

The Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference

The Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference, held in Manila, from 7 to 14 November 1981, was attended by a large number of delegations representing 121 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC, the League of Red Cross Societies and more than 80 States parties to the Geneva Conventions. The Conference was also attended by numerous observers from as yet unrecognized Red Cross Societies and from governmental and non-governmental organizations, which had been invited to follow the proceedings.

The International Conference was preceded, from 29 October, by various Red Cross meetings, the League General Assembly and, on 6 November, the Council of Delegates.

OPENING CEREMONY

At the opening ceremony of the International Conference, on 7 November, after a solemn reading of the Red Cross principles, General Romeo C. Espino, the President of the host National Society, the Philippine Red Cross, welcomed the delegates as follows:

The Red Cross has gone a long way in over a century of service to humanity. Today it has unlimited opportunities to provide assistance in both war and peace.

The Red Cross has always risen to its challenges and has always been equal to the task. It has adapted to the needs of the times. Where human lives are at stake, the organization has not been wanting in responsiveness, will, creativity and dedication—at both individual and collective levels—even in the face of serious resource constraints.

The founding of the Philippine National Red Cross shows the solidarity of the Filipino people with people all over the world in striving for a better quality of life for all mankind. Now the Filipino people, like the Red Cross, have extended their vision beyond the Filipino community to the world as a whole: a world where love, peace and other humanitarian values will prevail.

The holding of the Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference in Manila this month is doubly significant, relevant and timely. We in the Philippines are happy and proud that this prestigious Conference is held in our country.

What remains the biggest challenge to the Red Cross is its commitment to the attainment of genuine, positive, and lasting peace. When Henry Dunant founded the Red Cross, he did not perhaps expect it to be as big and influential as it has become. Perhaps he did not expect its role to be that complicated either.

But the constant reassessment of its role, made necessary by the difficulties facing it, and the adoption of a definite position on the problems it must solve, constitute the primary challenges that the Red Cross faces today.

May this Manila Conference strengthen our resolve to meet these and the rest of our challenges squarely in the interest of mankind.

On behalf of the Philippine National Red Cross, I welcome you to this Twenty-fourth International Conference in Manila, and I hope you find your stay pleasant, interesting and fruitful.

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The Chairman of the Standing Commission, Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh, thanked the Philippine Red Cross for its welcome and expressed a few relevant thoughts to all participants:

My first duty as Chairman of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross is to express our heartfelt thanks to the Philippine Government and the Philippine National Red Cross for providing this magnificent setting for our Twenty-fourth International Conference. The hospitality we are receiving, the excellence of the arrangements made for us and the friendly attentions given to us by our Philippine colleagues have been most highly appreciated by us all. The Standing Commission, which has, among other tasks, the responsibility for selecting the host city of the Conference, congratulates itself on having

chosen Manila on this occasion and I know that all the participants will share our appreciation and satisfaction and will join in the thanks I am expressing.

It is a very great privilege for me to find myself standing on this podium and to address the assembled leaders of the Red Cross world in the presence of the representatives of governments signatories of the Geneva Conventions, and I shall try to express in a few words my thoughts about the Red Cross and its place in the contemporary world.

As soon as one has uttered the words "the contemporary world", one's mind becomes filled with dark thoughts and deep forebodings about the violence and the suffering which that world contains, and the sounds of conflict that rend the air.

Then when you listen with greater attention, you can hear a distinct voice, a voice of mercy trying to make itself heard above the din. This is the recognizable voice of the Red Cross. It is not, alas! always listened to, but it never ceases to sound and it will never cease to sound.

We, as representatives of all the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the world are now about to engage, for a week, in a dialogue with the governments signatories of the Geneva Conventions. Only once every four years do we have this opportunity to engage the direct interest and support of government representatives, and we should use these rare occasions to bring to the attention of governments, through their representatives, the enormous range of constructive work carried out by the Red Cross throughout the world, and show them the value of our activities.

Our movement has never been more active, more effective, more greatly in demand, more true to its mission. The records of the work of National Societies, taken together with the long list of their operations provide the proof of that.

For it is at the level of National Societies and their work on the ground that the true value of the Red Cross is to be judged. If you want to envisage the reality of the Red Cross, you must cast your minds back to your own country, where the Red Cross workers, the volunteers, old and young, are, at this very moment, on the job.

Societies have two main obligations: the first is that they must abide by Red Cross Principles and the second is that they should give one another support and assistance in Red Cross work in every possible way. That is the great—and very comforting—strength of the Red Cross, and it is because of this that we can be sure the Red Cross will survive. Its considerable strength and health also come from the flexible independence and interdependence of its component parts.

Relief work by both ICRC and League has spanned the whole world, but the largest efforts have been in South East Asia and on the continent of Africa, where assistance has been given to literally countless victims of conflict, drought and famine. The number of refugees assisted in the past four years certainly exceeded that in any similar period of so-called "peace". The League and the ICRC have also been working on plans to strengthen the capacity of the smaller National Societies.

