

M I S C E L L A N E O U S

LATIN AMERICAN PROBLEMS

The 8th Inter-American Red Cross Conference showed, even more than previous ones, the extent and urgency of demographic, social and health problems facing Central and South America. However, it also demonstrated the progress made by our movement in that part of the world. This is therefore cause for encouragement and Mr. H. Beer, Secretary-General of the League wrote in this connection: "In the field of health education and training of medical and para-medical personnel, which is of such great importance in the rural areas of Latin America, Bogotá represents a great step forward".¹

Other institutions, however, have also intervened in those countries to bring the necessary aid. This is the case of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) which devoted a special number of its review to Latin America.² We give some extracts of this likely to interest the Red Cross world.

Furthermore, various contributors to that Review insist on the present need for fighting against sickness and malnutrition and for developing the health services. The Inter-American Seminar on Junior Red Cross and Health Education which met in Quito in November 1966 had similar preoccupations, one of the items on the agenda being precisely that of Junior Red Cross and health education in schools and the community.¹ One of the resolutions it adopted dealt with the creation of crash courses for youths wishing to make a career in health protection and social welfare.

This is how Mr. Eduardo Frei, President of the Republic of Chile defined the problems and responsibilities of Latin America to be faced in the future:

¹ See *International Review*, February 1967.

² UNICEF News, New York, April 1967, No. 43.

We believe that the time has come when the problems and requirements of children and youth must be considered in relation to development programming. In Latin America, development has become a crying need. Its objectives can be described or quantified in terms of average per capita income; industrial and agricultural production; ratios between the number of inhabitants and the number of medical practitioners, schools, housing units, highways and so forth; or other familiar indicators. But the basic essential is still the Latin American peoples' realization of their present position, and their will to assume responsibility for their own destiny. This self-awareness is the starting-point for the mobilization of their creative energies. The process of economic growth will inevitably force us to cope with certain universal developments. The introduction of the more advanced technologies into the Latin American countries is one of the questions that must be tackled quickly and on a broad front. This gives rise to cultural, social and economic problems which we shall have to solve if we are not to linger on the fringes of progress or become a society which, although more prosperous, is equally dependent upon factors beyond its control . . .

Latin America has vast natural resources at its disposal. Financial resources, although in short supply, can be obtained. But neither will be turned to account if the trained men that can organize and apply them are wanting. We must make the necessary effort to build up the cadres of scientists, professionals, technicians and skilled workers without whom there can be no development in the fullest sense of the term, since it is conditional upon the quality of the human resources available . . .

The world population explosion, as reflected in the striking expansion of the younger age groups in the Latin American countries, constitutes a forcible reminder that the incorporation of their peoples in the process of constructing a new society depends in essence on the rising generations. They must be brought up to take the risks and accept the responsibilities implicit in the launching of national development activities in all fields: in economic affairs; in production; in the organization of the community; in the establishment of new cultural patterns which will breed a modern

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attitude of mind, adapted to the changing conditions of our civilization.

Some figures will show the rapid population explosion to which the President of Chile referred :

The population of Latin America is growing faster than that of any other major region in the world. Growth rate for the entire area is 2.7 per cent, but in individual countries the population growth rates range from 1.5 per cent to 3.5 per cent. Half of the 250 million people in Latin America are under 18 years of age. And this "young" population keeps getting younger as it gets bigger. By the end of this century, demographers expect the region's population to be tripled, at the least. The impact of the population explosion is strongest in those sectors of Latin American society that suffer most from the ancient ills of poverty, disease, malnutrition and ignorance.

Difficulties have increased, but as Mr. Jim Breetveld stresses :

All Latin American governments are formally dedicated to the idea of education for all citizens. In signing the Charter of Punta del Este in 1961, nations of the Alliance for Progress pledged themselves to carry out far-reaching programs to improve the availability and quality of education in the Americas. Enrolment of students and construction of new schools have risen, but not as high as had been expected. The number of children to be educated and the cost of building and equipping schools and training teachers have climbed at an increasingly faster rate in recent years. Few national budgets allot enough money to assure substantial progress in the field of education. The result: stagnation where the need for progress is most urgent.

In 1967, close to 50 per cent of all the people in Latin America are illiterate. Some observers would put the figure much higher. But the grim truth is that the opportunity to obtain even a rudimentary education is still lacking in many Latin American nations. The few schools that are well staffed and adequately equipped are usually concentrated in the great urban centres. Schools are scarce in the rural areas where they are needed the most.

To him two problems are of equal importance, those of malnutrition and the chronic shortage of drinking water in certain areas. But disease is also a formidable adversary of development :

Public health problems stemming from diseases seriously hamper a country's development. UNICEF is assisting wide-ranging projects against malaria, tuberculosis, typhus, yaws, diphtheria, syphilis, and other diseases. As part of the general drive to improve public health, UNICEF helps to equip laboratories, schools, training centers, welfare centers, and TB laboratories. UNICEF also trains nurses, midwives, sanitary inspectors, laboratory personnel, and others engaged in the struggle against diseases.

At a special conference on the needs of children and youth in Latin America, held at Santiago, Chile, in 1965, Mr. Henry R. Labouisse, executive director of UNICEF, had this to say about children as future resources:

" We now speak of the development of human resources, in contrast to natural or physical resources. By this, we mean the process of increasing the knowledge, the skills, and the capacity of all people in a society. In economic terms it could be described as the accumulation of human capital and its effective investment in the development of an economy. In political terms, it prepares people for adult participation in political processes. From the social point of view, the development of human resources helps people to lead fuller and richer lives . . .

" To lay a proper foundation for all subsequent development, we must start with the child. The thoroughgoing preparation of the oncoming generation as productive adults and constructive citizens requires very substantial expenditure by the family, as well as public investment in health, nutrition, welfare, education and training. All of those aspects are inter-related in the child's total development and consequently cannot be neglected.

" We must not, however, think of human resources development entirely in economic terms. Investment in the development of human beings is quite different, say, from investment in physical capital. Better health or education, in addition to increasing output, are desirable in themselves. The development of human beings is a means to development and, at the same time, the primary goal of development."

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The health services must be developed and Mr. John Balcomb cites the example of Colombia where it is known that the Red Cross is most active in many fields and UNICEF gives technical assistance.

Compared to many developing countries, Colombia has a fairly high ratio of doctors to inhabitants (one to 2300), but almost a third of the country's 853 municipalities have no permanent health services of any kind. The object of the government's current health plan is to establish a national network of "integrated public health districts", each district serving a population of about 100,000 through a system of health centers and sub-centers and providing both preventive and curative services. So far, 50 of these districts have been established with 274 rural health centers and 225 sub-centers. The health centers have a permanent medical staff, while the sub-centers are staffed by auxiliaries, with a physician in attendance two or three times a week. The integrated public health districts now cover about 42 per cent of the country's population, and three or four new districts are being established every year.

UNICEF assistance to this project covers supplies and equipment for health centers, laboratories, and immunization services; medical kits for nurses and midwives; teaching equipment and stipends for the training of personnel; and vehicles to enable doctors and nurses to reach outlying districts. UNICEF also provides well-drilling equipment, pumps, and chlorinators for the program's important "environmental sanitation" component. WHO, on its part, provides technical advice and the services of internationally recruited experts.

In the face of such a complete and rapid transformation in Latin America, the Red Cross is called upon to play an increasingly important rôle especially as regards health.

In time of peace as during internal conflicts it must be prepared by its national and international bodies to demonstrate the durability of human values.