

# The Emblem of the Red Cross

A brief history

III

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## CHAPTER II

### The Emblem of Red Cross Societies

#### 1. National Society Recognition

From the outset, the central committees of the Societies for Relief to Military Wounded developed the habit of corresponding, either direct or through the International Committee. Was not the originality of the institution precisely that community of interests which united National Societies irrespective of frontiers?

Most of the founders of the earliest relief societies had taken part in the 1863 Geneva Conference which initiated the Red Cross movement. They knew each other personally and naturally kept in touch.

But the momentum of the work soon carried it beyond the circle of the States from which the participants to the 1863 Conference came. New Societies were formed in the Balkan States, in Asia and the New World.

These new Societies did not intend to remain on the sidelines of the movement; they wanted contacts with the older Societies and wished to participate in the effort of international solidarity which was beginning to crystallize around the emblem of the red cross. Naturally, they addressed themselves to the ICRC, asking to be put into touch with fellow Societies.

The ICRC became in this way the organization to notify existing Societies of new ones, the notification serving as an introduction of the new to the older Societies, so that in countries affected by war or natural disaster the Societies had a correspondent to whom they could send relief. New Societies acquired the right to participate in Red Cross international events (conferences, exhibitions, publications, and so forth).

The ICRC notified existing Societies of the constitution of others in the Ottoman Empire (1868), Montenegro (1876), Serbia (1876), Rumania (1876), Greece (1877), Peru (1880), Argentina (1881), Hungary (1882), Bulgaria (1885), Portugal (1887) and Japan (1887).

But the very success of the movement seemed likely to moderate its principles, and it was therefore felt necessary to ensure that the new Societies' objectives and bye-laws were in keeping with the movement's essential aims. It fell to the ICRC, the founder of the movement and the guarantor of its basic principles, to carry out this verification. As a result, before issuing a notification of a new Society's constitution, the International Committee was impelled to check the basis of the Society's foundation and to verify that the new Society's bye-laws and aims were consistent with the movement's fundamental principles. In fact several Societies spontaneously consulted the ICRC as to the best way in which to organize themselves.

Notification of the constitution of new Societies thus became, to all intents and purposes, a form of accreditation combined with official recognition.

At the outset the ICRC undertook this enquiry on its own initiative. However, the fourth International Red Cross Conference at Karlsruhe in 1887 considered it necessary to sanction what had become established custom by assigning to the International Committee

*the notification of the constitution of new National Societies after checking the bases on which they were founded.*<sup>1</sup>

This mandate gave considerable discretion to the ICRC which deemed it expedient to specify the scope thereof by laying down twelve qualifying conditions for recognition which, in its opinion, expressed the movement's essential principles.<sup>2</sup> Three of those conditions are worthy of special consideration, namely the conditions that a National Society had to:

- (a) belong to a country where the Geneva Convention was in force;
- (b) be named "Red Cross Society";
- (c) adopt the sign of the red cross on a white ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Fourth International Conference of Red Cross Societies, Karlsruhe, 1887, *Compte rendu*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Organisation générale et Programme de la Croix-Rouge*, second edition, Geneva, 1898, pp. 25-26. These conditions for recognition were reproduced in subsequent editions of *Manuel de la Croix-Rouge internationale*, until 1942.

These three conditions show the interdependence between the recognition of a National Society and the application of the Geneva Convention. This link is essential since, in the first place, National Societies are auxiliaries to the military medical services, which are protected by the Geneva Convention. These conditions stipulate also the name and emblem of the National Societies.