The work of the Red Cross is in full spate. Not everybody finds it easy to understand our peculiar structure with our two organizations in Geneva and our 128 organizations round the world, and not everybody can fully comprehend the philosophy, the ethic. But everybody can understand the motivation and the Principles and everybody can understand mercy and humanity...

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Next Mr. Alexander Hay, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, drew attention to three major concerns of the ICRC in a changing world where the elementary rules of humanity were increasingly flouted, namely, the increase of indiscriminate violence; the politicization of the humanitarian domain and the obstacles raised in the way of ICRC action; the arms race.

The address of the ICRC President will be printed in the next issue of International Review.

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Mr. Enrique de la Mata Gorostizaga, who had just been elected President of the League of Red Cross Societies, delivered the following address:

The world in which we live leads us to what is doubtless concern shared by all about violence and injustice in present-day society...

Faced with this definitely bleak situation, we men and women of the Red Cross must nevertheless seek reasons to encourage us in our work, and one of them is the existence, alongside the destructive impulse

of some groups of people, of many thousands of experts, politicians, economists, sociologists, who daily make efforts to expose these ills, to define them clearly, to show the magnitude of the problems, and try to find the appropriate solutions in order to alleviate collective suffering. There is a common desire felt by the people of today to work and improve the society in which we live. . .

We delegates present at this International Conference appreciate the desire to adopt a modern and realistic viewpoint, a desire to take up the challenge of building a future for all, which must of necessity be better. Two hundred and fifty million persons make up our organization in which everyone, without regard to social class, and because of fundamental principles, gives of his best to alleviate the suffering of others or achieve greater well-being for them. . .

These united efforts, this will to work towards a common goal, this energy, this endeavour, this refusal to accept without challenge an evil which could seem irremediable, the collective resolve to overcome difficulties, are our encouragement and hope. In this respect there may be a need for political powers and the Red Cross to unite their strengths in order to strive for common aims, and this will occur when we are all agreed on the need to respect above all the liberty and dignity of man, when we agree on the need to reduce possible dangers to people and alleviate their suffering, when we agree on the need to improve the quality of the future and to work for development of human relations based on mutual respect and equality. . .

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The President of the Republic of the Philippines, Mr. Ferdinand Marcos, closed the meeting with an address in which he affirmed his country's loyalty to the principles of the Red Cross.

“As one of the hundred and fifty nations that are signatories to the Red Cross-initiated Geneva Conventions, the Philippines is committed wholeheartedly to the principles for which your organization stands”, he said.

He then expressed his apprehension about attempts from some quarters to undermine the organization's traditions of neutrality. He exhorted the Red Cross to be vigilant of those who sought “to compromise the Red Cross tradition of being non-partisan”.

The President stated that the Philippines, which had benefited from the movement's services, looked upon the Red Cross as an organization embodying the noblest impulse of man. "We look to your organization's service to humanity of well over a century—a cause that we have tried to share, no matter how modestly—as somehow an affirmation of our own solidarity with all of mankind... for we too have known suffering, distress, privation and poverty."

The President added that the organization's excellent work had by its example made the doing of good works easier for all and had taught the people of the Philippines to share what it had with all mankind. This had been the sentiment which had prompted the Philippine people to provide a haven for thousands of refugees without asking them their political opinions or their race.

He praised the Red Cross for its determination to remain aloof from all political and ideological considerations, for "its capacity to resist the machinations of less commendable interests and for its historic record of selflessness and self-sacrifice," which had "given the Red Cross a unique influence and persuasiveness that other international and often better-endowed organizations can only aspire to".

He concluded by wishing the delegates a pleasant stay in Manila and a fruitful conference.

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We wish to mention that Mr. Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the United Nations, sent the following message to the Conference:

On the occasion of the twenty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross, I should like to offer my warmest good wishes to those who are gathered together in Manila.

To all of us who are engaged in the service of others, whether in the United Nations, in government or in the voluntary agencies, the work of the International Red Cross is an example of how disinterested, devoted work can bring in its train real and concrete results...

The value of so efficient and dedicated an organization has never been demonstrated so clearly as in the really difficult, large-scale multiple emergency where the results of natural events are superimposed upon the confusion and chaos which are the consequences of some of man's deliberate activities...

I look forward to continuing the co-operation which has grown up between the League of Red Cross Societies and the United Nations in

natural disasters, and between the International Committee of the Red Cross and United Nations bodies in times of conflict. I am sure that your deliberations in this Conference will do much to enhance the already high esteem in which the Red Cross is held throughout the world.

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The next issue of *International Review* will contain a summary of the various Red Cross meetings in Manila: the League General Assembly, the Council of Delegates and the International Red Cross Conference (Commissions and plenary sessions). It seemed important to publish without delay the text of the resolutions and decisions taken in Manila and no space was available here for the summary of the deliberations.
