

Introduction

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Introduction

Throughout the 125 years of its history, the ICRC has constantly pursued its original aim: to protect and assist the victims of armed conflicts.

However, this devotion to its original objective implies for the ICRC a perpetual re-assessment of its function. For although it is true that suffering is ever with us, the nature of conflicts and the categories of the victims affected by them are continually changing.

Those victims were, first, the wounded of armed forces in the field, to whom were later added the shipwrecked, prisoners of war and, above all, the civilian population, of whom conflicts take an ever-increasing toll: women, old people, children, killed, maimed or orphaned by indiscriminate bombing; populations displaced, tortured or even wiped out by persons in authority exercising abusively the power in their hands.

As a consequence of the changed nature of conflicts, the ICRC's concern is now directed not only to international conflicts, but also to the ever more numerous and deadly non-international conflicts and to internal disturbances and tension. In addition, the increasingly ideological character of conflicts, guerrilla techniques, weapons of mass destruction, including poison gas, and the shift of focus of modern conflicts to the Third World have raised new problems for humanitarian action. Sweeping over people living in already very precarious conditions, such conflicts brutally upset the equilibrium and very quickly make it indispensable for essential goods, in particular food and medicines, to be brought in to ensure the survival of the people.

In order to respond as well as possible to those new challenges, the ICRC must unceasingly re-assess and modify its methods. Assistance and protection activities demand expertise in the fields of medicine, nutrition and logistics (telecommunications, transport, relief management, etc.). Since the ICRC is active in situations where food could become a weapon of economic warfare, it has laid down very strict procedures for the checking of all relief distributions; this also enables it to meet the quite legitimate demands of governments and other donors to be accurately informed of the manner in which the funds they have entrusted to the ICRC have been utilized.

Furthermore, the ICRC is fully conscious that its strength lies in its delegates — young men and women, mostly — whom it dispatches to its theatres of operations, in prisons, refugee camps, and bombed cities; it therefore devotes the time and energy necessary to their selection and training.

While it is first and foremost through direct action that the ICRC seeks to achieve its original aim, it is nevertheless aware that such action must go hand in hand with a constant process of reflection.

This process is first of all internal. Being unceasingly the object of entreaties in a variety of spheres — Red Cross and human rights, political detention, etc. — and unceasingly confronted with unfamiliar situations, the ICRC's policies must be coherent and predictable. Its credibility and the confidence placed in it are at stake.

The process of reflection must also be pursued within the whole of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which counted some 145 National Societies at the end of 1987. The Movement draws its strength from its unity, which must be maintained throughout the world beyond each country's borders, in respect for the seven fundamental principles it has adopted: humanity — impartiality — neutrality — independence — voluntary service — unity — universality. In the mounting chaos around us, it is by its firm adherence to these principles that the Movement will find it possible to continue its humanitarian work.

The reflection generated by action has led the ICRC, throughout its history, to encourage governments to enact legislation in the field of international humanitarian law applicable to armed conflicts, in order to tackle efficiently the practical problems encountered in the field. The latest achievement in this domain was the adoption in 1977 of the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions.

While the reflection leading to legislation is a never-ending process, at present the ICRC is laying greater stress, first, on the strict observance by all parties engaged in armed conflict of the rules in force and on the efforts that should be directed to that end by the whole international community; second, on the formal adoption by the

States of the 1977 Protocols (now ratified by about half the States, but not by certain great powers); and lastly, on disseminating knowledge of international humanitarian law among a very great variety of circles and particularly among the armed forces. This is a duty which the States must not neglect; otherwise the undertakings they have assumed in the realm of the law of war will remain a dead letter.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that ICRC devotion to its original aim also constitutes a limit which it has knowingly set to its humanitarian activities; this is not because it is insensitive to the suffering of victims of drought, floods or other disasters; rather is it because the ICRC considers that efficacy demands a distribution of duties and that its special function as a neutral institution can be exercised most usefully in the already huge domain of conflicts.

As a private, independent institution, the ICRC has been entrusted by the international community with well-defined functions; in particular, the Geneva Conventions have bestowed upon it the right to visit prisoners of war and civilian internees during international armed conflicts and have granted it the possibility to propose its services for other humanitarian tasks in both international and non-international armed conflicts. The ICRC's right to put forward such a proposal — or, as it is often called, the right of initiative — is also laid down in the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and is the basis for ICRC action in situations of internal disturbances or tension.

Nevertheless, the ICRC is conscious that its entire action is founded on trust and that such trust can be gained only by its absolute devotion to its own principles, by its steadfast adherence to the standards it has fixed for itself and by its constantly renewed capacity to be moved by, and

to refuse to accept as inevitable, the sufferings of all human beings.

The ICRC is also conscious that, in order to obtain increased moral as well as diplomatic and financial support, it must become more widely known. Consequently, during recent years, emphasis has been placed on the development of its relations, not only within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but beyond it, with governments, other governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations and with the media.

Today the ICRC is reaping the benefits of its policy, as this *Annual Report* demonstrates. Never before has its participation in meetings, seminars or conferences, either organized or simply encouraged by the institution, been so considerable. On frequent occasions, both in Europe and on other continents, the ICRC has made its voice heard through the intermediary of Committee members and certain of its staff - lawyers or, for example, experts on dissemination. To be sure, all have had as their mission to enhance knowledge and understanding of the principles governing ICRC action; but also, depending on the nature of the meetings, to promote ratification of the Additional Protocols, to remind the international community of its duties, or to obtain financial support proportionate to the growing number of conflicts and the consequent increase in the ICRC's activities.

Indeed, the ICRC has known since its inception in 1863 that its resources for action are not limitless and that it has engaged in a struggle that cannot be won definitively: there can never be enough relief for conflict victims or sufficient contributions made towards establishing a lasting peace.

It is with these firm convictions that the ICRC presents its 1987 *Annual Report*.