

The Red Cross and the human environment

In the August 1972 issue of *International Review*, an article on the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment drew attention to one of the vital problems of our day. The importance of the subject was underlined in the seven-paragraph Declaration adopted in Stockholm in June 1972, expressing man's common interest in the preservation of our planet. The Declaration, comprising a preamble and a number of principles, stated, *inter alia*, the following:

Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality which permits a life of dignity and well-being, and bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.

It would seem that we have reached a point in the history of our planet when we must all, throughout the whole world, consider more carefully the repercussions which our decisions and deeds might have on the environment. States and institutions, groups and individuals have been alerted to the urgent necessity for worldwide co-operation and prompt action in this field for the benefit of all mankind.

Last year, for example, the Council of National Representatives of the International Council of Nurses, meeting at Singapore, approved a resolution on the role of the nurse in safeguarding the human environment. The preamble stated:

The preservation and improvement of the human environment has become a major goal of man's action for his survival and well-being. The vastness and urgency of the task places on every individual and every professional group the responsibility to participate in the

efforts to safeguard man's environment, to conserve the world's resources, to study how their use affects man and how adverse effects can be avoided.

The problem has now been raised to world level. The 5th of June has been set aside as the day on which World Environment Day is celebrated every year. The theme for 1976 is "Water, vital resource for life" and the World Day is organized and promoted by the United Nations Environment Programme.

It is only in recent years that the environmental question has become a matter of urgency. Previously, no one seemed to notice the steady destruction of the natural environment; indeed, in the eyes of those who considered that nature could be carved and despoiled at anyone's will or pleasure, that very destruction appeared to be in the natural order of things. As for the Red Cross, we can well see, as we look back on its history, that it was only in recent times that it became aware of the gravity of man's attacks on those natural surroundings where profound truth and harmony are to be sought. It cannot be denied that the Red Cross has been called upon to enlarge ever further the range of its activities. It has been compelled to do so by the very force of circumstance, and the chief concern of its founders was to confine the institution within narrow bounds in order to ensure its efficiency. Of those men, only the visionary *Henry Dunant* foresaw its tremendous development, imagining vast associations of men of good will, gathered together for the accomplishment of a wide variety of humanitarian purposes.

But for Dunant's four colleagues, as for him too, it was humanity which counted above all. They were also influenced, it must be admitted, by the mentality and aspirations of their time: progress was continuous, the advance of humanity went on unchecked and man cast his net ever more widely over nature's store. Our earth was no longer thought of as man's surroundings in which people had to live, but as an enemy to be conquered and to be exploited in the most efficient manner.

It is quite possible, however, that had they been less influenced by scientism and had they observed man's incessant depredations on nature, they would have foreseen that the Red Cross could also extend its activities to fields other than that of humanity. In his fundamental book, *Red Cross Principles*, Mr. Jean Pictet wrote: "Red Cross fights against suffering and death." It should therefore fight against those

agents which, by destroying the live forces which man seeks in nature, cause him to suffer and finally to die. If nature is not protected, if it is despoiled, polluted, drained without respite, it will no longer be the reservoir where man can find the live energy wherewith to build up his forces. As it is, from the viewpoint of humanity, irreplaceable harm has already been done, and the balance of nature has been severely upset.

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What can the Red Cross do? How can it act?

Actually, Red Cross concern in respect of this problem goes back quite a number of years, for in 1971, the League Council of Governors adopted a resolution emphasizing the importance of keeping the public well informed on environmental dangers and on adequate counter-measures that need to be taken. The following year, in Stockholm, Mr. H. Beer, League Secretary-General, stressed that activities for the protection of the human environment had their place as was to be expected in the programmes of the Red Cross. Among such activities, he mentioned Red Cross participation in preventive environmental health campaigns, Junior Red Cross action in clearing pollution, and co-operation with the United Nations for setting up a new system of pre-disaster planning.

Protection, the traditional task of the Red Cross, was henceforth to be extended to the environment in which men lived. That was the reason why the theme proposed for World Red Cross Day in 1973 was "You and Your Environment", drawing attention to the situation of the Red Cross vis-à-vis the danger threatening us all and of which the world has now become fully conscious. It was with this in view that action was taken on the proposal to organize a meeting at which a number of National Societies would have the opportunity to speak of the work which they are doing or intend to do, and to exchange ideas. It gives us pleasure to give below an article written by one of the participants at that meeting, Mr. Jacques Vigne, Director of Research at the Henry Dunant Institute.

