



Introductory Remarks at the Special Session on International Humanitarian Law,  
Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs of the Permanent Council of the  
Organization of American States, Friday, 27 January 2012

by

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Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First and foremost, our sincere thanks to Ambassador Maria Isabel Salvador and to the Committee of Juridical and Political Affairs of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States for the will and interest in organizing for us this special session on international humanitarian law. Furthermore, our gratitude goes also to the Secretariat of Legal Affairs of the OAS, and particularly to Dr. Dante Negro and Dr. John Wilson of the Department of International Law, for their steadfast support on the topic over all these years.

Relevance and timeliness characterize the agenda of today's session. It takes place at the heels of a quite extraordinary year. From the armed conflicts in Ivory Coast and Libya, to the dramatic and largely unanticipated events of the Arab Spring across North Africa and the Middle East, and to the tsunami and nuclear disaster in Japan, the past year has presented countless humanitarian challenges. Furthermore, over 60 armed conflicts continued unabated in 2011. The year also saw the celebration of the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, which takes place at intervals of four years, and gathers States party to the Geneva Conventions and the world's largest humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Four topics to be discussed at this special session represent the relevance and also timeliness that characterize today's agenda.

First, at the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, where some 2,000 delegates adopted a series of resolutions on actions to strengthen international humanitarian law (IHL), and these actions will be undertaken in the course of the next interval of four years. One of the areas for such actions is the protection of people deprived of their freedom, which constitutes one of our four topics of discussion at this special session this morning and later this afternoon.

Second, another objective of the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was to seek improved security so that health care can be delivered unimpeded in armed conflicts and other situations of violence. The ICRC is so concerned by the far-reaching and profound humanitarian consequences of threats to the provision of health care – in armed conflicts and in other situations of violence – that it has launched a major multi-year project on the issue. This Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs, has selected the subject of access to and provision of health care for discussion today.

Third, the events last year exemplify the increasingly diverse and unexpected situations in which the International Committee of the Red Cross is called to respond to complex humanitarian needs. As a result, the role and importance of IHL as a body of law dealing specifically with armed conflict is also being challenged. The Committee has recognized this phenomenon when it chose to address the interplay of international humanitarian law and international human rights law governing the regulation of the use of force and non-criminal detention for security reasons.

Fourth, to be sure, this special session provides a forum to periodically review advancements in the implementation of IHL in the Americas. This topic and the other three combine to make this special session relevant and timely.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Real and long term changes in international law can ultimately be achieved only if States are committed to it. States alone can create international law. It is, however, the ICRC's responsibility – based on its field experience as well as expertise – to draw governments' attention to areas where it feels IHL should be strengthened. The ICRC is ready to contribute in such a matter, in accordance with its mandate as received from the international community. We trust that we can combine our efforts to find efficient ways to meet the needs of the victims of armed conflicts, today and in the future. Action, not intention, is what really counts.

Thank you very much for your attention.