

*The Exploring Humanitarian Law program was developed by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 2001 to introduce young people to the basic rules that govern international armed conflict. In the past 10 years, the program has been integrated in the curricula of schools in more than 40 countries in an effort to challenge youth to think about and develop solutions for these modern international issues. The curriculum is divided into five thematic modules—The Humanitarian Perspective, Limits in Armed Conflict, The Law in Action, Ensuring Justice, and Responding to the Consequences of Armed Conflict—and provides educators with more than 30 hours of free material. These EHL resources include lesson plans, primary sources documents, and engaging activities that aim to make the situation of armed conflict more relevant to the everyday experiences of youth, most of whom have never witnessed armed conflict firsthand. Learn more at [www.redcross.org/ehl](http://www.redcross.org/ehl).*

# Turning Bad News into a Teaching Moment

## Using the Exploring Humanitarian Law curriculum to teach about the impact of war and natural disaster

Mat Morgan

**T**he head of the American Red Cross has visited Haiti a number of times since the devastating earthquake in January that killed more than 200,000 people and left an estimated 1.5 million people homeless. She recalls overwhelming feelings of both hope and despair, and it is clear these experiences live on within her. Progress has been made to alleviate the situation, but profound needs remain unmet.

The fact is that this situation is challenging even for seasoned responders: there are inherent realities to overcome related to logistics and local capacity, on top of other challenges like underdeveloped infrastructure and low employment rates that had existed prior to the earthquake. It can be a struggle to decide what should be done in response. At the same time, these poignant moments, which capture the world's attention, offer a unique opportunity to teach about humanitarian principles and introduce some of the methods and challenges inherent to humanitarian work.

After a disaster, or in the midst of a conflict, the news that finds its way into our homes has a uniquely powerful effect on our psyche. Vulnerable people are caught in destructive forces beyond

their control. The scenes we see are post-apocalyptic. The stories are gripping, spanning themes of luck, loss, hope, love, and wild fear, exploring the core of what it means to be human and also prompting questions about how we would react in the same situation. Often news outlets send their top reporters to chronicle the situation, capturing these stories as they unfold, raising the profile of the disaster, and also holding governments and response organizations accountable on the ground. Sometimes they even help support fundraising efforts. However, their interest, or the compassion they inspire in their audience, is not always matched by a deep understanding of the situation or an appreciation for the details of disaster response.

Haiti emphasizes the complexity of these situations. Before the earthquake,

1.7 million people, or nearly 90 percent of the capital city, lived in slums. One third of residents in Port-au-Prince had access to clean water, while no more than half of the population had access to latrines; 99 percent of the country was deforested; 70 percent of the population was unemployed; 40 percent of the population had access to medical care, and 40 percent had chronic malnutrition. When the disaster struck, Haiti was already an exceptionally poor country.

After the dust had settled, there were obvious and immediate needs. Teams rushed in to provide relief and also evaluate the situation on the ground. Within days, the Red Cross had mobilized 21 emergency teams from around the world to respond to diverse needs, including medical care, water and sanitation, and shelter. Each Red Cross society, including the American Red Cross, deployed highly-trained disaster specialists who worked with the Haitian Red Cross to deliver relief supplies through the network of Haitian volunteers. In a chaotic environment, the Red Cross established



Days after the earthquake, Haitians continued to search through the rubble for any sign of life. Petionville, Haiti. January 16, 2010 (Talia Frenkel/American Red Cross).



American Red Cross worker Matt Marek with Mari Michele Melson at a First Aid Post in Petionville, Haiti. January 18, 2010 (Talia Frenkel/American Red Cross).



A child in the Red Cross field hospital in Port-au-Prince following the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. February 1, 2010 (Bonnie Gillespie/American Red Cross).



Widline Sanon receives clean drinking water from the French Red Cross in Camp Daihatsu, an internally displaced persons camp in Port-au-Prince. January 27, 2010 (Talia Frenkel/American Red Cross).



