

Preface

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PREFACE

A witness to the disasters which have rent the world for over a hundred years, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has continued its humanitarian mission on behalf of the victims of war throughout the past year.

Its activity was mainly carried out in West Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia where, in addition to its traditional tasks for the benefit of the wounded and prisoners of war, it has also concerned itself with civilian populations. With the support of a large number of National Societies and several inter-governmental and private relief organizations, the ICRC's intervention, notably in Nigeria, enabled the saving from certain death of nearly a million and a half women and children.

This action must not, however, be considered necessarily as an exceptional case, but rather as a new type of engagement to which the development of contemporary international relations can lead the ICRC.

The Nigerian crisis in fact belongs to the category of internal conflicts of an international character. Although localized, it no less involves Nigeria's near and distant neighbours and even the large powers. It therefore develops on three levels: local, regional (African) and international, which consequently complicates the

seeking of a solution only to be found in the "convergence of lassitudes". However, such convergence is difficult to realize, in view of the fact that the relation of forces between the parties in conflict is constantly being modified by the aid they receive from outside, aid which is insufficient to lead either side to victory, but just strong enough to maintain the hope of final victory.

Furthermore, the only possible adjudicator, UNO, is placed outside the state of intervention, both because of the "internal" character of the conflict and of its international nature, which could rather be described as "multinational". It is in fact evident that the conditions in which the Nigerian crisis opened and is continuing, as well as considerations of a legal nature, oblige the Secretariat to refrain from any intervention which might be interpreted as adopting a position. In these circumstances, UNO could not undertake relief actions.

In the absence of intervention by UNO, the initiative for relief actions passes to non-governmental organizations which then commit themselves over a wide field according to circumstances, in connection with moral imperatives, or under the influence of collective and sometimes spontaneous emotion, manipulated at times by one or other of the parties to the conflict. However, such individual actions in which political passion sometimes appears to override the exclusive concern with giving to victims, contribute, without the existence of any co-ordination, to aggravate confusion and at the same time by the spirit of competition to which certain relief institutions are prone, maintain tension scarcely favourable for the search of negotiated solutions to the conflict.

Therefore, if one wishes to prevent politics from corrupting the humanitarian principles and the "good Samaritan" from becoming a tool in the hands of the parties to the conflict, a "humanitarian policy" should be drawn up and the ICRC's responsibilities in particular be defined.

In the case now under consideration, it should first of all be noted that the ICRC was not engaged in actions in Nigeria before the outset of the conflict. As is normal, the League and certain National Red Cross Societies as well as organizations such as UNICEF had, it can be said, already established contacts and developed activities in agreement with the Nigerian Government

and with that country's Red Cross. If appeal had been made to the ICRC to intervene from the beginning, it was because both sides recognized it as the neutral Red Cross whose intervention was necessary in the case of disturbances and conflicts.

Thus in accordance with a pre-existing agreement on the distribution of responsibilities for relief actions and by reason of the circumstances, the ICRC took in hand the co-ordination of operations throughout territory under the control of the Federal Government of Nigeria and at the same time acted in a similar manner as the Churches in the eastern provinces (Biafra).

Now, one of the characteristic aspects of this relief operation is not only its extent, but also the engagement of a coalition of Red Cross Societies, voluntary and specialized agencies under the control of an international institution of their own kind. This combination of forces, resulting from the dual influence of tradition and circumstances, made it possible to realize on the non-governmental level what UNO itself was not in a position to do.

It should be noted, however, that the multiple actions taking place in Nigeria and in Biafra could be fragmentated and that the ICRC retains no monopoly. The League of Red Cross Societies could co-operate with the Nigerian Red Cross in the distribution of relief and a group of Societies could operate the airlift. However, it happens that the one and the others have agreed to insert themselves in a general action conducted by the ICRC, with the agreement of the Federal Government of Nigeria, and that it is thus possible not only to co-ordinate the relief actions, but also to conduct them in accordance with these principles without which there can be no humanitarian policy which is neither circumstantial nor opportunist, because, by asserting the obligation of coming to the aid of all victims wherever they may be, it forces one to look beyond the present conflict, thus offering the hope of continuity.

The engagement in Nigeria is thus inscribed in the framework of the ICRC's mission and imposes on it responsibility and obligations which it has to meet. Responsibility towards the victims first of all, but also towards all those who by supporting its action have shown their confidence in it. There are also obligations to the whole of the Red Cross world which has accepted the leadership it assumes and whose moral authority is involved in this great action.

The ICRC has to provide proof that it is in a position to conduct the Nigerian operation and that the heterogeneous “ coalition ” which has voluntarily formed itself under its direction can fulfil the difficult tasks assigned to it. It must not only face the present crisis but also study the manifold political, diplomatic, economic and financial aspects of the operation in order to draw conclusions from it and to place itself in a position to face other similar crises.

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