

THE PROTECTION OF VICTIMS OF DISASTERS

The protection of victims of armed conflicts is laid down in the Geneva Conventions, to which were added in 1977 some extremely important definitions contained in the Protocols.

But the protection of victims of disasters, natural or otherwise, has still not been governed by any international instruments binding governments. It is true that numerous attempts have been made to organize and co-ordinate relief when a disaster has occurred, with varying results, but the situation of individuals in a country struck by a disaster is governed only by that country's national legislation.

The Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference (Bucharest, 1977) was informed of different suggestions put forward by institutions and groups taking an interest in this matter. The Conference expressed its appreciation of their efforts but considered, in line with a report submitted by the League and ICRC, that it was not realistic to bind States by specific provisions, and that a vague text containing obligations tied up with a large number of conditions might have more disadvantages than benefits.

However, although the adoption of imperative rules, in present world circumstances, is rather unlikely, it might perhaps be possible, within the Red Cross and, simultaneously or subsequently, in a United Nations forum, to adopt a certain number of basic principles. It is in this spirit that the League and the ICRC are co-operating with a Scientific Commission, set up by the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, and in the work of which the Henry Dunant Institute also takes part.

The Commission very quickly found that, before attempting to work out the principles to be proclaimed, it was necessary to know how these problems are dealt with in the legislation of several countries. The League and the ICRC will therefore consult a number of National Societies and Red Cross experts on the relevant rules in their own countries.

In the meantime, the Commission will continue with its work in drawing up a list of the provisions contained in some international legal instruments, and which could be applied in natural disasters. The majority are instruments drawn up or adopted by the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the covenants relating to Human Rights, as well as the principles and rules on relief actions adopted by the Twenty-first and Twenty-second International Conferences of the Red Cross.

These studies are a direct result of Resolution VI of the Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference, which "requests the League, in liaison with the ICRC, to continue in its endeavours with organizations engaged in disaster relief, and in particular UNDRO, with a view to surmounting the obstacles and difficulties in the way of the despatch of international relief and the movement of relief personnel".

It will be recalled that this Resolution was accompanied by a series of recommendations, which were later also approved by the United Nations General Assembly. A similar procedure could be adopted for the proclamation of some principles concerning the protection of disasters victims.

It is hoped that the studies will sufficiently advance for a report to be submitted to the Council of Delegates at its 1979 meeting, the final goal being the adoption of the principles at the Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference in 1981.