

CHRONICLE

DISSEMINATION OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS AND THE WORLD VETERANS FEDERATION

The World Veterans Federation (WVF) recently held an international conference at The Hague from November 20 to 25 and from November 27 to December 4, 1961. The international institutions of the Red Cross were kindly invited to take part as observers, and the International Committee delegated Mr. Frédéric SiorDET, a member of the ICRC, whilst the League was represented by Dr. Borgeld, medical counsellor of the Netherlands Red Cross.

The opening ceremony was held on November 7 in the magnificent "Ridderzaal", in the presence of H.R.H. Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who addressed the assembly. The Second International Conference on legislation for ex-servicemen and war victims was primarily concerned with the various national legislative provisions having a bearing on the compensation of ex-servicemen, ex-prisoners of war, deportees etc., or their executors. This problem is the primary concern of Governments, the World Veterans Federation and its different national sections.

Immediately beforehand, from November 20 to 25, the International Conference on delayed after-effects of internment and deportation had studied voluminous medical documentation dealing with the complaints, infirmities and various troubles observed in ex-deportees or prisoners of war and which could be considered as consequences of internment. A number of eminent practitioners from different branches of medicine had contributed to this study and the work of the Conference was enhanced by the presence of important delegations from the Academy of Medicine in Paris and the Royal Academy of the Netherlands. The problem was to find out whether it was possible to draw conclusions on a medical level which were precise enough to allow recommendations to be prepared on a legal level aiming at ensuring an equitable reparation for injuries caused by deportation and internment.

The Conference came to the conclusion that prejudicial after-effects of internment can manifest themselves at any time after liberation, without one being able to fix a time-limit for their appearance.

The debates showed yet again the considerable divergences, insofar as delayed after-effects are concerned, between prisoners of war who had benefited from the application of the 1929 Geneva Convention and prisoners of war for whom this Convention was not applicable and, above all, deportees in concentration camps who were protected by no Convention whatsoever. This fact coincided with the observations which the ICRC had made following the 11,000 visits which it had been able to make to camps during and immediately following the Second World War, and which had been the subject of a communication handed to the Conference. These factual observations show the value of the Conventions, where they exist and where they are applied and, in consequence, they prompt the intensified circulation of these texts.

The ICRC representative made a speech to the assembly (which will be found on the following pages), after an invitation to speak at the closing meeting, which was presided over by Professor Richet, a member of the Academy of Medicine, an eminent specialist in pathology of want and pathology of deportation, an ex-deportee himself and Chairman of the Committee for the Neutrality of Medicine.

For its part, the International Committee can only express its pleasure at witnessing its ever-closer links with the World Veterans Federation, because the experience of the members of this Federation and the authority which it enjoys in the world can be a powerful contribution to the fight against the suffering caused by war.

Here is the speech delivered by Mr. F. Siordet :

Once again the World Veterans Federation has invited the Red Cross to follow its work. I would like you to know with what interest I, together with Dr. Borgeld, representative of the Netherlands Red Cross and of the League of Red Cross Societies, followed your debates.

The International Committee of the Red Cross takes a natural interest in everything connected with war veterans. How many of you, former prisoners of war, will not find your names amongst the

40 million card-indexes of our Central Prisoners of War Agency which had undertaken to re-establish links between the prisoners and their families, their own countries?

And then, is it not a moving experience to see you all re-united here without any distinction between former allies and former adversaries seeking to find together the best means of attenuating past sufferings and of avoiding their repetition in the future?

To lessen the sufferings of war, to attempt, by subscribing to the respect for right, to eliminate unnecessary suffering in the future, that is also the preoccupation of someone who has been called the "third combatant", in other words, the delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

When I arrived in this hall the day before yesterday, one of you, finding out who I was, at once related his memories as a prisoner of war. He told me the impression which was made by the arrival of the ICRC delegates in his Stalag. After three years of isolation, to see a little air penetrating from outside, some friendship, some relief; to feel at last not to be completely abandoned!

How often, in every part of the world have I not heard the same expressions of gratitude.

But, Gentlemen, for every prisoner of war who has, directly or indirectly benefited from the aid of the Red Cross, from its visits, its parcels, the few improvements in conditions obtained through the delegates of the ICRC, how many others are there who unfortunately say: "The Red Cross? Never heard of it! We never had news from our families or parcels, or visits. Nothing penetrated from outside in our camp where we were treated like animals".