Red Cross volunteers canvas neighborhoods encouraging residents to come for vaccinations. Between February 8 and March 9, 125,000 people were vaccinated against measles, diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus. February 7, 2010 (Bonnie Gillespie/American Red Cross).



Haitian Red Cross workers educate Haitians about the benefits of mosquito netting. June 4, 2010 (Talia Frenkel/American Red Cross)

partnerships and also coordinated on the ground with other organizations to prevent duplication. The global Red Cross network established goals for the number of families it would help, and set about ambitious plans to get to them as quickly as possible with the supplies and services they required.

After several months and as short-term needs were met, the Red Cross then began implementing long-term programs for recovery. These programs include everything from the construction of transitional shelters to micro-grant programs to help small business owners re-start their enterprises. After so much progress, and with so much left to be done, there are still questions to be answered. What should organizations build towards? What is the measure of

success? We know the crisis is not over and the recovery process will be long and difficult. Haiti and its people must rebuild their homes, economy, schools and transportation network. And with an estimated \$12 billion needed to rebuild Haiti, the needs are beyond the capacity of the Red Cross alone to fix, and will require the collective efforts of governments and humanitarian groups around the world.

While many records were broken with the American Red Cross's disaster response to Haiti—including \$32 million in text donations—one of the most important records was broken by youth. As images poured in of people broken in spirit, young people across the United States rallied in support of a whole nation that some of them had

never heard of before. The magnitude of the continued youth response and desire to help provides insight into an untapped well of humanitarian sympathy. If we can educate young people further about humanitarian values, perhaps tomorrow we will have a humanitarian force to rival even the most daunting disasters.

Module 5 of the Exploring Humanitarian Law curriculum (<http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module5/index.php>) empowers students to explore these issues:

In Exploration 5A and 5B, students explore how war or disaster can disrupt the normal supports of life. They gain a greater understanding of the ways in which war or disaster results in tremendous losses in terms of resources; about

## Haiti on My Mind

*Winnie Romeril (American Red Cross International Disaster Responder, and International Humanitarian Law Instructor) Blog entry from February 22, 2010*

A lot of people ask will I return to Haiti. This morning, pangs of wanting to be there washed over me when Red Crosser Mat Morgan rang up while en route to Cite Soleil.

I miss Haiti. I miss the people. I miss feeling inspired, in awe, in the thick of it, alive amidst nearly a quarter of a million dead. I miss the sun beating down on my hair and the dust in my mouth. I miss holding the survivors' hands, listening intensely to their words, the photos they pressed into my hand. I miss closing my eyes to voices singing into the night and awakening to sounds of the city coming back to life. I miss every minute meaning so much.

I bandaged wounds, knowing their open sores would heal long before their broken hearts or homes. I tossed boxes of life-saving supplies down the lines of people wearing the same red and white symbols of hope from Haiti, Colombia, Iran, Italy, the Dominican Republic, Luxembourg, Israel, Spain, Korea, Croatia, Belgium, France, Japan, Turkey, Canada, China, the U.S. and so many places. I led a fragile grandmother to a chair in the shade, gated away from the crowded lines of humanity waiting for supplies. Then I retrieved her relief supplies, which a youthful Haitian Red Cross volunteer carried up the hill to the old woman's makeshift living space. We drew on the strength and resilience apparent all around us in the tent cities to push and expand our relief machine around the clock.

Mat tells me he saw the numbers for the first time since he arrived two weeks ago and was floored. I remember not reading a single statistic while I was there, too consumed by the gritty life and death reality all around me. So, I held my breath, not knowing if the news was good or bad. "We have helped 1.3 million people to date, can you believe it?" I exhaled.

He told me about the boy he met in the German Red Cross field hospital, erected in the Carrefour soccer stadium just days before I left. The child lost his entire family—and his leg—in the earthquake. I can see Mat, a big kid himself, playing games at his bedside, no translation required.

"What's it like to leave here?" he asks me. "I can't imagine not being here."