But these conditions were a body of rules decreed by the ICRC itself. It therefore considered itself authorized to exercise a certain amount of discretion in their interpretation<sup>3</sup> and in 1924, deferring to the decision of the 1906 and 1907 Conferences to admit the use of the red crescent and the red lion and sun, it recognized the Egyptian Red Crescent and the Persian Red Lion and Sun.<sup>4</sup>

This empirical approach lasted until the Second World War. The occupation of most of Europe by the armies of the Axis Powers created a real politico-juridical imbroglio: the central committees of some National Societies took refuge abroad so that the directing bodies continued to exist outside their national territories while the sections which

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<sup>3</sup> In the 7th and 8th editions of *Manuel de la Croix-Rouge internationale*, the conditions for recognition were followed by an explanatory note reading:

*These principles, which today are the expression of a tradition, were formulated by the International Committee following the Karlsruhe Conference in 1887 which—confirming a custom which was even then well established—directed the International Committee to notify existing National Societies of the founding of new societies after verifying the bases on which they had been constituted.*

*Most of these principles have been implicitly confirmed by subsequent International Conference resolutions and have been reproduced unchanged in successive editions of the Manuel.*

*However, the International Committee of the Red Cross, in view particularly of the complexity of the international legal status of various entities, is obliged to interpret these principles flexibly, taking into account the circumstances peculiar to each case.*

See *Manuel de la Croix-Rouge internationale*, Geneva, ICRC, Paris, League of Red Cross Societies, 7th ed., 1938, pp. 249 and 250, 8th ed., 1942, pp. 255-256.

<sup>4</sup> In our opinion it cannot be said that the ICRC recognized the Ottoman Society for Relief to Military Wounded and Sick in 1877 in spite of the fact that that Society was displaying the red crescent. It had notified National Societies of that Society's constitution in 1868; in 1877 it announced the reconstitution of that Society, at the same time expressing reservations on the emblem of the red crescent. The 1877 circular, therefore, was simply a notification, not recognition. There are two reasons for saying this:

- (a) in 1877 the ICRC had apparently not been vested with competence to recognize new Societies;
- (b) if it is argued nevertheless that recognition had been granted, then it must be admitted that it dated from 1868 when the Ottoman Society was first founded—but at that time the Ottoman Society had laid no claim to any right to use the red crescent.

remained behind in the conquered countries were dissolved by the occupation forces which instituted new societies subservient to them.

Under those circumstances, the ICRC decided to cease granting recognition until conditions had returned to normal.<sup>5</sup> After the war, the International Committee conveyed this decision to the Preliminary Conference of National Red Cross Societies which was held in Geneva from 26 July to 3 August 1946. The Conference approved but asked that new rules, more definite and more appropriate to the circumstances, be adopted.<sup>6</sup>

The new conditions for recognition were drawn up by the joint ICRC-League Commission and approved by the seventeenth International Red Cross Conference at Stockholm in August 1948.

The conditions relevant to our subject are:

*The applicant Society shall:*

- (1) *Be constituted on the territory of an independent State where the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick is in force;*
- (5) *Use the title and emblem of the Red Cross (Red Crescent, Red Lion and Sun) in conformity with the Geneva Convention.<sup>7</sup>*

In substance, these conditions do not differ from the three conditions previously quoted. The link between National Society recognition and the application of the Geneva Convention was maintained and new Societies had to use one of the three recognized emblems and the corresponding name.

On the other hand, the status of these rules had changed appreciably: having been approved by the supreme deliberative body of the International Red Cross they were binding on the ICRC which no longer had the same latitude in their interpretation and application.

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<sup>5</sup> The ICRC notified the Central Committees of National Red Cross Societies of this decision in its circular No. 365 of 17 September 1941.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Report on the Work of the Preliminary Conference of National Red Cross Societies for the study of the Conventions and of various Problems relative to the Red Cross*, Geneva, ICRC, 1947, pp. 133-136.

<sup>7</sup> Seventeenth International Red Cross Conference, Stockholm, August 1948, *Report*, pp. 77-78 and 89-90; *International Red Cross Handbook*, pp. 332-333.

Consequently, the ICRC is not empowered to recognize a National Society which does not use one of the three emblems mentioned in the Convention.

Moreover, it is probable that if one of the existing Societies decided to change its emblem for one not mentioned in the Convention the ICRC would be obliged to withdraw recognition, which would entail the Society's exclusion from the International Red Cross. Fortunately such a case has not arisen.

