

CAMPAIGN FOR THE DISSEMINATION of the GENEVA CONVENTIONS ¹

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1. IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY FOR THE DISSEMINATION OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS

The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, for the protection of war victims, postulate the principle of humane treatment for man, the victim of war. They afford protection in a specific field, that is to say, they affect only "protected" persons and only in the event of armed conflict of an international character, but not in conflicts which are not international². However, despite their limitations, the Conventions do afford protection in a very important field, in situations involving the greatest risk of suffering for mankind and in which lack of protection could have distressing consequences. It is for this reason that these Conventions are of such great importance. They form a fundamental component in that system of protection of man's basic rights which is gradually being developed through the medium of contemporary international law.

One way of ensuring the greatest observance of these Conventions is to make the widest possible public familiar with their principles. Awareness of specific international regulations relating

¹ This paper was presented to the Second International Congress of the Neutrality of Medicine, Paris. (*Ed.*)

² Except where the article common to all four Conventions, Article 3, applies; this contains provisions relating to armed conflict not of an international character. (*Ed.*)

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to the protection of war victims could greatly contribute to their implementation. Experience has shown that ignorance of the existence of such regulations has always been one cause of inadequate application of the Conventions and breaches of their elementary principles, resulting in severe suffering for war victims. It is for this reason that the new Conventions contain a special article under which each contracting State is responsible for instructing its armed forces and the population in general in the principles of the Conventions.

The main legal obligation for the dissemination of the regulations contained in these Conventions and for instructing the public on the subject is incumbent on governments. However, assistance in this task is welcome, and all the organizations and associations carrying out activities in the field of public health and social welfare should add their efforts to contribute to the dissemination of the humanitarian principles of the Geneva Conventions. The International Committee for the Neutrality of Medicine is particularly interested in the widening of the scope and acceptance of the principles of the Geneva Conventions, for these Conventions embody the elementary rules for the protection of the wounded and the sick; they provide for the application of humanitarian medical benefits and in particular they lay down the status of the health service which should ensure the practice of medical science.

The dissemination of humanitarian principles is a contribution to peace, as it promotes tolerance of man for man irrespective of nationality, and humane treatment even for enemies during armed conflict, thus facilitating the return to normal relations between nations when these have been disrupted by war.

2. PURPOSES OF DISSEMINATION

The dissemination of the principles of the Geneva Conventions should be so planned as to achieve the best results where their effect will be greatest and from where the knowledge can best be spread throughout the population. It is for this reason that dissemination should be focussed especially on professional circles, by and for the professional classes and those persons most familiar with the Conventions. The armed forces in any case should learn of these

Conventions in the general programme of instruction on the law of war. In addition, legal experts should know these Conventions, especially those holding positions in State departments where they may have to apply these Conventions. Likewise, all medical personnel, doctors, nurses and army medical staffs should be well acquainted with the main provisions of the Geneva Conventions, for they will find therein the basis of their work and of the special protection they require for the judicious and effective fulfilment of their mission. The staffs of various organizations, such as the Red Cross, are also obliged to be familiar with the Geneva Conventions and to propagate their principles. The members of civil defence organizations should also know the main provisions of these Conventions, for they may be of capital importance for the operation of this service. It is important that Conventions be brought to the knowledge of members of the public education departments, for they are in a position to propagate the ideas and fundamental principles of the Conventions among children and youth, through the medium of the Junior Red Cross and in other ways. Courses in secondary schools, universities, scientific institutions, should include in relevant curricula as much instruction as possible on the Geneva Conventions, so that young people may become acquainted with their main aims. These are but a few examples and there are undoubtedly other professions and groups which ought to know these Conventions. We believe that dissemination would achieve much greater results if concentrated towards particular groups and professions, for it would then be adapted to their functions and tasks. Stress could be laid on those aspects of the Conventions which are of special interest for the groups concerned and if the dissemination is effective among these groups, these in turn could spread knowledge of the humanitarian principles of the Conventions.