Expect the shudder from a truck driving by to feel like an aftershock. Your heart will pound until you ground yourself. Expect withdrawal from the lack of information juxtaposed with a barrage of news-that-happened-while-you-were-gone hitting you like a cement block. A broken cement block like the remnants of so many houses and suddenly your mind whisks you back to Haiti.

Expect spontaneous tears at inopportune moments. Remind yourself that it's normal and just breathe and ride the wave. You will have to unpack all those little boxes you hid deep inside yourself—images, sounds, smells, feelings, inconsistencies and frustrations that you had to pack away in the moment so you could do your job.

Focus and be strong, you told yourself while in Haiti. It's what you had to do during those weeks on that half-island that lies somewhere on the road between hell and hope.

When you are home, nothing will ever look the same. But that's good, I tell Mat. It keeps Haiti on your mind.

# TEACHING ACTIVITY

Note: The following lesson is adapted from *Exploration 5A: Needs that Arise from the Devastation of War*, Module 5. The complete lesson plan and resources can be found at <http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module5/A.php>.

## Students will:

- understand how war or natural disaster disrupts the ordinary supports of life;
- become aware of the scope of humanitarian action needed to prevent and reduce the suffering caused by armed conflict or natural disaster.

## Resources:

Photo Collage 2A: [http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module2/downloads/M2\\_Exp2A-5.pdf](http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module2/downloads/M2_Exp2A-5.pdf)

*Optional:* Photos from the newspaper, magazines or the Internet showing the impact of war or disaster.

## 1. Needs that Result from Armed Conflict or Natural Disaster

(15 minutes)

Have each student choose one photo from "Photo Collage 2A" or from photographs clipped from news articles, and make a list of the needs of the people in that picture.

Have students, in small groups, discuss the pictures they chose, identifying:

- the resources they see destroyed or lost;
- the needs of the people in the photos.

Ask the small groups to note not only visible signs of destruction, such as destroyed buildings, but other kinds of damage as well, such as the damage done to utilities and to personal belongings, the deaths of family members and friends, the separation of families, the psychological impact of war or disaster and the loss of community services.

Reconvene the class to compile their lists of resources destroyed and the resulting human needs.

### Possible questions:

*What further consequences might people in such situations face?*

*What other losses will people suffer as a result of the destroyed resources?*

*What kinds of action might help people cope with these consequences of armed conflict or disaster?*

*Are certain types of action more urgent than others? What might be the criteria for prioritizing the level of emergency?*

*Who generally requires special attention in such emergencies? Why?*

(For example: children, women, the elderly, those in need of medical care.)

## 2. Responding to Needs (15 minutes)

Explain to students that governments have the primary responsibility for responding to the needs arising from the devastation of war or natural disaster. Many humanitarian organizations, working together, assist them in this task.

(Examples of humanitarian organizations include: the International Committee of the Red Cross; various UN organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Food Programme and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; international non-governmental organizations such as Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières, Save the Children, Handicap International and OXFAM; and many local organizations.)

Note: Emphasize the fact that under international humanitarian law (IHL), countries must allow civilians access to humanitarian relief.

## Discuss:

Focus students' attention on the variety of activities that must be carried out in response to the needs arising from armed conflict or disaster. Ask students to imagine the consequences for those living in places affected by war or disaster.

*Optional:* Use "Affected by Armed Conflict—Colombia in 2006" found at [www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations\\_pdfs/5a\\_colombia.pdf](http://www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations_pdfs/5a_colombia.pdf)

Ask students, working in their small groups, to brainstorm ideas for specific humanitarian activities. The following categories may be used to help students get started and to organize students' responses: food, shelter, medical care, water, hygiene and sanitary facilities, family reunification, security, psychosocial support, communication and energy.

Reconvene the class to share ideas.

### Possible questions:

*What difficulties might humanitarian organizations encounter in carrying out these activities? Why?*

(For example: security problems; civilian population trapped in combat zones; difficulties in bringing relief convoys due to the lack of permission from local authorities or neighboring countries; access denied to population in need because they are regarded as the enemy; overwhelming scale of the task when hundreds of thousands of people are displaced in a very short period of time; armed combatants mingling with civilians in need; bad roads; flooding during the rainy season; lack of funds.)

