

THIERRY HENTSCH: "FACE AU BLOCUS" ¹

This book, which describes International Red Cross action in Nigeria during the 1967-1970 war, is written in a clear and lively style which makes it eminently readable. Rather than burden his chronological survey with analyses and references, the author presented the fruits of his research in the form of an account of the ICRC's endeavours, during the Nigerian civil war, to provide the population of the secessionist territory with food and medical relief. The book is, in fact, the story of an air-lift. As Mr. Jacques Freymond, a former member of the ICRC, remarks in his preface, the book stresses what beyond a doubt is the most important aspect: the transport of relief. The problem of prisoners is deliberately left in the background.

Mr. Hentsch explains that he was prompted by such general questions as: How did the ICRC gradually become involved in so large an operation? Was it justified in proposing to assume responsibility for that operation? What part did the Geneva Conventions and Red Cross principles play? In his quest for accurate information, he turned to various sources and thus compiled an exceptionally well-documented report.

The sequence of this book may be summed up as follows: the first chapter deals with the period from December 1966 to November 1967; the second, from December 1967 to April 1968; the third, from May to September 1968, and the fourth, from September 1968 to June 1969, at which time the relief operation was at its peak. A deadlock then set in, which continued until the operation came to an abrupt end and the ICRC withdrew. The fifth chapter attempts to answer such questions as might be asked by an outsider less conversant with the problems involved: Why did the ICRC not resume its night flights? Was there any prospect of success for the renewed negotiations on the subject of day flights?

¹ Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, Geneva, 1973, 307 pages. Price 30 Swiss francs.

Towards the end of the book, which contains the author's reflections and conclusions, interest is sustained in basic problems of doctrine, the nature of Red Cross action, and, to some extent, even the conditions governing the ICRC's existence in the contemporary world. While Mr. Hentsch states that the results achieved by the International Committee are reflected in its capacity to relieve not only present-day but future suffering, he affirms that the ICRC cannot depart from what is its essence: its neutrality, its independence and its private character. The crisis which the institution is undergoing is, above all, a crisis of spirit, one which can to a great extent be solved by a return to the spirit of Red Cross pioneers. For the benefit of those prompted by passion rather than humane considerations, the book points out that the Red Cross, true to its principles of equality and proportionality and the golden rule defined by Mr. Pictet in his book "Red Cross Principles", *would not "choose" to aid one belligerent party rather than another.*

In an analysis such as this, greater stress should have been laid on the fact that the war in Nigeria was not an international war but a civil war involving the usual personal factors, political susceptibilities and considerations of prestige. An established government will not recognize rebels. Moreover, in Nigeria the rebels were fighting in a territory which was completely surrounded. Blockade, which the Geneva Conventions did not formally prohibit, became one weapon more in the arsenal. Only in the name of humanity, therefore, did the ICRC act on behalf of civilians who, as in all internal conflicts, were the principal victims. In addition to material relief, the ICRC rendered medical assistance, particularly by means of extensive vaccination campaigns for children in the secessionist territories threatened by epidemics.

Admittedly, the ICRC's achievements should not disguise the difficulties or shortcomings of a relief operation larger than any of the many conducted by the ICRC since the end of World War II. The ICRC has now entered upon a course such as advocated by the author, arranging for a more clear-cut distribution of work and allowing senior officers, aware of their heavy duties and stimulated by their scope for initiative, to make better preparations for new undertakings that lie before the ICRC.

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

The author's criticism is not in the nature of an indictment. It comes from an observer who claims to be as objective as anyone can be and who, in conclusion, affirms that the ICRC was right in assuming all responsibilities with regard to relief in Nigeria. The means available were not always adequate for such an onerous task, essential facilities were sometimes refused, and certain decisions were delayed for want of sufficient safeguards. The ICRC intervened for humanitarian reasons, and the victims' sufferings compelled it to take ever further action, as Mr. Hentsch admits when he says that the ICRC had to fulfil a task which no other organization was able or willing to carry out: the task of providing relief for victims in both camps by ensuring the neutrality of humanitarian aid.

J.-G. L.

Family Planning, *World Health, January 1974.*

... The United Nations decided that 1974 would be World Population Year, and this should provide the opportunity to highlight a fundamental issue: in many countries, a large proportion of the people are not receiving even minimal health care. Needs in developing countries are great and the financial support for health purposes now being given from outside is quite inadequate. At the same time, however, the countries that need help must themselves undertake some basic reforms if they are to achieve their objectives in health care and social well-being.

Unesco and Human Rights, *M. P. Herzog, Unesco Chronicle, December 1974.*

Twenty-five years ago, on 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly meeting in Paris proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The principles set forth in it are of the first