictable. It therefore attaches greater importance to the credibility of its information and to medium and long-term strategies rather than to "media coups." It bases statements concerning issues and facts relating to its own area of competence

on information that it has itself verified or that cannot be disputed, so as to inspire confidence in the organization and in its work to protect and assist people affected by armed conflict.

Identity

To maximize the coherence and impact of its public communication, the ICRC must continuously seek to develop a voice of its own reflecting the distinctive attributes of its identity, i.e. those of an independent, neutral and impartial humanitarian institution that is well versed in the reality of armed conflicts, endeavours to protect and assist people affected by war and internal violence and works to promote respect for international humanitarian law.

Impact

The ICRC's public communication must be created and implemented in a results-oriented manner that reflects operational and institutional strategies. Every act of public communication, including that of not communicating, is the result of a deliberate choice. The opportunities and risks resulting from such choices must be made explicit in the strategies drawn up by the ICRC.

The ICRC favours public communication that is targeted, direct and based on the relations and dialogue it has established with priority audiences. Initiating these relations and dialogue and maintaining them over the long term is a matter of priority, especially with audiences that can serve as relays for explaining the positions and activities of the ICRC and can rally support on issues falling within their area of influence. Only thus can the ICRC make effective use, in real time if necessary, of the opportunities it has to communicate, both locally and globally. In addition to developing relations with priority audiences, and in support of its efforts to do so, the ICRC uses mass communication tools such as its website, electronic media, radio, television and the press, which enable it to raise awareness of the importance of specific issues. In all contexts, ICRC staff members play an important role in relaying the organization's messages.

Conclusion

The ICRC is constantly seeking support in order to gain access to persons affected by armed conflicts and violence, carries out its work, generates the diplomatic and financial backing needed for that work and ensures the safety of its delegates. This support is all the more necessary, for it can no longer be taken for granted in a world in which humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC must manage and protect their reputation in order to be able to operate.

The environment in which the ICRC works and communicates is constantly changing. Factors such as the emergence of new technologies and new media, the influence of the ICRC's presence in the media on perceptions of the

organization and its work, and assessment of the latter in the light of the symbolic nature of certain humanitarian crises — have induced the ICRC to adapt its communication strategies with a view to expanding the support base for its work and its guiding principles.

The ICRC continues to give priority to direct communication based on relations and dialogue established with all parties to an armed conflict. It constitutes a sustained effort to ensure that key audiences with an influence on the fate of people affected by armed conflicts, internal violence or humanitarian crises are familiar with the ICRC, its *modus operandi* and IHL. Communication in these terms is preventive action designed to ensure that relations and dialogue with the organization's various audiences are long term and not merely the product of crises or emergencies that need to be tackled. This is still the most effective way of establishing at least the minimum of trust required between, for instance, the parties to an armed conflict and ICRC delegates.

This approach, which is at the heart of the organization's communication strategies, has been enhanced over the years in order to meet the challenges posed by recent changes to the environment. Three developments, in particular, have left their mark on the ICRC's communication strategies. First, it was recognized that communication is not merely an activity intended first and foremost to put over the organization's messages effectively, but that it is just as necessary to understand the various audiences' issues and perceptions of those issues as it is to inform them. The second concerns the development and use of a wider range of communication strategies and resources, ranging from meetings with local armed groups to mass communication tools; the use of these different means depends on their complementarity and potential impact. The third has been to incorporate communication activities into the entire decision-making process of the ICRC, both in the field and at headquarters. The fact that communication strategies, including the choice of different forms of transmission, are thus an integral part of its operational strategies means that what the organization and its representatives say can be constantly aligned with what they do.

This threefold change is aimed at enabling the ICRC to manage its reputation over the long term and to generate the support needed for its work today and in the future.