

**CENTENARY CELEBRATION
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS**

Speech by Mr. Léopold Boissier, President

The International Committee of the Red Cross wishes to thank the large number of persons who have responded to its appeal and have come here to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of its foundation.

Mr. Pierre Boissier will shortly be describing to you how this work began, reminding you how much the whole world owes to the five men of Geneva who created the Red Cross. Did they not accomplish, with astonishing courage and tenacity, the two great ideas of their colleague Henry Dunant: the declaration of legal principles leading, on the one hand, to the protection of the victims of war and, on the other hand, to the forming of National Societies whose task it was to assist the Army Medical Services in the theatre of hostilities? Furthermore, by constituting themselves as an International Committee, they foresaw that it could carry out the dual rôle of a neutral and impartial body which would propagate and develop humanitarian law and also send delegates to places in which fighting was taking place who would see to the application of this law. The principles and the action would thus be complementary.

Our century has given itself over with relentlessly weakening, sometimes even destroying, those noble ideas which had ripened in the previous hundred years, the inevitable arrival of democracy and the respect for the individual, universal brotherhood, the necessary sequel to scientific progress, a general peace assured by arbitration and by the rule of law.

But the basic ideas carried into effect by the Red Cross have been neither forgotten nor treated with contempt. On the contrary, they have survived every catastrophe, they have been affirmed in

the face of all obstacles, they have imposed themselves on governments and, above all, they have made it possible to meet countless appeals from suffering humanity. The impulse given to the movement by Dunant and his friends has never halted.

Protection was given first of all to combatants in the field by the Ist Geneva Convention signed in 1864, then in 1899 to combatants at sea, to prisoners of war by the IIIrd Convention in 1929, and finally, after revision in 1949, this was extended to civilian victims of all conflicts.

Modesty prevents me from calling it the Red Cross triumphant in the face of tasks constantly being renewed. Two world wars have multiplied these tasks beyond all expectation. Then, after the turmoil of great battles, the present disorder and instability have created new situations, generating revolutions, internal conflicts, encounters which have often degenerated into strife in which countless lives have been lost. Here again the International Committee has intervened, whether appeals have been made for its services, or whether it has acted by virtue of a right of initiative universally recognized.

In many cases, the Committee's mission consists in bringing aid to men who have rebelled against a government which regards itself as legitimate and considers that it is within its rights in repressing with severity attempts made at overthrowing the established order. However, these rebels, these insurgents, are not handed over to the mercy of the authorities. The International Committee sees to it that a minimum of guarantees is accorded to them, so that, in spite of the charges made against them, they may enjoy humane treatment. By interposing itself between a government and its nationals, the International Committee may thus penetrate the sovereignty of a State and open up hopeful perspectives to civilised conduct and to the rules of international law.

I can only mention here some of the countries on whose territory the Committee's delegates have taken action:

In Africa, Algeria, the Congo, Kenya; in Asia, the Lebanon, the Yemen, India, during the division of the peninsula into two separate States, in North and South Viet Nam, Korea, Indonesia and in several States of Central America.

CENTENARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

Its delegates have everywhere accomplished the most varied tasks: to care for the wounded and sick, to visit and give comfort to prisoners, to obtain the release of hostages, reunite dispersed families, assure medical treatment to stricken populations, lend their help to refugees to enable them to lead decent lives and, if possible, for them to return to their homes, in short, to do everything which is in line with their heavy duties.

For, so many principles affirmed, so many appeals made to the solidarity of peoples, so many approaches made to governments, finally lead to something which is very concrete, something which one can see, touch and hear, men, women and children who are suffering and to whom the envoy from Geneva brings healing and solace. The consequence of this is that those who should testify today, much more than I myself or my colleagues, are those countless beings who have seen the doors of their prisons half-opened, a hand offering them bread or milk, a look restoring some hope to them.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if the International Committee of the Red Cross has been able to do what it has done for the past hundred years, it is thanks to the support it has found throughout the world and which one should not forget.

Gentlemen, representatives of the Cantonal authorities, you should know what a debt the Committee owes to the Swiss people which has constantly given it such moral and material support, supplying it with devoted personnel and its delegates who have often sacrificed themselves as far as death itself, serving the two crosses at the same time, the white on red and the red on a white ground.

Gentlemen, diplomatic and consular representatives of foreign States, it was on your territories upon which the Committee was called upon to act. Your governments have understood that our institution was inspired by three fundamental principles without which it would remain without force and without authority, namely, independence, impartiality and neutrality. That is why the Geneva Conventions have nearly everywhere found their benevolent application. Did not the United Nations only recently, during the Cuban



*Lecture by
M. P. Boissier.*

**Ceremony, in Geneva, on the occasion of the Centenary of the International Committee
of the Red Cross.**

Speech by Mr. L. Boissier, President.

Jean Zbinden, Genève.





Silver-gilt Medal awarded to the National Societies by the ICRC, on the occasion of its Centenary.



crisis, ask the Committee to help them preserve the world from the horrors of an atomic war ?

Gentlemen, representatives of international institutions established in Geneva, I have pleasure in asserting that the International Committee has had sympathy and understanding from you, and when this was required, most fruitful co-operation. Your efforts to ensure a lasting peace and to build a better world fully accord with the United Nations Charter which is itself an act of vigilance and faith.

Finally, may I thank the National Red Cross Societies, recognized one after another by the Committee, and their federal body the League of Red Cross Societies, for the help they have given the Committee and the ever-expanding work which they are accomplishing.

I have said enough. We are celebrating today an anniversary which all peoples without exception can commemorate without ulterior motives. The work continues and history will inscribe the names of new victories on its banner which has remained untarnished.
