

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF THE RED CROSS

by Anton Schlögel

A survey, over a period of time, of what the public thinks of the Red Cross as reflected in the spoken, written and audio-visual media, has led to astonishing conclusions: two diametrically opposite trends have steadily emerged. On the one hand, at national and international level, the Red Cross, whose activities over the past few years have developed to a surprising extent, has received great praise, in fact too much praise. Yet at the same time bitter criticism has constantly been levelled at the Red Cross. A study of the causes of that praise and criticism, however paradoxical this may seem, shows that both stem from the very same facts and events!

Obviously they have been due to the viewpoint held, the hopes pinned on Red Cross action, and one's idea of Red Cross possibilities. While those who are realistic in their appraisal of the Red Cross express their appreciation of the results, however meagre they may be, others show keen disappointment because they have assigned the Red Cross tasks and achievements far beyond its field of activity. In addition, all manner of personal considerations, financial and otherwise, weigh the balance this way and that. Yet by taking a closer look at things we realize that the very factors that make for the strength of the Red Cross and determine its possibilities also set its limits, even though the attempt to exceed those limits may have no untoward effect on practical activities.

This situation is due to a great many causes. We shall mention only four, which seem particularly characteristic but are as yet hardly known to the public: voluntary work, Red Cross universality, Red Cross neutrality, and international humanitarian law. These causes apply to matters which concern us all, and it behooves us to draw the right conclusions.

I. Voluntary work

It is obvious to us, Red Cross workers, that Red Cross institutions can count only on the support of persons who devote themselves to them of their own accord and in complete freedom. We are thoroughly aware of the fact that the Red Cross draws its strength precisely from its voluntary nature, and that the selflessness shown by many of its workers has been possible only because of the absolutely free commitment they have contracted. The free decision made by a Swiss, Henry Dunant, his idealism, enthusiasm and spirit of self-denial, gave birth to the movement. There have been countless volunteers in the history of the Red Cross: Elsa Brandström, who, on her own initiative and without any coercion or urging, conducted a magnificent relief action during the First World War and was the guardian angel of prisoners of war; Clara Barton, that admirable woman who unflinchingly devoted herself to the Red Cross and the 1864 Geneva Convention through the difficult years of the nineteenth century, when the United States of America was ravaged by civil war—she it was who laid the foundations for the fine work of the American Red Cross; Mrs. Amrit Kaur, former secretary of Mahatma Gandhi, who took up the duties of Indian Minister of Health and for many years was President of the Red Cross in her country.

These outstanding figures were imbued with an inner drive and a spirit of dedication that gave meaning to their entire lives. Again, millions of persons are doing voluntary work for the Red Cross, day by day, in every part of the world. The voluntary nature of the movement has lent it the enormous strength that we so sorely need. Thanks to that strength we have been able to cope with new tasks and to face unknown situations with ever-renewed impetus. Voluntary work also calls for prompt adaptability to new conditions and a capacity to withstand the burden of official bureaucracy. Operations may thus partly overlap, develop simultaneously, and at times even make for healthy competition. Voluntary work also accounts for the fact that Red Cross organizations have swiftly overcome even the most serious disasters. Thus the German Red Cross, which was thoroughly disorganized after the First and Second World Wars, rose after only a few months, like the phoenix

from its ashes, and once more set to work. Voluntary work is therefore one of the major forces and potentials of the Red Cross.

Yet it also has its limits in that it comprises, in the first place, a highly personal factor. A voluntary organization is, by definition, a private association. The Red Cross is no government institution, but a free group, and as such it encounters the same barriers as any private institution. It is not by chance that Red Cross Societies are still private organizations even though they have extended into the public sphere and there carried out many tasks. Red Cross organizations cannot be held responsible for problems arising outside a private association's sphere of influence, and they cannot attempt to solve them.

Nor are we unaware of the fact that National Societies can take on no more than their active members are prepared to do, and—a fact which is seldom realized—no more than the funds provided by their own members and the public permit. Private associations such as Red Cross Societies can never identify with governments in such a way as to act as their agents. By doing so they would forfeit an essential measure of independence. This applies not to National Societies alone but also to the International Committee and the League of Red Cross Societies. We should always bear in mind the fact that these institutions are voluntary associations under private law and therefore can achieve only what those acting therein are willing and able to do.