Nevertheless, in the course of the years, several attempts have been made to introduce new emblems. Some gave rise to thorough discussion, while others went no further than the stage of tentative approaches. We give below such details as we have been able to trace.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Unrecognized emblems

The purpose of the brief notes which follow is simply to indicate the unrecognized emblems that have been proposed or used.

### *Afghanistan*<sup>9</sup>

In 1934 the ICRC contacted the Afghan authorities with a view to the founding of an Afghan National Society.

Arrangements proceeded so well that in December 1935 the Afghan Government, through its Minister in London, applied for recognition of the National Society which had adopted the name and emblem of the Red Archway (*Mehrab-e-Ahmar*).

The ICRC could not take this new emblem into account. On the basis of an extensive interpretation of article 19 of the 1929 Convention, the ICRC proposed that the new Society adopt the name and emblem of the Red Crescent.

In a note dated 21 February 1936, the Afghan Minister rejected this, saying:

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<sup>8</sup> ICRC records do not keep information on the emblem in a separate file. We had therefore to peruse correspondence exchanged with (or concerning) several National Societies. As research was empirical, the findings should not be considered as exhaustive.

<sup>9</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. CR 00/2.

*In respect of the name of the Society, as it is impossible to adopt the Red Cross for an emblem of the above-mentioned Afghan Society, in the like manner, I do not see, how Afghanistan can accept the symbols of the Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun, which are not religious signs, but definitely national emblems of other countries.*<sup>10</sup>

On 23 July 1936, the Afghan Government confirmed the position stated by its Minister in London. Nevertheless, in 1938, the Afghan Society took the name “Red Crescent Society of Afghanistan”: it was recognized on 2 September 1954. Its emblem is a crescent with the points pointing upwards.

This example illustrates the ambivalence which some symbols induce: in 1936 Afghanistan rejected the sign of the red crescent as the national emblem of a foreign country, whereas in 1949 the Afghan delegates emphasized how the population of their country was attached to that emblem for religious reasons.

### *Cyprus*<sup>11</sup>

A section of the British Red Cross was founded in Cyprus in 1950.

In the expectation of the island’s independence, the British Red Cross took steps to convert its Cyprus branch into a National Society. One of the first difficulties encountered was the name and emblem of the new Society.

The British Red Cross proposed the name “Red Cross and Red Crescent Society of Cyprus”; the emblem would then have consisted of a combination of two recognized signs.

The ICRC refusal was tactful but positive. It objected mainly from fear of sanctioning the introduction of a new emblem.

Incidentally, more recently, two associations entitled the “Red Cross Society of Kurdistan” and the “Red Cross and Red Crescent Society of Eritrea” have proposed an emblem comprising the two recognized signs. However, neither association can claim to belong to a recognized State, so that the question of their recognition cannot be taken into consideration.

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<sup>10</sup> Original English.

<sup>11</sup> Sources: ICRC records, files 122 (35), 122 (70), and 122 (140).

### *India* <sup>12</sup>

The Indian Red Cross Society was formed just after the First World War and was recognized in 1929. It therefore had a tradition dating back to long before the end of the colonial period.

Nevertheless, after independence, some government circles and some leaders of the National Society desired to eliminate all signs of British domination and replace them by symbols indigenous to India. They proposed substituting the symbol of the red wheel on a white ground for the red cross.

The proposal gave rise to some discussion but was soon abandoned.

### *Israel* <sup>13</sup>

The 1949 Diplomatic Conference had refused to recognize the red shield of David as the fourth protective sign for the medical services of the armed forces.

But a relief society displaying that emblem had been in existence in Palestine since 1930. On 1 June 1952 the Society of the Red Shield of David (*Magen David Adom*) applied for recognition.

The fifth condition for recognition as approved by the Seventeenth International Conference <sup>14</sup> not having been complied with, the ICRC was compelled to refuse to recognize the Israeli relief society, which it advised accordingly by letter on 25 June 1952. This is the reason why the Society of the Red Shield of David has not become a member of the International Red Cross.

