

AFTER A SYMPOSIUM ON DEVELOPMENT

THE RED CROSS IN AFRICA

As announced in the last issue of the *International Review*, a Symposium on the Development of the Red Cross in Africa was recently held at Montreux (Switzerland). It was organized by the League of Red Cross Societies and attended by officers of thirty-five African Societies and representatives of eight of the main donor Societies which had contributed to the programme for the development of the Red Cross in Africa over the past ten years. Experts from African universities, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and other United Nations agencies also attended the Symposium, as did representatives of the League, the ICRC and the Joint Committee for the Reappraisal of the Role of the Red Cross.

A number of addresses were delivered at the opening ceremony presided over by Dr. S. P. Tchoungui, President of the Cameroon Red Cross Society. Maître Marcellin Carraud, Vice-Chairman of the League's Board of Governors and President of the French Red Cross, welcomed the delegates on behalf of the Chairman, Mr. José Barroso. Like other major international organizations, he said, the Red Cross realized that the time had come to take stock of its assistance programmes. Mr. Henrik Beer, Secretary General of the League, asked for a frank and constructive exchange of views. Referring to problems which the Red Cross had to face, he mentioned the adapting of Red Cross programmes to the needs of the population, co-operation with the United Nations and voluntary agencies, the Red Cross contribution to peace, and the need to co-operate with other institutions in various spheres of activity

(food, disaster relief, and the protection and improvement of the environment). The Red Cross was poor, but on the other hand it had considerable capital—people—and should bend its efforts to imbuing them with a humanitarian spirit. A new era of Red Cross action was starting, one that would mean a better life for African peoples.

Mr. Eric Martin, President of the ICRC, also addressed the African National Societies in a speech from which we quote some passages:

I should like to tell you how much hope we place in your young Red Cross Societies. It is quite likely that some of the older National Societies have lost something of their initial vigour, and we are accordingly pleased to see the birth and development of new Societies, from which we expect a great deal. We are in need of your youth and enthusiasm. It is not the number of members which is important to us, nor the material situation of the Society, but rather the motivation of the little group which leads it. It is vital that you realize the new responsibility you are assuming.

It is sometimes said that the Red Cross is an outdated idea; that it is part of the so-called "establishment" which must disappear and be replaced by new approaches. On the basis of my two-year experience as President, however, I am convinced that the world needs the Red Cross today more than ever before. In this time of political instability, conflict, violence and torture, the Red Cross is essential and must more and more impose itself. I can assure you that in all the travelling I have done, I have been able to judge the degree of confidence granted to the International Red Cross. Even though the Red Cross is something of an old lady, more than a hundred years old, she still has a vital task to accomplish in our strife-torn world.

First of all, the Red Cross is action, the action of bending over a defenceless victim to give him assistance, a spontaneous action springing from the heart, without calculation, without hesitation, without selfish interest, without any haggling, without any judgement. I think we shall always be united by this ideal and always ready to perform and repeat that action.

The Red Cross was born in Switzerland, but it would be utterly wrong to consider that its roots are only in this country. The idea of the Red Cross is inherent in every civilization and in every religion. Its principles can be found in the Koran and in the ancient civilization of Persia. Wherever there are men and women who live and suffer and die, we find the seed of the Red Cross ideal, ready to sprout and grow.

What do you expect of the International Committee of the Red Cross? We have known one another for a long time. You have seen our delegates at work and they have received from you a sympathetic and friendly welcome. On their behalf, I thank you. The International Committee of the Red Cross made its presence felt in Africa as early as 1935 and 1936, at the time of the war between Italy and Ethiopia, but it was especially during the process of decolonization that we were active. We visited the camps and prisons which held those who were fighting for independence—in Kenya and Algeria and in the Portuguese territories; we brought relief to the victims of internal conflicts, in the Congo and Nigeria. We have co-operated closely with the OAU and with the liberation movements. At the present time, we are visiting political detainees in South Africa and in Rhodesia. We are providing humanitarian assistance to many prisoners, in co-operation with the governments and authorities of the detaining countries. What we offer you, materially, is aid which we know is insufficient, which we should like to be able to increase; but we also offer a presence, the presence of our delegates. A few months ago I attended a Pan-American meeting of Red Cross Societies and I was very touched to hear representatives from Central America say that the mere presence of a delegate from the International Committee of the Red Cross gave them hope and encouragement.

In addition, we can help you to disseminate knowledge of the principles of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions. In this field, I think we can do still more than we have done. It gave us great pleasure at the ICRC to receive in Geneva officers from your armies who came to join with Swiss officers in courses devoted to the laws of war and the Geneva Conventions. We received them as brothers and have the warmest memories of their visits.

Now, what does the International Committee of the Red Cross ask of you? First, your active participation in the life of the International Red Cross, the weight of your influence and your growing experience, your individual support. It is true that the Geneva Conventions, to which two new protocols now under discussion will be added, were largely conceived by Europeans and by representatives of industrialized countries. It is also very important, however, that due consideration be given to your experience and wisdom.

Next, we look to you for devotion to the ideals of the Red Cross, typified by the gesture of one who gives aid to a victim, without asking

who he is or where he comes from. Finally, we ask you to realize your own importance in the world. The composition of international conferences of the Red Cross has changed, and the participants from the developing countries now play a very prominent role. You will exercise great influence, and I hope your consciousness of this influence will be attended by a sense of responsibility. I trust you will demonstrate this sense of responsibility in carrying out your tasks.

