

SUBMISSION TO
THE HUMAN RIGHTS SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE ON
THE LINK BETWEEN AID AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Australian Red Cross thanks the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the opportunity to express its views in relation to the above enquiry.

As an institution ARC is involved in a large number of activities domestically and internationally which have as their broad objective the advancement of human rights. The ARC does not, however, link aid and human rights and so the terms of the inquiry can be said to fall somewhat outside the purview of the ARC mandate. This brief submission explains the ARC's general approach in its provision of assistance in furthering its humanitarian goals and highlights a number of our international programs involving the development of a broad range of human rights.

Background

ARC is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement). The Movement has three specific parts - the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with a mandate to protect lives and the dignity of victims of armed conflict; the 176 National Societies, of which we are one, with the mandate of responding to the needs of the most vulnerable people; and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Federation) which has a mandate to assist and co-ordinate the work of National Societies in particular during natural disasters. All elements of the Movement are bound to work within the seven Fundamental Principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

Impartiality and Neutrality

The principles of impartiality and neutrality are the most relevant to the terms of reference of this inquiry. In short the principle of impartiality requires all ARC work, both domestically and internationally, to be undertaken without any discrimination as to nationality, race, religion, class or political beliefs. The only criterion that we will be guided by is giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress. In this sense, ARC does not review the human rights infrastructures or activities of a country as part of our assessment in providing assistance. If there is a demonstrated need and request for aid and we have the capacity to assist ARC will implement a relevant program irrespective of the political environment. Programs are either undertaken on a bi-lateral arrangement with other National Societies or under the co-ordination of the Federation or ICRC.

The principle of neutrality requires ARC not to take sides in hostilities nor engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. In practice this principle results in ARC not being involved in public-focused advocacy work on the topic of human rights. Unlike organisations such as Amnesty International, which have mandates for concerted public advocacy, ARC uses different modes of actions to advance the rights and dignity of vulnerable people. ARC undertakes public educational activities and often makes direct representations to Government and other relevant authorities on specific topics of concern. In all instance ARC and the other elements of the Movement attempt to work in conjunction with authorities rather than denounce their actions in public. Thus ARC does not link emergency and humanitarian assistance with the development of a specific type of ideology or political environment.

Example of ARC work which advances human rights

Under the principle of humanity, ARC undertakes a vast range of work which incorporates the advancement of human rights. This is particularly so if a broad definition of human rights is taken to involve education, health and the right to development.

Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law

One of the core activities of ARC is the dissemination of international humanitarian law (IHL) which is the area of law aiming to limit suffering during times of armed conflict. ARC has a specific relationship with the Federal Government in the area and we have been tasked with assisting the Government with their obligation to disseminate IHL. This obligation is found in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols as well as the Statutes of the Movement. Our activities here are persuasive and educational in nature, dealing with the relevant Government Departments on the development of treaties in a strict legal manner rather than using public advocacy. IHL is a basic element in the development of a civil society and strengthens democratic structures. ARC has provided much assistance to other National Societies, particularly in the Asian Pacific region, in relation to the dissemination of IHL. For example a number of ARC staff have run IHL courses and given lectures in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Macau and Hong Kong. Last year, with assistance from AusAID, ARC ran an IHL dissemination training program for over 15 regional representatives from National Societies such as Fiji, Solomon Islands, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

International Operations

Below is a list of some of the activities ARC is involved in internationally which advance human rights :

- ARC has deployed health delegates to work with the ICRC and Federation in Burma. The low health status of the population especially those in border areas is well documented, and ARC is providing support to international Movement partners to improve the health conditions of these people regardless of political affiliations.
- ARC is involved in the dissemination of correct information around HIV transmission issues in a number of countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In these countries there are often strong prejudices about HIV which then impact upon basic rights of HIV-positive individuals. This work is especially relevant and important where there are overlaps with marginalized groups (commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users).
- ARC is involved in a project in Tibet dealing with Primary Health Care and Water Supply. The basis of the project is that, given the extremely poor conditions in the rural area of Shigatse municipality, improvements in primary health care and drinking water supply had the greatest potential to improve the welfare of the rural population, especially if coupled with community education.
- ARC co-ordinates a *Women's and Children's Health Pilot Project - West Bank and Gaza Strip* which is designed to improve the health status of Palestinian women and their children in eight target communities by upgrading the quality of women's and children's health services. The project has a focus upon: meeting the needs of vulnerable groups including girls, adolescents, rural poor, elderly, divorcees/widows, and refugees in non-UN serviced areas; and promoting outreach activities and implementing cooperative community health education programs targeting priority women and children's health issues.
- In Bougainville, since 1993, ARC through the Federation has supported emergency relief efforts, community rehabilitation and health and development. Currently the Community Health and Development project aims to improve the health and quality of life of people in Bougainville by facilitating community development in the area of health services and water and sanitation.

Currently ARC has approximately 45 delegates placed internationally with either the ICRC or Federation undertaking a range of work, including medical personnel, lawyers, engineers and water sanitation experts, all working on project which advance human rights.

ARC would be happy to provide more information on this topic if requested and Dr Helen Durham, National IHL Manager, can be contacted on ph 03 9345 1845 or hdurham@nat.redcross.org.au.

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Secretary General
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