Since that time the matter has been discussed at regular intervals by the ICRC, the Israeli Government and the Society of the Red Shield of David with a view to regularizing the Society's position. However, no satisfactory solution has yet been found.

These legal difficulties have not prevented the ICRC and the Society of the Red Shield of David from maintaining close working relations, particularly for the provision of assistance to the victims of the recent conflicts in the Middle East.

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<sup>12</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. CR 00/67 II and 043.

<sup>13</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. 122 (171).

<sup>14</sup> See p. 286 above.

### *Japan*<sup>15</sup>

In 1877 a benevolent society named *Hakuaisha* was founded in Japan. Its objectives were identical with those of the National Red Cross Societies.

The Society's emblem was a sun above a red strip (or, to put it in another way, the horizontal branch of the red cross beneath a sun) on a white flag.

In 1886 Japan acceded to the Geneva Convention and the same year the *Hakuaisha* Society adopted the name and emblem of the Red Cross.

The Japanese Red Cross Society was recognized in 1887.

### *Lebanon*

The Lebanese Red Cross was founded immediately after the Second World War and was recognized on 30 January 1947.

It developed rapidly. Nevertheless, its work was hampered when trouble broke out between Christians and Moslems. It seems there was then some question of adopting the sign of a red cedar tree on a white ground, the cedar being the national symbol which might have rallied the various religious communities. However, this proposal did not go beyond preliminary discussions and we found no written record of it in the archives.

### *Sudan*<sup>16</sup>

Two budding National Societies were formed in the Sudan during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium: a local branch of the British Red Cross and a section of the Red Crescent sponsored by the Egyptian Red Crescent Society.

After independence the question of merging these two sections into a single National Society arose, with the attendant question of what emblem the new Society should adopt. A red rhinoceros and other suggestions were made but not adopted. Finally the Society chose the red crescent.

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<sup>15</sup> Sources: — ICRC records, file Japanese Red Cross Society 1885-1914 (without reference number);

— A communication from Mr. Gerhard Dumke, Dr. Jur., Landesgerichtsrat, Oberhausen, dated 20 March 1951 in ICRC records, file No. 043.

<sup>16</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. 121 (179).

The Red Crescent Society of Sudan was recognized on 1 November 1957.

### *Sri Lanka*<sup>17</sup>

The Red Cross of Ceylon was founded on 1 April 1949, succeeding the local branch of the British Red Cross.

It was recognized on 6 March 1952. However, while other relief societies developed rapidly after the island's independence, the Red Cross of Ceylon encountered difficulties which its leaders attributed to the fact that the population associated the sign of the red cross with the British occupation and Christianity. They therefore sought to replace the red cross with a symbol more appropriate to the local religion and customs.

In 1957 the swastika, a symbol common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism for more than a thousand years, was suggested. For obvious reasons the proposal was not followed up.

In 1965 there was a suggestion to integrate all assistance organizations in the National Society, which would then have adopted as its emblem a red lion brandishing a glaive (this emblem, displayed on the national flag, was already being used by the *Shramadana* which was concerned with rural development). The ICRC and the League objected to the introduction of a new protective sign and after some correspondence the Red Cross of Ceylon did not pursue the matter.

### *Syria*<sup>18</sup>

A National Society was founded in Syria soon after the Second World War. Originally, it appears that the prime movers in the Syrian Society rejected both the red cross (redolent of the French domination) and the red crescent (reminiscent of the Turkish domination). They therefore advocated a red palm as the emblem, a koranic and biblical emblem.

Opposed by the ICRC, this attempt was soon abandoned. The Syrian Red Crescent Society was recognized on 12 October 1946.

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<sup>17</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. 121 (32).

<sup>18</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. CR 00/61.

### *Thailand*<sup>19</sup>

In 1893 the border dispute between France and Siam degenerated into armed conflict. Stimulated by Queen Saavakha, a society for assistance to the wounded was founded in Bangkok. It adopted the name *Sabha Unalome Deng*, which may be translated as Society of the Red Flame.

The Society's emblem combined the sign of the red cross with the buddhist symbol of the flame.

