



# RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT EMBLEMS

**SAFEGUARDING THEIR POWER TO PROTECT  
AND PREVENTING MISUSE**



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



**ICRC**

# DID YOU KNOW?

## Three protective symbols

Most people are familiar with the red cross and red crescent emblems. They are seen every day by people all around the world, primarily in connection with community services offered by the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in their country. Many associate the emblems with first aid or the medical community. But they are often unaware of the purpose of the emblems.

The red cross emblem dates back over 150 years. It was developed to protect wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield and the armed forces doctors and nurses that cared for them. The red crescent emblem came to be used shortly afterwards for the same purpose. The red crystal emblem was also adopted more recently.

First and foremost, the red cross, red crescent and red crystal are internationally recognized symbols of the protection that international law confers on the wounded and the sick and those

caring for them in times of armed conflict. Their primary function is to protect armed forces medical services.

The emblems also show that a person or an object is linked to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement). As such, the emblems also symbolize the independent, neutral and impartial assistance delivered by the Movement.

These life-saving symbols need to be understood and trusted by all so that they can protect those suffering during armed conflict. It is therefore crucial that the emblems are displayed correctly, and only by those authorized to do so by law.



# WHO CAN DISPLAY THE EMBLEMS?

**The use of the emblems is governed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949, their Additional Protocols and by national law.**

States are responsible for ensuring that they are used correctly both in peacetime and during armed conflict. National rules regulating their display are also included in domestic legislation in most countries.

In times of armed conflict, these rules allow the emblems to be displayed as a protective symbol by:

- > armed forces' religious personnel and medical staff, facilities and vehicles;
- > civilian medical staff, hospitals and other civilian medical units assigned to the treatment and care of the wounded and sick with the permission of the government authorities.

**The ICRC and the International Federation are entitled to use the emblems at all times.**

In peacetime, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC and the International Federation are also permitted by law to incorporate the emblems into their logos to show their association with the Movement. This is known as indicative use.

Ambulances and first-aid stations exclusively assigned in peacetime to offer free treatment to the wounded and sick are also allowed to display the emblem, in line with domestic law and with the express authorization of the National Society.

**Sometimes people use the emblems who aren't permitted to. For example:**

- > **A health practitioner displays an emblem at their clinic.**
- > **A pharmacy displays a red cross or a red crescent on a shopfront sign.**
- > **A company includes an emblem on a product or advertisement to take advantage of the goodwill and reputation associated with the red cross and red crescent emblems.**

**None of them are authorized to do so.**

# WHAT IS EMBLEM MISUSE?

Emblem misuse occurs when the emblems are displayed in peacetime or during armed conflict by those not lawfully entitled to do so or when they are used in a manner that could undermine respect for the emblems or create confusion. The two main types of misuse are:

## Imitation

The use of a symbol that, by its shape and its colour, could be confused with the red cross, red crescent or red crystal emblem.



## Improper use

When a person or organization that is not entitled to do so displays the emblem on, for example, a sign marking their establishment or on an object. Sometimes commercial enterprises, medical centres, pharmacies, non-governmental organizations or others are not aware of the rules and wrongfully display the emblem.





# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PROTECT AND ENSURE RESPECT FOR THE EMBLEMS?

Misuse of the emblems could jeopardize their protective function during armed conflict because the warring parties and weapon bearers lose trust in what the emblems stand for.

By undermining the status of the emblem during armed conflicts or in peacetime, misuse may also hamper or jeopardize the safe access of military medical services and Red Cross or Red Crescent staff and volunteers to people and communities in need during humanitarian crises.

Even in countries that are not experiencing any such crisis, it is important to ensure that

the emblems are used correctly so that people and communities understand their purpose. If an emergency strikes, including civil unrest or a natural disaster such as an earthquake or a major flood, people need to know that the staff and volunteers that display the emblem while responding to the affected communities' needs are neutral, independent and impartial – values and principles associated with the red cross and red crescent emblems – and grant them safe access.



# WHAT COULD HAPPEN IF THE EMBLEMS ARE MISUSED?

Misuse of the emblems can have many serious consequences, primarily for the people who are most in need of help during emergencies. In the worst-case scenario, lives can be put at risk if the emblems are displayed by those not authorized to do so. Consider the following examples:

An armed conflict is raging in your country. Massive shelling takes place in populated areas. Men, women and children are wounded and houses destroyed. Health workers displaying the red crescent arrive to care for the wounded but are stopped at a checkpoint and not permitted to enter the area. The reason for this is that, before the conflict broke out, the emblems had been freely displayed by the medical community and used by private companies for commercial gain. Then, during the armed conflict, some fighters had also been unlawfully transporting weapons and ammunition in ambulances marked with the red cross or red crescent emblem. As no one understands or trusts the emblems, the medical workers are not allowed to provide help. Countless lives are lost.

A major typhoon strikes your village. Your home is destroyed. Your family is injured and needs help quickly. Red Cross first-aiders come to your village to provide life-saving assistance but they are blocked from entering. Local officials are suspicious that the emblems are associated with a political agenda, as a symbol closely resembling the red cross had been displayed by one party during the recent electoral campaign. They don't understand that the care being offered by the Red Cross is neutral and impartial. This results in your family not getting the care they need and many in your community dying. Here, too, countless lives are lost.



# WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP PROTECT THE EMBLEMS?

You can make sure that the red cross and red crescent emblems are not used in ways for which they were not intended. Alternative symbols may be appropriate to prevent confusion and misuse.

For example, the medical community could use one of the many internationally recognized signs to identify ambulances, hospitals, first aid posts and pharmacies.

If you see the emblems being used by people or organizations that are not entitled to do so, you should alert your National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, which will decide what course of action to take. In most cases, those that misuse the emblems do so simply because they are not aware of the purpose of the emblems and how they may be used.



*Hospital*



*Pharmacy*



*First aid*



*Ambulance*



A. Sytenko/ICRC



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies  
P.O. Box 303, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland  
T +41 22 730 42 22 E-mail: [secretariat@ifrc.org](mailto:secretariat@ifrc.org) [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org)



ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross  
19, avenue de la Paix  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
T +41 22 734 60 01 F +41 22 733 20 57  
E-mail: [shop@icrc.org](mailto:shop@icrc.org) [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)  
© ICRC, May 2016

Front cover: M. Dualeh/ICRC, M. Kokic/ICRC