

MEETING OF RED CROSS LEADERS

As announced at the meeting of the Council of Delegates, Mexico City, October 1971,¹ the International Committee of the Red Cross invited the members of the Standing Commission and the President and Vice-Presidents of the League's Board of Governors to an informal meeting for a study of questions of mutual interest. The meeting was held at Montreux (Switzerland) from 5 to 7 April 1972. There were four items on the agenda:

- What, today, constitutes the strength of the Red Cross; what will its future be; must its objectives and limitations be revised?
- The specific contribution and role of each of the various component bodies of the International Red Cross, namely, the ICRC, the League and the National Societies.
- Co-operation among the various bodies, and ways and means of strengthening the unity of the International Red Cross.
- Red Cross relations and co-operation with governments, inter-governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

The presentation and discussion of the various items—and it should be noted that they are interdependent—served to highlight the new conditions under which Red Cross activities are being carried out, particularly in view of the development of the mass media. Nowadays everyone is concerned about disasters and conflicts, wherever they may occur, because news and pictures of such events are instantly broadcast all over the world. Relief supplies pour in from every quarter. Welfare institutions have multiplied and public opinion is watchfully following their various activities.

Never has there been a greater need, when conflicts arise, for a body as impartial and independent as the ICRC, whose uni-

¹ See *International Review*, December 1971.

national composition makes it proof against political pressure. Its specific contribution to the work of the Red Cross and to the international community as a whole lies in the fact that it can act as a neutral intermediary. As several representatives of National Societies observed, while the Societies were governed by the universal principles of the Red Cross, they were also the auxiliaries of their own governments and, as such, could not claim to be totally independent. It was repeatedly urged that National Societies should aim at achieving the highest possible degree of autonomy.

The discretion of the ICRC was also discussed. This is something which public opinion does not wholly understand, considering open condemnation of acts that are contrary to the spirit of humanity as being more fitting. It shows an unawareness of the fact that the concrete results obtained through discreet representations on behalf of prisoners or detainees have proved the effectiveness of the method.

A large part of the strength of the Red Cross, now as in the past, lies in the wide network of National Societies, which covers practically every country and can muster a large number of volunteers within a short time. Stress was laid on the power which volunteers lend to the Red Cross movement. To be effective, this power must be directed by qualified people, another important factor, and must be supported by the League, in its capacity as the federation of National Societies and the organ that promotes their development.

The Red Cross, therefore, is a complex body formed of various components but moved by principles that make for cohesion yet distinguish it from other welfare movements. What is important is to devise methods of organization that will enable each constituent part to shoulder its specific responsibilities in co-operation with the rest, and thus maintain diversity within unity.

The ICRC, for its part, declared that it proposed to seek increasingly the advice and co-operation of National Societies, and one of its members suggested that the Red Cross should study the publications issued by specialized institutes concerned with the study of peace and war, as these were undeniably becoming increasingly scientific. This was a most appropriate field of action for the Red Cross movement as a whole.

At the Montreux meeting, the ICRC suggested that it might join the League in a reappraisal of the role of the Red Cross in the contemporary world. The proposal was warmly welcomed.

Special attention was given to the subject of relief. Although the ICRC takes practically no part in relief action in the case of natural disasters, public opinion, moved by a spirit of international solidarity, is urging National Societies more and more to provide relief for civilian populations in cases of conflict. It so happens that the spectacular and popular role of providing relief in a conflict is accompanied by the ICRC's essential role—a difficult and at times even unpopular one—as neutral intermediary and guardian of Red Cross principles. During hostilities, and in some circumstances even after the end of hostilities, the two roles cannot be dissociated, and that is why responsibility for the action as a whole rests with the ICRC. This shows how important it is to find practical ways and means for the League and National Societies to make their vital contribution to the relief action and at the same time for the ICRC to play its part as a neutral intermediary, and to ensure application of the principles, respect for the emblem, and protection for the personnel involved in the action. One of the members described this as the “neutralization” of relief action. It is all the more urgent to devise such methods of co-operation, since, in their absence, some National Societies might enter into bilateral commitments liable, perhaps, to jeopardize Red Cross unity of action.

Such methods of co-operation should be based, at least in the immediate future, on the Agreement concluded between the League and the ICRC in 1969. It would be a step in the right direction to adopt two concrete measures: the ICRC should associate the League and the National Societies concerned with the preparation of future relief operations; and, once relief action is undertaken, permanent high-level consultations should be held the better to ensure the integration of the assistance furnished by the League and National Societies taking part and to make joint preparations for handing over responsibility for relief operations, if need be, and with League support, to the Society or Societies concerned. This closer co-operation, at a higher level, could be based on a broader interpretation of article 5 of the Agreement; but all participants agreed that that interpretation would in no way alter the premises on

which articles 2 and 3 were based, namely, that in case of a natural disaster responsibility for action would rest with the League, and in case of conflict, with the ICRC. While relief action for the civilian population would be joint where there is conflict, since the League and National Societies would participate with the ICRC, this would not imply a sharing of responsibility.

In the discussion of relations with governments and inter-governmental organizations, the ICRC referred to the close links it maintained with both. Whether in its role of neutral intermediary under the Geneva Conventions or on its own initiative, or as a promoter of international humanitarian law, it was constantly called upon to negotiate with a great many governments and with the United Nations, which was also endeavouring to develop human rights and was now officially entering the field of relief. The fact that the United Nations had created the post of disaster relief co-ordinator could not but affect the activities of the League and the ICRC. Recent experience, however, had shown the existence of a certain degree of complementarity, given the powerful means of the United Nations, on the one hand, and Red Cross adaptability and ICRC independence, on the other.

At the close of the meeting, it was suggested that the advisability of instituting practical measures to facilitate co-operation between the League and the ICRC, such as the pooling of some of their services, should not be neglected.

In conclusion, it may be said that the Montreux meeting enabled Red Cross leaders to gain a better knowledge of the respective functions of the various constituent elements of the Red Cross and the ways in which they complemented each other, and to take a further step towards the goal to which all were striving: to make the Red Cross more effective in the service of suffering mankind, by showing a united front in all circumstances and combining, in the smoothest possible fashion, the various contributions provided by the institutions which compose it.

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