During the 1899 and 1906 Conferences, the representatives of Siam attempted to obtain recognition of that emblem. However, after the 1906 Conference, Siam adopted the emblem of the red cross on a white ground for the protection of the armed forces medical service.

In 1918 the National Society adopted the name *Sabha Ka Chad Syam*, i.e. Red Cross Society of Siam. It was recognized on 27 May 1920.

### *USSR*<sup>20</sup>

The Constitution of 31 January 1924 gave the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics a federal structure. In 1926 the National Society was reorganized in accordance with the principles of decentralization and self-governing branches in the various republics. To all internal intents and purposes, these branches became autonomous Societies. Depending on the predominating element of the population, they adopted the name and emblem of the Red Cross or of the Red Crescent.

These Societies founded in Moscow a co-ordinating body, the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the Socialist Federal Soviet Republics. The Executive Committee of the Alliance is responsible mainly for co-ordinated representation of the Societies abroad.

In its administrative tasks, the Alliance uses an emblem consisting of the red cross *and* the red crescent, but apparently each Society in its operational activities uses its own sign.

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<sup>19</sup> Sources: — Bye-laws of the Red Cross of Siam, in *Bulletin des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, 1920, pp. 771 ff.  
— ICRC records, file No. CR 00/53.  
— Communication from Mr. Gerhard Dumke, Dr. Jur., Landesgerichtsrat, Oberhausen, dated 20 March 1951, in ICRC records, file No. 043.

<sup>20</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. CR 00/50c.

On 15 October 1921, the International Committee had recognized the Moscow Red Cross as the “Red Cross Society in Russia, that is to say, in that part of the old Russian empire which constitutes the territory of the Socialist Federal Soviet Republic”,<sup>21</sup> It had previously received an assurance from the Russian Red Cross “that no other National Red Cross Society will be recognized on the territory of the Soviet Republic”.<sup>22</sup> Following the reorganization in 1926, the Executive Committee of the Alliance considered that each Society should be recognized individually. However, the ICRC was of the opinion that “the Executive Committee of the Alliance had . . . *ipso facto* taken over the place and functions in the international organization of the Red Cross of the former Central Committee of the Russian Red Cross of the Soviet Republic”.<sup>23</sup> In the ICRC view, therefore, there was no question of granting recognition again but simply of taking note of the substitution of one body for another.

Moreover, from the point of view of assistance and relief activities, the 1926 reorganization did not result in the adoption of a new emblem, since each Society continued using one single emblem and name.

#### *Zaire* <sup>24</sup>

The Congolese Red Cross, founded immediately after independence, encountered difficulties at the outset. Various contending factions in the country were seeking to gain control of the National Society. This resulted in the founding of rival societies.

One such society was the Society of the Red Lamb of Central Congo which expanded to a certain extent in 1963 and 1964. In September 1963 its request to the ICRC, the League and a number of National Societies for recognition and material assistance was considered inadmissible.

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<sup>21</sup> Circular No. 206 to the Central Committees of the Red Cross, dated 15 October 1921.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Circular No. 275 to the Central Committees of the Red Cross, dated 3 January 1928.

<sup>24</sup> Source: ICRC records, file No. 121 (37).

TABLE I: RECOGNIZED EMBLEMS (ARTICLE 38, CONVENTION I)



TABLE II: UNRECOGNIZED EMBLEMS



AFGHANISTAN



CYPRUS



INDIA  
(Conjectural)



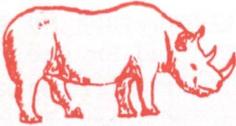
ISRAEL



JAPAN



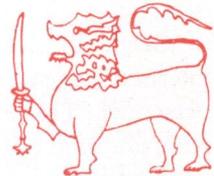
LEBANON  
(Conjectural)



SUDAN  
(Conjectural)



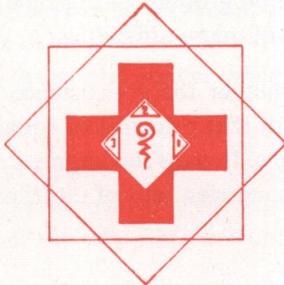
SRI LANKA  
(Conjectural)



SRI LANKA



SYRIA  
(Conjectural)



THAILAND



DISSIDENT SOCIETY  
OF CENTRAL CONGO

NOTE: Only the emblem of the red shield of David (Israel) is in fact used.