Nevertheless, work directed in this manner does not mean that no effort should be made to reach the general public. Quite the contrary. At the same time as these activities are aimed at specific professional groups, diffusion of the conventions should be pursued among the population as a whole. Of course, ways and means will differ. It will merely have to be recalled and made known publicly that the elementary humanitarian regulations exist and their importance should be underlined. Every effort must be made to

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impress upon the citizens the existence of these essential humanitarian rules.

All propaganda and campaigns for the diffusion of these principles should take into account certain characteristics of the Geneva Conventions, otherwise a completely erroneous understanding of the Conventions may be propagated. In the first place, a true picture of the Conventions should be given. Their scope is limited, their effectiveness in practice is often imperfect and it is for this reason that emphasis must be laid on the fact that these Conventions give not an absolute but only a relative protection. Care must be taken not to kindle unjustified hope among the public that in the event of conflict they would benefit from an absolute and facile protection merely because of the Conventions: it must be stressed that these are guiding rules and to have them respected will probably require effort. Furthermore, certain shortcomings in these Conventions and the remedial measures should be underlined.

Another fact to which attention must be drawn is the problem of the relationship between these Conventions and the primary concern of the world today, that is to say the striving for peace. The basic forces and the principal efforts of the progressive world today are directed to the safeguard and consolidation of peace. In these circumstances, if there is much talk and propaganda in favour of rules affecting something which is itself forbidden, confusion may be created among the uninformed and uneducated public. The public could conclude that those promoting the Geneva Conventions have insufficient faith in the struggle for peace and that their activity contributes to creating a war psychosis, and hence to the danger of its outbreak. That is why propaganda must be carried out with moderation and realistically, explaining that the efforts being made are for the defence of man and human values; that they are not opposed to, but concomitant with, efforts to safeguarding peace. That is why dissemination should be an integral part of a systematic endeavour to achieve a better and more humane world; it should be an integral part of education, in order to further goodwill among men and should not be an aspect of a campaign impelled by urgent necessity or danger.

Dissemination should be looked upon as one of the appropriate measures designed to bring men together, both nationally and

internationally. By affording specific protection and respect for the victims of armed conflicts, the Geneva Conventions at the same time make clear the suffering, the hardships and terror threatening mankind in various situations and circumstances. By inculcating the humanitarian regulations of the Geneva Conventions into the general public, those in control can exert considerable influence even in such questions as the safeguard of peace and the settlement of disputes without resort to force. As can be seen, there are many factors affecting the understanding of the Geneva Conventions as an instrument in the service of peace, however paradoxical this might appear.

3. PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

In the actual implementation of the plan itself, there are two possibilities which must be borne in mind and which are not merely complementary but are directly related to each other. In the first place, there is the sphere of action at the international level which can undoubtedly have recourse to international solutions and methods based on the valuable experience first and foremost of the International Red Cross. In a national plan of action it is both important and useful for States signatories to the Geneva Conventions to take advantage as much as possible of every available means and to publish or explain through their representatives and delegates the action they have undertaken in their countries, in order to disseminate knowledge of the Geneva Conventions. Experience, suggestions, explanations of difficulties encountered, etc., would be extremely useful for States just beginning to undertake measures of dissemination. We shall mention later some experience gained in Yugoslavia. However, we consider that it is of primary importance to undertake an international plan of campaign.

There are many ways and means to facilitate dissemination. A well presented booklet, publication, illustrated pamphlet, book or monograph can be of immense service. Well prepared courses, seminars, special conferences, will also contribute to dissemination when they are preceded by sufficient documentary publication. It goes without saying that all these efforts should be backed up by such effective media as the press, radio, television, cinema, etc.

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We shall now describe some experience of disseminating the Geneva Conventions in Yugoslavia in the course of the last few years. Apart from considerable efforts to acquaint the members of the Yugoslav armed forces with these Conventions, the programme also aimed at reaching the civilian population. It is for that indeed that the Yugoslav Red Cross activity is important. This activity takes on a number of forms.