Public opinion has of late directed all manner of reproach at international Red Cross organizations regarding projects that have failed to materialize and duties that have not been fulfilled. Admittedly, some undertakings may not have met with the success hoped for, but I still feel that most of the criticism is based on the misunderstanding that an institution which, in fact, is a voluntary and private association, is assigned duties which could be fulfilled by no less than an intergovernmental authority.

The misunderstanding must be dispelled once and for all. Surprisingly enough, it is on account of the successes it has scored throughout the world, despite its private character, that the Red Cross is expected to make inordinate efforts, which the failure of many another institution has tended to magnify *ad infinitum*. The achievements of the ICRC, the League and National Societies

obviously raise greater hopes than can be fulfilled. When Red Cross efforts in the Dominican Republic, in 1965, led to the conclusion of an armistice—in itself a notable achievement—it was taken for granted that the Red Cross would act in the same way on other occasions. This applies to all manner of relief in national and international conflicts. Yet people are apt to forget that the Red Cross cannot demand. It can do no more than ask, hope, wish, urge. Broadly speaking, Red Cross efforts merely pave the way for political decisions, which are reached by those who are in fact politically responsible.

II. Universality

The principle of universality should be more closely considered. Frequently it is not properly understood, and only when studied do the possibilities and limits of the Red Cross stand out clearly. We know that the Red Cross is one of the few truly universal institutions, if not the only one. There are now 121 recognized National Societies in different parts of the world. Almost every State of any importance has its own Red Cross, Red Crescent or Red Lion and Sun Society. This universality is of inestimable value. For example, after the Second World War, at a time when West Germany, which in 1949 had become the Federal Republic of Germany, had no diplomatic relations with the eastern countries, a host of problems was solved through the co-operation of the National Societies of Poland, the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia. In no other way could problems have been solved than under the Red Cross emblem and the universal co-operation which that implied. Thanks to universality, hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war went home, more than 600,000 persons were reunited with their families, and the fate of countless soldiers and civilians was ascertained. And, although constantly challenged, universality has enabled the International Committee and the League of Red Cross Societies to form links throughout the world, which to this day have withstood all manner of restrictions and crises.

Universality, however, also sets serious limits for the Red Cross. An institution can be universal only in so far as there is mutual

confidence, the essential and irreplaceable basis for any universal institution. Without confidence the institution collapses, and even if outwardly it continues to exist, it no longer has the basis essential to its work. Yet confidence necessarily implies voluntary restrictions, since ideas clash the world over, and philosophical, political, religious and other tendencies differ widely. The confidence of all can be maintained by means of self-imposed discretion, in fact discipline, which although not easy to exercise is nevertheless indispensable. Thus universality is beyond a doubt the most vulnerable of Red Cross principles. The fact that no other institution has, so to speak, succeeded in securing and maintaining that universal character proves how difficult it is to achieve.

These thoughts may perhaps make it easier to understand why the Red Cross refrains from taking a certain stand or siding with some against others, passing judgement or voicing any protest. To aid and to protest are attitudes that conflict rather than complement one another. The Red Cross protests only when it can do so without hampering the fulfilment of its fundamental duties as a relief institution. A few years back, Rolf Hochhuth, a German writer, wrote a play called "Der Stellvertreter" in which he attacked Pope Pius XII for not protesting with enough vigour against the persecution of Jews. Such attacks have sometimes also been directed against the Red Cross. The Red Cross, however, has clearly stated¹ how hard it has found certain considerations and decisions and what efforts it has made to secure the best possible conditions for victims, without jeopardizing the very foundations of its relief actions.²

III. Neutrality

Here we must refer to two other distinctive features of the Red Cross: neutrality and impartiality. They are closely linked and, as we are all aware, have been the basis of the movement since its very inception. Henry Dunant exhorted us to aid, not only those who were on our own side, but those on the other side too, and

¹ See *Inter Arma Caritas*, Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross, 1947, p. 75 et seq.

² Jean Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, Geneva, 1956, p. 73 et seq.

not to render aid according to the degree of sympathy we might feel. All of us are acquainted with the well-known formula: "without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria", which, in varying terms, appears many times in the Geneva Conventions (for instance in Article 3).