Why these differences in treatment? Why were millions of prisoners of war able to pass years of captivity without too much harm, seeing their conditions regulated, controlled and improved by relief from outside? And why should millions of other prisoners of war and the millions of those in concentration camps, know only conditions of hunger, cold, slavery and often death, and for those who survived, these delayed effects upon which you have been centring your attention?

Does the Red Cross then show any preference?

No, and it offered its services to all the belligerents. But not all of them accepted. Entire camps remained inexorably closed to the ICRC, in spite of its unceasingly repeated efforts, as they remained closed to

the Protecting Power, because no convention gave protection to civilian deportees and because the Geneva Convention of 1929 relative to the treatment of prisoners of war had not been ratified by all parties to the conflict.

Thus, merely comparing between the lot of prisoners of war benefiting under the 1929 Convention and that of other captives, whether civilian or military which no convention protected, gives ample proof of the value of the Geneva Conventions.

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Your work deals essentially with the delayed effects of deportation and internment. The results of this work, the conclusions reached by this international centre of documentation, will not only be of use to those who are actually suffering from the effects of the period they spent in the concentration camps. They will also be of great value for the future.

In fact, however unanimous and ardent may be people's desire to live in peace and to abolish war, one cannot fail seeing an outburst of localised conflicts, of internal disturbances practically everywhere in the world. The situation leads one to fear that this state of affairs is likely to continue for some certain time.

Now, when one speaks of conflicts or internal disturbances one also means political prisoners, prisoners of war, persons interned. The conclusions which you have reached will enable the appropriate authorities to have the standards of the conventions or the elementary principles of humanity respected, and they will also enable those responsible for deciding upon internment conditions to organize the places of detention, not only from the point of view of safeguarding the immediate health of the captives, but also in order to avoid them, by taking into account the delayed consequences of those conditions of which the existence is only too apparent today.

I will repeat this : The 1929 Convention wherever it was applicable and was in fact applied, has proved its salutary value.

Now, in 1949, this Convention was considerably extended and strengthened as well as those relative to the wounded, sick and shipwrecked members of armed forces in the field and at sea.

Furthermore, a fourth Convention protecting civilian persons finding themselves in the hands of the enemy—and this was sadly lacking during the last world conflict—was adopted and regulated by analogy with the Convention relative to prisoners of war, the conditions of internment and the prohibition of deportation.

Finally, contrary to that which was the case in 1939-45, these four Conventions were ratified by nearly all the States in the world, including the Great Powers.

One must therefore hope that if, and God forbid that this will be so, these Conventions would have to be put to the test in a large conflict, they would avoid a repetition of the horrors which we have seen.

But, Gentlemen, in order that these Conventions fulfil their function, it is not sufficient that they should exist. They must also be made known and one should be sufficiently convinced of their necessity for there to be the willingness to have them applied. The signatory Governments have undertaken to disseminate them. It is everyone's duty to assist them to do this and to make the responsible authorities feel that they are bound by the general will, to carry out their obligations.

Gentlemen! Veterans, prisoners and those of you who were deported, know better than anyone the sufferings of war. Because you have benefited from the Conventions or because, on the contrary, you were deprived of them, you know how much relief they can bring when they are observed. You will then allow the International Committee of the Red Cross which, with its modest resources, attempts to have their texts respected, to appeal to you to contribute, from this very moment, to have them made known and to create the determination to have them applied in all circumstances.

People have sometimes said to us: "By speaking of the Geneva Conventions, you evoke war. You want to humanize war? This means that you accept it. You would be better advised to work for peace".

No! The Red Cross does not accept war. Its very foundation and all its action for nearly a hundred years has been nothing else than a protest against war. A protest not in words but in acts, since the Red Cross, which is unable either to declare war or to end it, makes every effort to dispute the fate of its victims.

I would go further: by working to disseminate the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC is working for peace. What does the spirit of the

Conventions ask? That even in war, even when the unleashing of hatred is at its height, one knows how to discover the human being in one's adversary ; that if he is wounded, one gives him treatment ; a prisoner, that one respects his dignity as a man.

If this is true in time of war, all the more reason for it to be true in time of peace.

Thus, by making the spirit of the Conventions known, and that which has enabled you to find yourselves here amongst former adversaries, we work to create a climate of mutual respect, of compassion in the face of suffering, in which, if it were to become general, would make war impossible.
