

NEW CHARTER FOR THE LEAGUE OF RED CROSS SOCIETIES

by Henrik Beer

In 1976 the League adopted a new constitution. Four years of study, research and discussion were necessary until the special commission, set up by the Board of Governors in 1973, with the co-operation of National Societies, came up with what is to be the charter of the League for years to come.

The matter was of considerable importance and the National Societies were fully justified in deciding, in 1973, to overhaul the Constitution which had not been revised since 1938 when the League membership was less than sixty.

The aim was nothing less than to prove that the League, like the Red Cross movement, was a dynamic institution capable of adapting to the great changes which had occurred since the Second World War within the international community and the Red Cross, and that it was equal to the task of responding to the needs and hopes of the community and of guiding the development of its members, the National Societies.

By the early seventies it had become apparent that the League could hardly continue its humanitarian work on the basis of statutes whose shortcomings and even contradictions were obvious.

The founders of the League in 1919 did indeed make it clear that such an organization, to act in emergency and to promote development, required a flexible structure and statutes which it was more important to respect in the spirit than in the letter. Nevertheless, in spite of the faith and experience of its members, the League had reached a stage at which its renovation was imperative to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world; it was necessary to take into account the growing number and development of the League's members all over the world,

and the variety of their activities and experience, by drawing up new statutes for the institution's guidance in the future. Moreover, this necessity was not an isolated instance; it was part and parcel of the thorough re-appraisal of the role of the Red Cross and of the structures and activities of the international institutions of the Red Cross. As was said at the time, the re-appraisal was a genuine self-criticism, the better to face the future.

The League for its part was aware that to be dynamic and to ensure its own development and adapt its structure it should have statutes which truly reflected its character as the international federation of National Societies, and which re-affirmed and developed the principles on which their activities were based.

As the result of thorough thought and study by experts and by National Societies on fundamental questions concerning the mission, structure, activities and relations of the federation, the new constitution is a logical and coherent set of rules intended to be a more effective guide and working instrument.

A non-political humanitarian institution such as the League must serve an ideal. For the League that ideal is defined in the Fundamental Red Cross Principles adopted by the International Red Cross Conference in Vienna in 1965, and to which the League and its members restate their formal attachment the better to carry out their functions and achieve their objectives.

The new constitution not only re-affirms but also develops the purpose and functions of the League, set forth in general and flexible terms in the International Red Cross Statutes. It gives the general object of the League a new world-wide humanitarian dimension within which the institution will not only inspire but will also promote the humanitarian action of National Societies, thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of peace in the world.

The fundamental functions of the League have been supplemented and developed to take into account new needs and development prospects for the federation. The new provisions give their blessing to a practice which has been going on in the field of relief for several decades, not only during natural disasters but also during armed conflicts, in accordance with agreements concluded with the ICRC. They give expression to the League's moral duty to help its members to develop their structures and activities, and to do everything possible to ensure that its members work, in co-operation with the national authorities and institutions

concerned, for the welfare of their communities through their medical and social programmes. These are basic tasks for the League and National Societies, tasks which the Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference formally reiterated. In addition, another task is the dissemination among National Societies and the public, especially among young people, of knowledge of the fundamental Red Cross principles. The League will henceforth closely co-operate in this with the ICRC.

The structure of the main League bodies in 1973 was based on principles laid down when the League was founded in 1919. The new constitution suitably stresses the institution's universal and democratic character and the participation of the members in League decision-making and management, by a strict separation and allocation of powers among the collective and individual bodies. It also allows for wider League co-operation with international Red Cross institutions and with intergovernmental institutions.

It is true that not all decisions were adopted unanimously. Unanimity within an association of societies of such very different origins, structures and cultures could hardly be expected. But democracy was fully respected so that, within the main bodies, the principles of equitable geographic representation and rotation were stipulated to permit all members to make their voices heard and to have a say in the direction of the League. Provisions were introduced so that important groups might express themselves in their own languages and so that their aspirations would be respected, bearing in mind regional characteristics but with overriding concern to safeguard the unity of the movement.

With a General Assembly, the supreme decision-making body in which National Societies with equal rights define the general policy of the League; with an Executive Council, a genuine executive body; and with subsidiary advisory bodies in the main fields of its activity, the League has the legal instruments for its efficient work while respecting the independence, the scope and sense of responsibility of National Societies.

The League does not live in isolation. It shares with many other international governmental and private institutions the ups and downs of a changing modern world. Its opening to the exterior is not due to the force of events but to a determination to display its solidarity. It was necessary for the co-operation which started many years ago to be given the sanction of the new constitution.

In the first place, co-operation with the ICRC, a privileged partner of the League, is strengthened in the constitution, whether that co-operation takes the form of agreements on joint activities, the joint procedure for the recognition and admission of new National Societies, or the almost daily co-operation which is more than ever necessary for the achievement of the objectives of the Red Cross movement as a whole in time of peace and in time of conflicts.

Likewise, the new constitution offers emerging National Societies the possibility of becoming gradually integrated into the International Red Cross by participating as observers in the proceedings of the League General Assembly. The same applies to the organizations which claim adherence to the Fundamental Red Cross Principles.

Finally, as the Federation of the National Societies, the League has an important role in the present system of international organizations. It has obtained the status of consultative body to important United Nations institutions and with them has undertaken the promotion of international solidarity, particularly in the field of relief. By permitting these institutions, on a reciprocal basis, to attend the General Assembly as observers, the League has proved its determination to contribute in more systematic fashion to the international community's efforts for the benefit of populations needing protection and assistance.

If we attempt to summarize the scope of the new constitution, we could say, without however venturing to give a value judgement, that it is the outcome of the interaction of democratic forces which have been a characteristic for so many years of the institution as a Federation of the National Societies. In the Commission for the Revision of the Constitution, in consultations with National Societies and in meetings of the Board of Governors, the preparation and study of the new constitution have been marked by a free exchange of views of all schools of thought, resulting in a healthy and productive confrontation.

Some provisions, agreed upon after laborious discussions and hard-won compromise, prove how attached the members are to their federation. They testify to the members' will to devise an instrument for the future and to promote the general interest. That determination was discernible, moreover, in the committee of experts for the drafting of the new League constitution. The competence and maturity which its members displayed, combined with their desire to find the most equitable and suitable solutions, produced a document which was the outcome of a constructive association of thought and action.

An important factor not to be overlooked was that all National Societies were able to make a contribution from their own experience, detecting shortcomings here and contradictions there, but also, and especially, giving prominence to the priority activities of the League, the new needs of National Societies, and the necessity for efficient co-operation with the ICRC. They gave form to a renovated League vested with a re-affirmed mission and definite functions within a suitable structure.

Henrik BEER

Secretary General of the League
of Red Cross Societies
