

The President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and National Societies

by Eric Martin

In earlier times, the President of the ICRC may sometimes have been taxed with aloofness, unapproachability and unawareness of the practical action of National Societies. I think this is no longer the case. My predecessors and I myself have been cordially invited to visit National Red Cross Societies, and we in turn have had the pleasure of receiving their representatives in Geneva.

Let us without more ado say how greatly the President of the ICRC appreciates the welcome he has been given everywhere and the tokens of esteem he has received. He makes no mistake, however: the object of that deference and courtesy is merely the person who embodies the institution's principles and carries the ICRC message. The tribute is rendered to a great idea which is continuing to enlist the devoted support of millions of men and women in every nation.

When a new country emerges, once its flag and national anthem are selected, it sets about establishing a Red Cross Society. How comforting is the thought that in every part of the world there are men and women imbued with the same purpose and determined to give their best in the service of others !

The ICRC President finds it most rewarding to see new countries and learn the value and diversity of the activities carried out by National Societies. The duties and responsibilities of Red Cross Societies vary according to the area, political regime and economic situation. Many of them have advisedly concentrated on specific activities outside the operational field of State bodies and other welfare organizations. Red Cross work may be extensive or confined; but it is its very own. Duplication and useless effort are discouraging to those who want to do a good job.

The President of the ICRC now in office is a doctor and has always been interested in medico-social action, which is just as necessary in the countries of the Third World as it is in industrialized areas. Many Red Cross Societies have provided the aid of voluntary workers. Emphasis should be laid on that feature: the totally disinterested action of the Red Cross; its acceptance of voluntary work that is strenuous, often obscure, yet useful to the community. In our present-day world, selfless aid may be a rare thing, but let no one say that it is non-existent! Time and again, we have witnessed it on our visits to National Societies.

Local contact with the leaders of those Societies has helped the President of the ICRC to realize the difficulties they have encountered, the obstacles that stand in the way of their development, and the restriction of their independence. That experience was useful for it gave him a better understanding of the various aspects of the International Red Cross.

When he makes a visit, however, the President of the ICRC makes a point of recalling the great principles of the Red Cross, those principles which cannot be debased, interpreted or ignored. If the foundations are undermined, the whole building collapses. Our present-day communications show us how small the world is, but they also show the differences that separate nations. Despite antagonism, misunderstanding and mistrust, there is an idea which unites human beings and, under the emblem of the Red Cross, prompts them to provide relief for the weak and the suffering, whoever they may be.

The President of the ICRC must also explain the stand taken by the institution over which he presides, and describe its activities and problems. Any misapprehension must be dispelled, and the dialogue must in all circumstances be frank. The ICRC performs its duties in a struggle which is renewed from day to day. Its purpose is to provide relief for victims of conflicts. When hindered in its mission by circumstance or human malevolence, when its action is restricted owing to the size of the tasks which confront it, it experiences failure and is sometimes paralysed at the very time when an emergency may call for immediate action. On the other hand, difficulties such as these are offset by the numerous undertakings which are successfully completed.

Thus direct contact between the ICRC President and leaders of National Societies is useful. It makes for confidence and creates bonds of friendship.

Lastly, the President of the ICRC recalls the role of National Societies in the *dissemination of principles*. The principles of the Red Cross should be taught at school, at the university, in the army, in factories, on the land, and in administrations. For every age, every grade of education, every category of individual, there is a special message, an appropriate method of presenting the Red Cross. Our action may occasionally lack vigour and conviction in this field, and the procedure should be given closer study.

Yet the aim is abundantly clear: to imbue people with the Red Cross spirit of tolerance, mutual understanding, service and devotion; a spirit of which the world, in its quest for peace, stands in such great need.

Eric MARTIN
President of the International Committee
of the Red Cross