## Conclusion

The foregoing pages were intended to review the historical circumstances which led to the break-up of the emblem unity.

To conclude this study we must briefly analyse the present situation.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Present situation

Originally the unity of the emblem appeared to be essential for an international system of protection for the wounded and for medical personnel. This concept was eroded, two other emblems being recognized in addition to the original. This raised the spectre of a succession of emblems. Consequently, new emblems were refused, although the unity of the sign was not restored.

This situation may be explained by historical factors. On the other hand, it is hardly defensible on grounds of logic and equity.

Moreover, it is a source of many difficulties:

(a) It may be asked whether the co-existence of three emblems is genuinely in accordance with that principle of equal rights which should govern international relations. It gives the impression of a bias in favour of Christian and Moslem countries, and of discrimination against those of other faiths.

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<sup>1</sup> In our conclusions, we have taken into account the analysis and proposals advanced by the Study Group for the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross. See Donald D. Tansley, *Final Report: An Agenda for Red Cross*, Geneva, Henry Dunant Institute, July 1975, pp. 125-127.

Much has been written on the religious or non-religious character of the original emblem; we have avoided reopening that debate. The significance of an emblem is essentially in the eye of the beholder; but unquestionably the co-existence of the red cross, red crescent and red lion and sun confers on these three emblems a religious connotation which the original emblem alone did not have. It was the appearance of the red crescent alongside the red cross which invested the latter with a religious significance it had not previously possessed.

To return to the single emblem would be to eliminate the discrimination which appears to tarnish the present situation.

(b) The adoption of several emblems has caused many difficulties in countries where communities of different faiths co-exist. Whatever efforts the National Society makes to serve the whole population, it will appear to identify with the religious group suggested by its emblem. This will hinder the development of its activities.

In the event of religion-based disorders or of civil war, the protective sign is likely to be ignored and the National Society will be paralysed at the very time its action is most needed. Recent examples have underlined the seriousness of that situation.

(c) The co-existence of three emblems undermines the unity of the Red Cross movement whose vocation requires it to transcend cultural, religious and ideological divisions. In many quarters the plurality of signs is considered incompatible with the ideal of international solidarity, and a symptom of the movement's failure to overcome religious obstacles.

(d) Finally, the plurality of emblems imperils the value of the protective sign: it is a source of errors and may even be the cause of deliberate violations, a particularly serious danger when a national symbol is used as a protective sign.

Indeed, the emblem's power to protect depends in the first place on it being the same for friend and foe. When that unity is split, respect of the emblem—and hence the safety of the wounded—is in jeopardy.

## 2. Conclusion

Our objective was to review the history of the red cross sign and of exceptional signs. The situation revealed seems illogical and inequitable.

We have limited ourselves to the historical aspects; it is therefore not for us to put forward proposals to change the present situation.

Nevertheless, it seems that the emblem question deserves further examination with a view to finding a compromise acceptable to everyone. The unity and universality of the protective sign are well worth the sacrifice which everyone must make to achieve them. Nothing less than the safety of the wounded and the medical personnel is at stake.

Although only a diplomatic conference could amend article 38 of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field, we believe that efforts to restore emblem unity should be made first and foremost within the Red Cross movement. After all, it is the Red Cross which bears the brunt: its unity, its universality, and its ability to act for the benefit of victims of armed conflicts are impaired. By offering a clear solution to the emblem problem, the movement would give vivid proof of its ideal of solidarity transcending national, cultural, ideological and religious barriers.

If the movement found such a solution, States could be expected to follow the lead. Incidentally, there is a precedent: the protective sign was devised by the Relief Societies and then adopted by States.

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