In conclusion, let me remind you that this meeting is an extremely important one, which will have its effects upon the future of the Red Cross. I should like to congratulate the directors of the League for taking this splendid initiative. I hope that while considering the technical problems of relief organization, the ideals and spirit of the Red Cross will not be forgotten. I hope that this meeting will be an occasion for the National Societies in Africa to be drawn closer together. If the spirit of the Red Cross does not inspire this meeting, even though it may lead to interesting technical conclusions, it will not be a success. I know that you agree with this, that we can count on you and that this spirit will be at the heart of your discussions. I thank you.

The Symposium was a particularly important gathering since it was the first in which a large number of Societies were meeting with the League for an overall evaluation of the interchange of knowledge and techniques, materials and funds which had taken place since 1963, to consider future needs and devise an appropriate strategy. In the first phase, an *evaluation* was to be made before answering the question: What have we developed? The second phase was to *forecast* the future trend of the development programme in which the League, under its Constitution, "encourages and promotes in every country the establishment and development of a duly authorized independent National Red Cross Society".

Training by means of regional institutes, seminars and study visits, was regarded as a priority in promoting development. A professor from the University of Ghana said that while programmes drawn up by National Societies were bound to differ, so long as they remained true to the humanitarian and moral ideals of the Red Cross the result would be the same: the improvement of man's condition and the affirmation of his dignity. As far as the future was concerned, he demanded a continued and strengthened effort to develop the Red Cross in Africa, an

effort more closely geared to development in order to ensure man's optimum integration with his environment.

Many problems were considered at Montreux, and the League will prepare a summary of the proceedings and of their results for all National Societies.

We shall therefore confine ourselves to the morning meeting devoted to the ICRC at which the president and several officers of the ICRC spoke about the institution's activities in Africa. The ICRC was not inactive in the conflict then shaking Africa, but was rendering appreciable assistance to civilian and military victims alike.

Mr. P. Gaillard, director, spoke about the ICRC's current work in disseminating the Geneva Conventions and humanitarian principles by various means such as the school textbook and the Soldier's Manual published by the International Committee.

Mr. J. Moreillon, ICRC delegate-general for Africa, made a statement on ICRC action directed particularly at political detainees. One delegation which the ICRC had established in 1970 had concerned itself with the twenty countries of West Africa; the other with the sixteen countries of East Africa. A number of other delegations had been opened since that time. A few passages from the address will enlighten readers regarding some aspects of ICRC action in Africa:

It was in Algeria that the ICRC first rendered political detainees humanitarian assistance, although only to a certain extent. In Kenya it persisted for six years before it was finally authorized to visit prisoners who at the time were known as the Mau Mau. As from 1966, ICRC delegates were able to visit political detainees in Portuguese overseas territories, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, again only to a certain extent since conditions varied from one country to another. In South Africa, for instance, the Red Cross had access only to convicted political prisoners, and in Southern Rhodesia to persons detained under the Emergency Regulations. Gradually, however, these places of detention are opening up, and in some prisons ICRC delegates have been able to meet prisoners of all categories.

Although limited to certain categories of detainees or subject to the time factor, the ICRC was able to act in all such situations. There was one point in common, however: detainees were seen without witnesses and delegates could, as they can today, talk with them in an atmosphere of

mutual confidence which has sometimes strengthened over the year.

From a legal standpoint the cases of those detainees were until recently regarded as coming under the national law of the countries which exercised control over the colonies. The ICRC realized on those occasions that what was important was the need to protect a man in the hands of an enemy, whatever the nation to which that enemy might belong and even if the two were of the same nationality. Action in internal situations was thus becoming a habit, and a second trend was sparked off by visits to political detainees in South America.

In prisons, it was noted that political detainees and penal law prisoners often shared the same cell. Obviously the ICRC was not going to provide a political detainee with medicine or a blanket and withhold such relief from his cell-mate, who also felt cold and might also be sick, merely because his was an offence under penal law. The ICRC thus began to concern itself with prisoners in general rather than with political detainees alone.

It might be added that this attitude frequently contributed to a solution of the thorny problem of the term "political detainee". That term is not always ascribed to an individual, to whom the ICRC is not entitled to attach a "juridical label". As far as the Red Cross is concerned, what really matters is that it must be able to come to this man and render him assistance, and that the only consideration must be detention conditions, not the reasons for detention. A further reason why the ICRC has extended its aid to penal law detainees is that in some countries it has noted that their condition is less favourable than that of political detainees.

Prisoners, whoever they may be, are on the whole forgotten men, and that is why the ICRC has developed its activity on their behalf, and often at the request of governments supplied them with relief. That action, as already mentioned, started in South America. Since 1970 it has been carried out in Africa. International Committee delegates have thus made more than 250 visits to prisons in some twenty African countries and distributed relief to a value of about two million Swiss francs. These visits may create problems for Societies in those countries, not as regards relations between delegates and the national Red Cross but in relations between the latter and the government of that country. A Society is sometimes able to help ICRC delegates in the performance of their task, and may in fact want to do so by securing permission for visits and even facilities for bringing relief supplies to places of detention. Such aid is not only

useful but often essential. But in some other countries, however anxious the Societies may be to help the ICRC delegate, they may for various reasons be unable to approach government authorities and hence be obliged to leave the delegate to fulfil his humanitarian duties alone...

...And this is how in Africa, the land more given to dialogue than any other, the helpful and impartial action of the Red Cross is contributing to restoring an atmosphere of mutual understanding and fostering a spirit of reconciliation and, in doing so, building peace.