Nowadays, that formula is very much disputed, and particularly by youth. I have often talked with young people about the question of how far Red Cross impartiality and neutrality are still genuine values and whether, at a time when social reform is so frequently contemplated and demanded, it may not be better to bend one's efforts in that direction. Many of the letters which we receive, many of the wishes expressed and questions asked by writers and others who are interested in international problems, have followed the same trend. A correct reply calls for considerable thought. But for Red Cross neutrality and impartiality, most of the major actions would not have been possible. Neutrality may actually be defined thus: in making an estimate of the needs of relief and weighing all relevant decisions, human beings and their sufferings are determinant. Thus the Red Cross does not lend support to the government of this or that State, to revolutionary movements or to any other groups of persons, but to suffering human beings alone, and they are to be found everywhere.

Here lies the strength of the Red Cross and that is why it is respected as a symbol of relief throughout the world, in spite of difficulties and limitations. I am thoroughly convinced that this is the most vital position the Red Cross has to defend at the present time. Neutrality is not an innate quality. Man is not born neutral, but likes to reach decisions and take sides. This attitude is usually justified; but when it comes to providing relief for victims, for those who suffer, there can be no other reply than to afford them the aid they need, regardless of their ideas, religious beliefs or political leanings, no matter whether the regime they serve seems good or bad. I remember that in a discussion I had on the subject with Mr. Jacques Freymond, a former member of the ICRC, he very wisely remarked that where aid was rendered to one side in a conflict, it should always be done in such a way as to ensure that the other side could also receive aid. It seems to me that this useful

and practical principle sheds some light on the essential aspect of our efforts in the matter of neutrality and impartiality. This aspect, too, should be made public. What is involved is simply an old Christian appeal which can be found in other religions as well: to love all human beings, to make no distinction between those who should be loved and those who should not be loved.

IV. International Humanitarian Law

Unlike other institutions, the Red Cross has from its inception recognized the importance of law. Henry Dunant had already advocated rules for the protection of victims of armed conflicts, on the one hand, and the establishment of voluntary relief organizations, on the other. The former led to the Geneva Conventions, the latter to the birth of the Red Cross. The Geneva Conventions and the different humanitarian Conventions related thereto have provided countless possibilities for effective action, not for the International Committee alone, but also for National Societies and the League. They have assigned the International Committee of the Red Cross very broad duties, which are defined about sixty times. Thus is fulfilled what Henry Dunant, in 1862, advocated in his book *A Memory of Solferino*, in which he declared that a holy crusade of humanitarianism must be undertaken. We cannot, in this article, describe the extraordinarily far-reaching activities which all Red Cross institutions, particularly the ICRC, have carried out under that mandate. Nor need we pride ourselves on this. Yet it is because of the very fact that this work is so important that the possibilities afforded National Red Cross Societies under the Conventions have been overestimated.

International humanitarian law has certainly proved itself over the years, but experience in the last twenty years has shown that a number of shortcomings persist. Humanitarian law must be supplemented in many regards. The most serious shortcoming would seem to be the meagre provision made in Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions for a non-international conflict or civil war, despite the fact that since 1945 there have been more civil wars than actual international conflicts. The Red Cross, however, has constantly endeavoured to act even in situations where the

legal basis was lacking or very weak. This it has often done at the cost of heavy sacrifice. Several of its delegates have perished. Yet the ICRC has also stressed the urgent need to improve the legal basis for its action. The efforts made in this direction, which we hope will meet with excellent results at the Diplomatic Conference to be held in Geneva in 1974, deserve our unanimous support. All Governments should be prevailed upon by their respective National Societies to acknowledge that these matters are not of minor importance, and are extremely topical.

The possibilities and limits of the Red Cross, then, are very closely connected. Despite the large-scale operations launched and the notable success achieved, the Red Cross appears to be an institution which has strict limits rather than omnipotence. The Red Cross has nevertheless set a magnificent example, one that touches and moves the heart of every human being. We must therefore spare no effort in the struggle to ensure that in spite of everything the vast fields of activity that lie open to the Red Cross are, today more than ever before, properly used and developed. This is something that should be particularly convincing for youth, who are to carry on the work and take it a step further.

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