

Foreword

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FOREWORD

Among the many groups that visit our headquarters, very few, whether they come from Switzerland or from any other part of the world, are aware of our raison d'être, of the duties laid upon us by the Geneva Conventions, and of the diversity and scope of our commitment. To paraphrase Alexis Carrel, one might say: « Le CICR, cet inconnu ».

We hope that those who have this report in their hands will not be content with a cursory glance but will study it carefully and acquire a consciousness of all that lies behind the restraint and dryness of the words: the sufferings, misery and blood of victims; and the total, un-sparing dedication of those working for the ICRC.

It is easy enough to criticize the ICRC by pointing to some individual mistakes, but in all fairness one must consider the lives that have been saved, the families reunited, the messages exchanged and the victims provided with relief.

Today the ICRC can be said to hold a privileged place in the world, in relation to governments and to the United Nations which trust it for its impartiality and experience. No international organization is in a position today to think of taking its place, and the results it achieved in 1974 were such as to confirm this appraisal and strengthen its position.

A few moments given to the pages dealing with the ICRC's action in Cyprus, for instance, will make the reader aware of the multifarious duties we were called upon to fulfil, and enable him to assess the effectiveness of a resolute group of ICRC delegates in a war situation.

One should not delude oneself, however: the task that lies before our institution is today a difficult one owing to all the obstacles put in its way by politics. It often has to wage a relentless struggle to ensure the unqualified or unrestricted application of the Geneva Conventions.

In addition to this arduous action, conducted in chancelleries and in the field, the ICRC has a further duty: it must acquaint the world with its mission and maintain close contact with National Red Cross Societies. In this context, the relations which the ICRC President and the President of the Executive Board maintain with the National Societies are necessary. I have on various occasions had experience of the warm and deferential welcome extended to the President of the ICRC in the course of visits to Societies which do their utmost to ensure that those occasions shall be pleasant and fruitful. There is nothing that can dispel a misunderstanding better than personal contact and an exchange of views marked by frankness.

The need to expound the mission and the message of the ICRC to the world is all the more vital because young National Societies have to be supported and encouraged, while on the other hand some older Societies seek a tonic and revitalizing stimulus that will enable them again to spring into vigorous action.

The first session of the Diplomatic Conference was held in 1974. It was vested with powers to reaffirm and develop the 1949 Geneva Conventions through the adoption of two additional Protocols. The universality of the attendance was heartening. While the Conference covered only a limited part of its programme, it nevertheless paved the way for subsequent sessions at which its important task will, as we all hope, be completed.

A widespread knowledge of humanitarian law and of the salient features of the Geneva Conventions must be developed at every level, at school, in the army and in the university, and this is not an easy matter. The presence of ICRC delegates and the work they perform throughout the world contribute effectively to the success of that effort.

The ICRC message must be persuasive and proclaimed uncompromisingly. It must reaffirm the impartiality and non-discrimination that govern the aid rendered to all victims. Some believe that the Red Cross should be imbued with a new spirit. This is doubtless true; but none of the basic principles must be called in question lest the whole structure should collapse.

We are used by now to the novel sight of International Conferences of the Red Cross, attended by young Societies which have come to life in new States. The ICRC is conscious of this transformation and

welcomes it, for it shows that the concept is marching ahead. The ICRC lends an attentive ear to the new world, but it must watch over the sources and principles of the Red Cross. By doing so it believes that it is working for peace. The Red Cross builds a bridge between different ideologies, conflicting economic systems and countries still bruised by war; it calls for dialogue and seeks to restore confidence.

The future of the International Committee of the Red Cross is very clear: wherever there are victims of conflict it must be on the scene. It must pursue its action on behalf of political detainees. Armed with its right of initiative, it must be prepared to assume responsibilities in humanitarian action. Thus it can hope to help in building a world in which there will be greater justice because men will seek to understand one another better.

Eric Martin

