

Civil Defence 1977-1997: from law to practice¹

by Stéphane Jeannet

Concern has been expressed recently that the rules of international humanitarian law pertaining to civil defence² have been somewhat neglected since 1977 and that, 20 years on, the time has come to assess whether these rules are sufficiently realistic and have retained their validity. The purpose of civil defence rules is clear, i.e. "to mitigate the losses, damage and suffering inflicted on the civilian population by the dramatic developments of the means and methods of warfare".³ But while the primary purpose of civil defence rules may be formulated quite simply, the means of achieving it are naturally far more complex, indeed increasingly so given the effects of the ever more destructive methods of warfare as well as the changing nature of conflicts, which is resulting in a larger proportion of civilians being killed. It has also been recognized that the rules governing civil defence would remain a dead letter if they were not made known to those for whom they are intended. The current lack of awareness has therefore made efforts to spread knowledge of these rules a matter of necessity.

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¹ A shorter version of this article was published in the *International Civil Defence Journal*, Vol. X, N° 4, December 1997, pp. 25-27. The full report of the meeting, S. Jeannet (ed), 1977 - 1997, *Civil Defence: From Law to Practice*, 1997, 89 pages (in English, with a French summary), can be obtained either from the ICDO or from the ICRC.

² Articles 61 to 67 of Protocol I, which grant civil protection a status comparable to that of medical units. See below, Section 1.

³ See Y. Sandoz, C. Swinarski and B. Zimmermann (eds), *Commentary on the Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, ICRC, Geneva, 1987, para. 2319.