The Review asked Alberto Cairo, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) orthopaedic programme in Afghanistan since 1992, to make his own selection of pictures from the ICRC’s photo library collection, which covers its activities in conflicts throughout the world from the 1860s to the present day.¹ There are now more than 115,000 photos available in digital format.

Alberto, an Italian national, studied law before becoming a physiotherapist. From 1987 he spent three years in Juba, Sudan, with L’Organismo di Volontariato per la Cooperazione Internazionale (OVCI), an Italian non-governmental organization for disabled children. In 1990 he joined the ICRC and was assigned to its Surgical Hospital for War Wounded in Kabul. Apart from a short ICRC mission in Sarajevo in 1993, he has never left Afghanistan. In 1994, during Afghanistan’s civil war, Alberto worked with the ICRC’s Economic Security Department to assist the internally displaced inhabitants of Kabul. Today, he is responsible for the country’s seven ICRC orthopaedic centres, a programme that provides the disabled with physical rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Through his selection and comments, Alberto gives his personal account of his experiences while working closely with the people through the different stages of Afghanistan’s troubled contemporary history.
ICRC presence in Afghanistan

The ICRC has been present in Afghanistan since 1979, working initially out of Pakistan, and since 1987 from its delegation in Kabul. Today, Afghanistan is the ICRC’s largest operation worldwide. The institution has over 130 expatriates and more than 1,400 national staff based in Kabul and in fourteen other locations throughout the country.

The ICRC regularly visits places of detention run by nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), by the US forces, and by the Afghan authorities. The aim is to monitor conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees. In 2010, it also began visiting people detained by the armed opposition. Moreover, it helps families who are separated by the conflict to stay in touch with one another through Red Cross messages and telephone calls, and endeavours to trace those family members who have gone missing.

The ICRC assists Sheberghan Hospital in the north of Afghanistan and Mirwais Regional Hospital in the south, both of which are run by the Ministry of Public Health. Some twenty expatriate doctors, nurses, and administrative personnel are based in Kandahar, and provide support to the medical, administrative, and logistics staff at Mirwais. The ICRC also gives technical and financial support for ten Afghan Red Crescent clinics and for their community-based first-aid volunteers who deliver health care to people in their respective villages. In addition, the ICRC runs four first-aid posts in areas where conflict is ongoing.

One of the ICRC’s most important activities in Afghanistan is the distribution of aid, in co-operation with the Afghan Red Crescent Society, to tens of thousands of people displaced by the fighting. Meanwhile, ICRC water engineers work closely with local water boards on urban and rural programmes. The institution promotes hygiene awareness in religious schools and detention centres, and with families in their homes.

Reminding parties to a conflict of their obligation to protect civilians and keep them safe from harm is a fundamental part of the ICRC’s efforts to promote compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) worldwide. In Afghanistan, the institution spreads knowledge of IHL within civil society, government bodies, the armed forces, and armed opposition groups country-wide.