

RED CROSS "OBSERVERS"

Following on statements suggesting that "observers" of the International Committee of the Red Cross be placed on the frontier between Northern Rhodesia and Katanga, press correspondents have asked the International Committee of the Red Cross if it would be in a position to undertake tasks of this nature. The International Committee of the Red Cross wishes at once to stress that it has received no official requests on this subject.

Such a proposal having however been discussed at length in the press, the International Committee wishes to point out that its humanitarian action, within the terms of the Geneva Conventions implies the carrying out of certain functions of observation and control. Without being strictly defined by the letter of the Conventions, these functions encompass, in a general manner, all that is essential for the Committee to be able to fulfil its rôle, which is above all to aid the victims of conflicts and to have human dignity respected.

Thus, the Delegates of the Red Cross and the National Societies can be called upon to ensure, in the case of prisoners of war and of detained persons, that the Conventions are strictly applied; in the despatch of relief supplies, the Red Cross sees to it that consignments reach those for whom they are intended and that these are equitably distributed amongst them. It can be called upon to carry out observations internally or on frontiers in order to guarantee the nature or the integrity of consignments. Such observation has, on several occasions, been a condition imposed by the belligerents or the authorities of a State for the crossing of frontiers or for the passage through a blockade.

The Red Cross could therefore not carry out any control "in abstracto" or one of a "customs" character, nor any sort of political arbitration between the parties in the form of observation. Control or observation by the Red Cross has always and above all a humanitarian purpose. When it does assume such functions, it invariably applies the principles of neutrality and impartiality which are its own.

Since the principles are strictly bound to the humanitarian aid given by the Red Cross, the International Committee is often asked to engage itself in other tasks in connection with certain conflicts. This was the case in particular with relation to Article 16 of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Japan for the payment of compensation to former prisoners of war in Japanese hands and for indemnification to victims of pseudo-medical experiments. In all these cases, actions connected with the victims of war were involved.

Finally, if the statutes of the ICRC allow it "to take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its rôle as a specifically neutral and independent institution and consider any question requiring examination by such an institution", the representatives of the Red Cross could not be called upon to set up road blocks or inspect vehicles for arms.
