

Starter Reading – History and meaning of the red cross emblem

How is the emblem used in times of armed conflict?

The red cross is used in times of armed conflict in order to say ‘Don’t shoot’.

It indicates that people, materials, buildings and transports displaying the emblem are **not part of the fighting** but are responsible for providing neutral humanitarian assistance. For this reason they must not be targeted but protected.

Typically the red cross will be worn by the medical personnel of the armed forces and placed on hospitals and ambulances. It is also worn by those working for the Red Cross itself.

What about the red crescent?

In 1864, when the twelve countries which agreed to the First Geneva Convention adopted the red cross into International Law, they did not intend any religious significance and had little idea of the controversies that were to follow.



As the use of the red cross spread from Europe, some – such as the Turks in 1876 – objected to the red cross, seeing it as a Christian symbol. Even though the red cross was even, in the shape of five equal squares, and not the same as the Christian crucifix, for some it would always be linked with the medieval Crusades when knights like Richard the Lionheart wore a red cross on their breastplates.

As a result, some countries simply began using the red crescent, the red moon shape, instead. The red crescent was derived from the flag of the Ottoman Empire that first used it as its protective emblem. The law had to catch up with the reality of what was

occurring in the field.

At an international conference in 1929, the red crescent was formally accepted as a **second symbol**, equivalent in legal status to the red cross. Each nation decides which emblem it will adopt. As we know, Australia nominated the red cross – hence its military medical services use a red cross to demonstrate their protected status, and the National Society is Australian Red Cross. Bangladesh and Iraq, for example, chose the red crescent, and children there grow up as familiar with the name Bangladeshi or Iraqi Red Crescent as ours are with Australian Red Cross. All are parts of the same International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, represented in 190 nations of the world.



Why is the red cross emblem important?



As the international symbol of protection and neutrality in armed conflict, the meaning of the red cross emblem has been agreed by all countries in the world. In war it is essential for the survival of injured and sick members of the military, as well as civilians, including humanitarian workers. To deliberately target a person, object or site

displaying the emblem is a war crime, and soldiers who do so may be prosecuted. If the emblem is to be respected, everyone, both military and civilian, needs to understand what it means – and this education needs to begin in peacetime.

The red crystal

Although the red cross and red crescent emblems were well established, the story of the emblems was not yet complete. Some nations remained reluctant to adopt either the cross or the crescent.

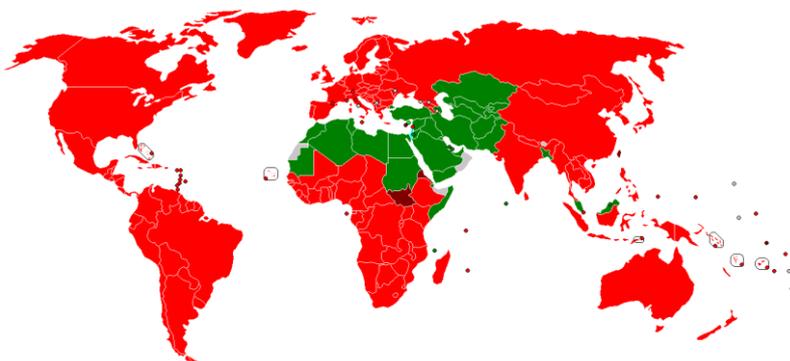
The breakthrough came in December 2005. The countries of the world agreed to adopt a **third, and final, emblem** – a red diamond shape on a white background, to be known across the world as the red crystal.

The red crystal officially became a part of international humanitarian law in 2007 when Additional Protocol III to the Geneva Conventions came into force. Israel agreed to use it in times of armed conflict outside its borders. A small number of other nations, such as Eritrea and Kazakhstan, are considering using it because it further distances the use of the emblem from any lingering religious connotations of the cross and crescent.



Summary

All 196 nations – every nation in the world – have agreed to be bound by the four Geneva Conventions. Each nation chooses the **red cross, the red crescent or the red crystal**, which all have equal legal status. The emblems are set apart in international level, because they protect lives.



Map left highlights nations using red crescent.