(J.-G.L.)

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Firmly standing by the principles which have at all times guided its activities, in particular the principle of humanity, the Red Cross has always endeavoured to alleviate and where possible to prevent human suffering, whatever might be the cause.

As much suffering has its source, directly or indirectly, in the events and circumstances affecting human beings, in short in their environment, it may be said that the Red Cross cannot remain indifferent to those problems, but at the same time it cannot be denied that it has for many years been active in the field of the protection of the natural environment, and that its aim is to prevent the suffering which might result from its deterioration.

Nevertheless, even though the activities of the Red Cross in this sphere go back quite a long way in time, it ought to consider the role it could play in the context of the present evolution of a truly world-wide movement for the protection of the environment.

First of all, the Red Cross should ask itself what is the context in which its activities are situated in relation to its principles, and what are the guidelines along which its action could be best developed, whether it acts as an auxiliary of the government or in co-operation with other organizations involved in such problems.

Four fundamental questions may therefore be put:

- (a) what are the principles underlying Red Cross action for the protection of the environment ?
- (b) what can the Red Cross do in this field? (This implies necessarily a definition of the limits to what it can and cannot do.)
- (c) with whom may it act ?
- (d) how may it act ?

It was mainly with the purpose of taking stock of these different questions that the League of Red Cross Societies decided that its Commission on Environment should meet in Budapest from 7 to 10 April 1976.

This meeting, under the chairmanship of Mr. Angebaud, Chairman of the Health and Social Service Advisory Committee of the League, was held at the National Headquarters of the Hungarian Red Cross, with the participation of representatives of the League, the Henry Dunant Institute, WHO, and of delegates from eight National Red

Cross Societies (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Finland, France, Hungary, Poland and USSR).

In his address of welcome, Mr. Janos Hantos, Secretary General of the Hungarian Red Cross, laid stress in particular on the fact that for many years past the activity of the Red Cross had developed in the direction of a more effective protection of the human person against environmental hazards, and on the necessity for the Red Cross to work out, following the example of other international organizations, a policy of its own regarding environmental matters.

This, be thought, should be done in close co-operation with other international organizations and with governments with its main emphasis on educational and informational tasks.

Mr. Angebaud added that this was a basic role for the Red Cross, whose frame of development was, first and foremost, at National Society level, and that he was very happy at the prospect of this Budapest meeting where there were good chances of fruitful exchanges of views on a question of such importance for the whole of the Red Cross.

Most of the delegations presented various papers on specific environmental problems, after which the discussion centered on three main themes:

- what are the guiding principles of the Red Cross concerning the environment ?
- what sort of methods should be employed to deal with this problem ?
- what are the models to be followed in practice ?

The final report of the meeting, which will be submitted at the forthcoming meeting of the League Board of Governors, contains, besides a definition of the environment, a number of recommendations arising from the discussion of Red Cross methods and activities relating to it.

Among those recommendations, mention should be made more particularly of the following:

- more emphasis to be laid on educating the public, to make it better informed and more aware of environmental concerns; this means training volunteers with special instruction in those problems;
- the determination to rely more on expert advice about such questions, by setting up advisory committees, multidisciplinary in character, at National Society level;

- the desire to provide guidelines for Red Cross action on environmental matters, concerning methods and, more particularly, practical examples, leading to a definite plan of action on Red Cross environment protection. This implies close collaboration between the various bureaux of the League Secretariat which are involved in this problem;
 - the advisability of convening working groups to study different methods and models and also to analyse the information assembled by National Societies in the environmental field;
 - emphasis to be laid on the vital character of the permanent contacts that must be maintained with all international organizations involved in environmental problems: UNEP, UNESCO, WHO, UNICEF, etc.;
 - publicity to be given to Red Cross activities in the field of environment, by the publication, on the one hand, of a newsletter at regular intervals to inform National Societies on recent developments in Red Cross environment programmes at National Society level as well as at that of international Red Cross institutions, and, on the other hand, by the inclusion of a special column in “Panorama” on environment;
 - a mandate to be given to the Henry Dunant Institute, the research centre of the International Red Cross, to undertake a study on “Principles of the Red Cross and environment”; the publication of the results obtained should serve as an “ideological” basis for Red Cross activities in the environmental field.
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M. Alexandre Hay
who will take up his duties as President of the International
Committee of the Red Cross on 1 July 1976.