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IRRC

OPINION NOTE

Wars have limits

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This year marks the 160th anniversary of the original Geneva Convention and the 75th anniversary of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Together, they have come to embody our common humanity. Alas, recent history teaches us that nothing can be taken for granted – whether people's basic rights or peace.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the Swiss Confederation's main partner for humanitarian aid and plays a critical role as a neutral, independent and impartial actor. "Our most fervent hope is that the four Conventions need never be applied": so wished my predecessor, Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre, who represented Switzerland when the Conventions were adopted. That wish has still not been granted; on the contrary, the Conventions are sadly as relevant as ever.

All the precautions taken over the past seventy-five years to prevent a repetition of the tragedies of the twentieth century would seem to have been in vain. Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, the Middle East – these are just a few of the current conflicts that neither multilateralism nor international law has been able to prevent, let alone resolve.

While this anniversary cannot be a cause for joyous celebration, it can spur us on in two ways: to continue to labour for peace, security and the peaceful settling of disputes in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, and to commit to upholding the Geneva Conventions in times of war.

Let us not lose sight of what the Geneva Conventions are for: they exist not to prevent wars but to establish limits on the conduct of hostilities in order to ensure a minimum level of humanity, even during armed conflict. Over seventy-five years,

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the Geneva Conventions have saved millions of lives in hundreds of conflicts, reunited thousands of separated family members and brought comfort to at least as many prisoners of war – moments of bright success amidst the darkness, thanks in particular to the unstinting endeavours of humanitarian agencies like the ICRC.

The Geneva Conventions have been universally ratified. They are the expression of the political will of every State in the world. Their message is clear: wars have limits. This anniversary is an occasion for all States to remember the importance of this message and to respect international humanitarian law.

At this critical time, in a world disfigured by conflicts that induce so much suffering, respect for international humanitarian law must be made a political priority. The Geneva Conventions help to alleviate suffering, to limit the devastating effects of war and to bring about a return to peace. Their rules must be respected, even if the adversary does not respect them.

At this time, a world without the Geneva Conventions is impossible to imagine. Switzerland will doggedly pursue its commitment to the rule of law, until there comes a time when might no longer makes right.

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