In the first place the Yugoslav Red Cross in 1957 issued a 122-page document explaining in detail to those concerned the main provisions of the Conventions. The same publication contained an index to facilitate reference to the long and complicated texts of the Conventions. This publication was widely acclaimed and was used as a handbook by those interested in studying the Conventions and also by lecturers on the subject.

The Yugoslav Red Cross and its various committees periodically organized conferences. In 1959—the centenary of the event which inspired the Red Cross idea—a more intense propaganda campaign was developed by means of conferences throughout the world. A standard twelve-page lecture was prepared and addressed to all Yugoslav Red Cross committees. This programme was very effective: merely according to data available to the Yugoslav Red Cross Central Committee, 248 conferences were held for adults—attended by about 25,800—and 165 lectures for young members of the Red Cross, attended by 20,070. This programme aroused considerable and lasting interest in these Conventions among the population. The conferences were well publicized; they were not limited to members of the Red Cross¹, but were open to everyone.

The Yugoslav Red Cross produced a publication intended to reach a professional group. An illustrated pamphlet, “Medical Personnel and the Geneva Conventions” (1961, 24 pages, small size), was distributed by the Yugoslav Red Cross to the medical personnel through medical faculties, nursing schools, the larger hospitals and professional associations of medical personnel; it was so well acclaimed that a second edition is being considered.

¹ As part of this campaign, Prof. MILAN BARTOS, Academician, member of the U.N. International Law Commission, gave a conference in Belgrade entitled, “Red Cross Action for the Protection of War Victims”; the text of his lecture was printed and 16,000 copies were distributed in a short time throughout the entire country.

On February 26-27, 1962, the first course for civilians on the Geneva Conventions was held in Belgrade. This was organized by the Yugoslav Red Cross and attended by the higher echelons of the personnel of that organization and later by legal experts of the State federal services interested in this subject or whose functions demand a knowledge of these Conventions. The subjects dealt with were: "Contemporary Humanitarian Law", "Historic Development of the Geneva Conventions", "Protection for the Wounded and the Sick", "The Status of Prisoners of War," "Civilian Population Protection", "The International Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions" and "The Functions and Duties of the Yugoslav Red Cross".

This course aroused great interest and similar courses will probably be organized in the provincial republics. The texts of the lectures have been printed in a 90-page publication which was issued in 1963.

These were some of the more important experiences in the dissemination of the Conventions in Yugoslavia; they demonstrate the diversity of methods used and the scope of the programme and we hope that they may be useful examples.

Countries in which there are National Committees or groups for the Neutrality of Medicine should be in the forefront of action to disseminate these Conventions. These groups or committees should approach other organizations interested in this mission, for example the National Red Cross Societies, the medical associations, the universities, and should draw up with them a joint plan for co-ordination.

The work will be more difficult in countries where there are no such committees. For this reason and where possible Committees for the Neutrality of Medicine should be organized through the formation of ad hoc committees by existing organized groups. Qualified persons should be found in the greatest possible number of countries and persuaded to undertake this task. The dissemination of the Geneva Conventions should be a primary duty, for it is the best way to obtain the support of a larger section of the population.

This report could be used as a basis for discussion and it would enable conclusions to be drawn during our meeting. Then, we think

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it would be useful to prepare one or several standard conferences which could be used by the promoters of the programme to start dissemination. Finally, we consider it would be useful to draw up detailed plans for courses on the Geneva Conventions to be given to the various professions in the same way as the courses organized for the employees of the public health services, etc. This would also form the basis of the programme of work in this field. In addition, other texts could be composed for dissemination through the cinema, the radio, the television, etc. This committee could also compile a list of lecturers in the various countries, liable to respond to an invitation to hold conferences abroad.

The foregoing contains some suggestions. We believe others will be made in the course of the discussion by the Congress. We are of the opinion that the dissemination of the principles of the Geneva Conventions and humanitarian principles in general is a task worthy of being undertaken on a wider scale by our organization and is one which will contribute to the promotion of those principles of which it is the advocate.

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