

Arms transfers, humanitarian assistance and international humanitarian law

by Peter Herby

The International Committee of the Red Cross has witnessed in its work for war victims throughout the world the increasingly devastating effects for civilian populations of the proliferation of weapons, particularly small arms. The difficulties of providing humanitarian assistance in an environment where arms have become widely available to many segments of society are well known to most humanitarian relief agencies today. However, until recently the relationships between the availability of weapons, the worsening situation of civilians during and after conflict and the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance have not been addressed directly.

The exceedingly high levels of civilian death and injury in recent conflicts, from Bosnia to El Salvador to Liberia to Afghanistan, are no longer being seen simply as an inevitable by-product of these conflicts. Rather, these results are increasingly viewed as a result of inadequate or non-existent control of the flow of weapons — both internationally and domestically. Although few would claim that the weapons themselves are the primary source of recent conflicts, it can be argued convincingly that the easy availability of arms and ammunition increases tensions, heightens civilian casualties, prolongs the duration of conflicts and renders post-war reconciliation and rebuilding far more difficult.

The unregulated availability of weapons, in particular small arms, combined with their frequent use in violation of the most basic humanitarian norms, poses a direct challenge to the dual mandates of the

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