

IFRC BRANDED GUIDELINES

Questions and Answers

Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Crystal Emblems

This document is intended to answer some basic questions regarding the red cross, red crescent and red crystal emblems. It provides simple responses for general audiences. For more detailed information particularly with respect to the legal framework please visit the emblem page on icrc.org to find the relevant documents.

The following questions are addressed:

- What are emblems?
- What emblems are in use today?
- Are there laws governing the emblems?
- What do we mean by protective use of the emblems?
- What do we mean by indicative use of the emblems?
- Who can display the emblems?
- What is emblem misuse?
- Why is it so important to display the emblems in line with the rules?
- Are the red cross or red crescent religious symbols?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that the emblems are displayed correctly?
- Sometimes I see the emblems used by pharmacies or to indicate medical services? What can I do?
- What is the difference between an emblem and a logo?
- Do we provide permission for organizations that want to display the emblems?
- Where can I find more information about how the emblems and logos can be displayed?

What are emblems?

The red cross, red crescent and red crystal emblems are signs of protection displayed during an armed conflict, informing those fighting that the people, vehicles or facilities displaying them must at all times be protected and may never be targeted or attacked. The emblems are also used in the logos of the organizations that make up the international Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to show their association with this network. All three symbols enjoy equal legal status.

What emblems are in use today?

Three emblems are in use today: the red cross, the red crescent and the red crystal.

In 2005, the third Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions was adopted, recognizing an additional emblem: the red crystal.

The red lion and sun was recognized as the third distinctive emblem at the 1929 Diplomatic Conference. It was used by Persia until 1980, when the Islamic Republic of Iran declared that it would use the red crescent as its distinctive symbol instead. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran reserved the right to return to the red lion and sun should new emblems be recognized. This emblem is not in use today.

Are there laws governing the display of the emblems?

The use of the emblems is regulated under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, the 1991 *Regulations on the use of the Emblem of the Red Cross or Red Crescent by the National Societies* (Emblem Regulations) and domestic legislation in some countries.

What do we mean by “protective use” of the emblems?

When we use the term “protective” we mean the display of the emblem in its pure form (without the name or acronym of the Movement component) during armed conflict in order to protect the people, vehicles or facilities. In these circumstances the emblems are displayed in large size so that they can be seen at a distance.

What do we mean by “indicative” use of the emblems?

When we use the term “indicative,” we mean the use of an emblem to indicate the affiliation of a person, vehicle or facility with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement). When an emblem is displayed indicatively, it is part of a logo, showing that the ICRC, the Federation and National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society are part of a global network.

Who can display the emblems?

The components of the Movement are not the only entities permitted to display the emblems. In times of armed conflict the emblems can be displayed for protective purposes by armed forces' religious personnel and medical staff, facilities and vehicles.

With the permission of the government authorities, civilian medical staff, hospitals and other civilian medical units assigned to the treatment and care of the wounded and sick may also display an emblem.

What is emblem misuse?

When the emblems are not used in line with the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols or other relevant domestic legislation, it is considered emblem misuse.

There are three specific forms of emblem misuse, including:

- **Imitation:** This occurs when a person or entity uses the same shape and color of one of the emblems. This can create confusion with the emblem.
- **Improper use:** When the display of an emblem is inconsistent with international humanitarian law it can be defined as improper use. For example, the use of an emblem by unauthorized people or entities (such as companies, pharmacists, private doctors, non-governmental organizations, individuals, etc.) is considered to be improper use. It also relates to using the emblem for purposes that are inconsistent with the Fundamental Principles and/or the mission of the Movement.
- **Perfidy:** This form of misuse is perhaps the most serious. It occurs if the emblem is used during an armed conflict to protect combatants and military equipment with intent to mislead the adversary. When causing death or serious personal injury, perfidious use of the emblem is considered a war crime.

Why is it so important to display the emblems in line with the rules?

It is crucial that protective function of the emblems is ensured. This relies on people understanding their primary purpose and not causing any confusion by misusing them. By undermining the status of the emblems during armed conflicts or in peacetime, misuse may hamper or jeopardize the safe access of military medical services and the Red Cross or Red Crescent staff and volunteers to people and communities in need during humanitarian crises.

Are the red cross or red crescent emblems religious symbols?

The emblems are free of any religious, political or cultural association which allow us to gain access to people that need our help. In addition to symbols of protection they also represent humanity, impartiality, and neutrality

The origin of the emblems dates back to 1864 when a diplomatic conference adopted a red cross on a white background, the colors of the Swiss flag in reverse to help protect military medical services, volunteer and aid workers and wounded people in armed conflict. The red crescent was first used by the Ottoman Empire in the 1876-1878 war between Russia and Turkey.

Who is responsible for ensuring that the emblems are displayed properly?

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols require States to enact legislation defining the use and preventing misuse of the emblems on the National level. Oftentimes, the ICRC and National Societies support or encourage States in this effort.

It is important to remember that the ICRC as well as all Movement components do not, in fact, “own” the emblems. The States grant us, and National Societies, the right to display the emblems in accordance with the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the 1991 Emblem Regulations.

At ICRC headquarters Stéphane Hankins is responsible for managing emblem related issues.

Sometimes I see emblems used by pharmacies and doctor’s offices in my context? What can I do?

It is important to inform the legal adviser in your context so that the misuse can be addressed. In addition there are model letters in the [Emblem Study](#) as well as the Branding toolkit that can be used. Oftentimes entities that are using the emblems do not know that they are not entitled to display an emblem. It is important that they understand their purpose and the respective legal framework. We developed a flyer on [emblem misuse](#) to help in this effort.

What’s the difference between an emblem and a logo?

People often refer to the emblems as logos and logos as emblems interchangeably. But there is a difference. As noted above, the emblem is the symbol that is displayed in its pure form, without the name or initials of the Movement component. It is used for protective purposes in armed conflict. The logo is used to show the association of the Movement component by including the name or initials of the respective entity.

These logos are intended to ensure instant recognition and identification of the individual organization, its brand and its activities.

Where can I find more information about how the emblems and logos can be displayed?

There are a number of documents which provide an explanation regarding how emblems and logos may be displayed, including:

- the [1991 Emblem Regulations](#),
- the Red Cross and Red Crescent Emblems and Logos in Communication Marketing and Fundraising (which provides a more accessible and visual explanation/guidance of the Regulations) This document is available on Fednet.

While all these regulations are strict, the intention is to ensure their integrity and respect and most importantly -- their protective function.