**International humanitarian law (IHL)** is a body of international law that consists of treaty and customary rules that seek, in times of armed conflict, to limit the suffering caused by war by protecting persons who are not, or who are no longer, taking part in hostilities by restricting the methods and the means of warfare that may be employed.

**What does the law say?** Under IHL, warring parties must not starve the civilian population. They must not attack or destroy objects that are essential for the survival of the civilian population.

*What precautions should be taken when planning and carrying out humanitarian activities?*

(For example: contacting armed forces and groups to ensure that they consent to and support the planned actions; conducting detailed assessments to ensure that victims are served according to their needs; trying to determine who is at risk of being excluded from receiving aid and why, and taking measures to reduce this risk; planning to cover the most urgent needs first—checking the means available for cooking before bringing dry food, treating the water to avoid an epidemic; using local experts whenever possible.)

*What can be done to avoid further consequences?*

(For example: pointing out the consequences of not respecting IHL rules; reporting the situations of prisoners or civilians to the authorities and helping them find solutions; informing the victims of the services provided by humanitarian organizations and the way to benefit from them; helping military officers or leaders of armed groups to train combatants to respect IHL rules.)

*What kinds of different skills are needed to carry out humanitarian action?*

(For example: doctors, nurses, nutritionists, physiotherapists, social workers, agronomists, veterinarians, economists, engineers, trainers, logisticians, pilots, secretaries, office managers, truck drivers, mechanics, media experts, lawyers, interpreters, information technology specialists.)

**What does the law say?** IHL requires the warring parties to facilitate access to humanitarian relief for civilians in need. They must allow humanitarian workers the freedom of movement necessary for them to do their jobs.

### **3. Close—What Is It Like?** (15 minutes)

Point out to students that though humanitarian workers have been the subject of much discussion in this exploration, humanitarian action is focused on the people whose lives have been torn apart by armed conflict or disaster.

*Optional:* Present the video *Forced from Home*, in which Medin and Damir (two boys aged 12 and 13) tell what it was like to flee their homes and Saba (a 30-year-old mother of three) tells of her journey to a refugee camp ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8VcYwD6U40](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8VcYwD6U40)).

Discuss the ways in which war affected their lives and the needs created by it.

#### **Possible questions:**

*How were the boys affected by the armed conflict?*

*What needs did they have?*

*What sorts of humanitarian activities could meet those needs?*

*What losses has Saba suffered?*

*How will life in the refugee camp be different from what she was used to?*

*What humanitarian activities could help her family?*

*How do you think people in the camp might be able to help each other?*

the scope of humanitarian action needed to reduce the suffering; and about the importance of a coordinated effort among humanitarian agencies. Students engage in an activity to plan a camp for displaced persons to help them grasp the scale of the effort required to restore ordinary supports of life. They take on the role of humanitarian workers, estimating needs—biological (water, food, shelter, medical care, etc.), as well as social and psychological. They assign tasks and make plans for getting supplies in a coordinated manner.

Exploration 5D focuses on the plight of families separated by war or natural disaster and without any news of loved ones. What is needed to restore family links?

In Exploration 5E, students learn about the ethics of humanitarian action, how humanitarian workers may sometimes face dilemmas in performing their work, and that all humanitarian organizations have codes of conduct that include working principles.

Through Module 5 of Exploring Humanitarian Law, students have an opportunity to learn in greater depth about the challenges of a disaster or conflict zone. Through lessons and critical exercises, they learn to appreciate what it means to be both a survivor and a responder, and how the two sides work together to restore lives and livelihoods. When the next major event breaks on the news, they will be prepared to contribute to a thoughtful discussion, and perhaps even take action, on issues that may not be covered on the 10 o'clock news. 🌐

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The Exploring Humanitarian Law curriculum can be accessed at <http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module5/index.php>