

PRESIDENTIAL MISSIONS

Greece (19-23 May)

ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga, accompanied by Mr. Jean-François Berger, regional delegate for the Balkan States, and Ms. Marlyse Schaer from the Division for Principles and Relations with the Movement were in Greece from 19 to 23 May 1991 at the invitation of the Hellenic Red Cross. The principal aims of their mission were to pay an official visit to the National Society and learn more about its activities, and to meet with the Greek authorities to discuss ways of promoting knowledge of international humanitarian law and other matters relating to ICRC activities.

At a meeting of the Hellenic Red Cross Council convened by Mr. Gerasimos Apostolatos, the Society's President, Mr. Sommaruga reviewed the ICRC's activities around the world, focusing on the operation carried out by the ICRC and a number of National Societies in the Gulf. A discussion ensued on a number of topics, including the coordination system used by the ICRC in conflict situations.

Following the meeting, Mr. Sommaruga was awarded a gold medal with laurel leaves, the National Society's highest decoration, in recognition of his outstanding humanitarian service to the international community.

The ICRC President then visited the National Society's "telemedicine" centre where he viewed a number of installations belonging to the long-range maritime medical information network (informing ships at sea of the location of first-aid stations and hospitals that could assist injured or sick people on board) and a computerized information system enabling specialists to give advice on treatment of patients at a distance. The system can, for example, transmit an electrocardiogram from a patient on a remote island to a heart specialist in Athens.

Mr. Sommaruga also visited the National Society's Henry Dunant Institute. The mandate of the Institute, which was set up in March 1990, is to work closely with the universities to promote knowledge of

international humanitarian law. It organizes seminars and lectures and publishes material concerning the Red Cross and other social welfare organizations. Mr. Sommaruga assured the Hellenic Red Cross that the ICRC would provide the institute with support in the realm of publications and documentation.

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While in Athens the ICRC President was received by Mr. Konstantinos Karamanlis, Greece's Head of State, Mr. Konstantinos Mitsotakis, the Prime Minister, Mr. Tzannis Tzannetakis, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, and Ms. Marietta Yannakou, Minister of Health, Welfare and Social Security, Mr. Yannis Varvitziotis, Minister of National Defence, and Mr. Georges Papastamkos, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The government officials all expressed their appreciation of the ICRC's vital humanitarian role and their gratitude for its work on many occasions in the past to assist conflict victims in Greece.

The discussions that followed focused on compliance with international humanitarian law, in particular the need to step up efforts to promote awareness of its principles and basic rules among members of the armed forces and the importance of ratifying the Additional Protocols. The President later talked with some of those present on more specific subjects such as the problem of misuse of the red cross emblem, ratification by Greece of Protocol II and financial support for the ICRC from the Greek government.

He also took advantage of the opportunity to give a general account of ICRC activities to President Karamanlis and the various ministers present.

Mr. Sommaruga gave two lectures, one organized by the National Society at the Athens Museum of Ethnology, where he appealed to governments, National Societies and the general public to strive for greater awareness of humanitarian issues, and the other at the Athens exhibition centre, where he spoke at the invitation of the Jean Gabriel Eynard Greek-Swiss Friendship League. This second lecture, which was held to mark the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation, was entitled "The ICRC's humanitarian mandate as reflected in its work in Greece and throughout the world".

Italy (21-22 June)

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the death of St. Aloysius of Gonzaga, who was born in Castiglione delle Stiviere, His Holiness Pope John Paul II met representatives of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the city's *Chiesa Maggiore* on 22 June. The ICRC was represented by President Sommaruga, who had been invited to attend by the Mayor of Castiglione. The Mayor stressed how appropriate it was that the meeting should be held "in the very place where the Red Cross idea was born".

In his address, the Pope spoke of the action taken on the battlefield of Solferino, and even in that very church, by Henry Dunant and the inhabitants of surrounding villages. Then, greeting Mr. Sommaruga and leading officials of the Italian Red Cross by name, he expressed his profound esteem for the work of the Red Cross, "which has rendered service to humanity on countless occasions, both in wartime tragedies and in the aftermath of natural disasters". In a brief conversation with Mr. Sommaruga, the Pope expressed his admiration for the work of ICRC delegates throughout the world and made special mention of their activities in the Gulf region.

On 21 June, President Sommaruga was invited to give a talk on "Voluntary service and solidarity" at a round-table discussion held in Castiglione's community theatre. The large audience also listened to talks by Monsignor Luigi Bettazzi, Bishop of Ivrea, and Professor Luigi Giannico, Commissioner Extraordinary of the Italian Red Cross.

Canada, United States (23-25 June)

At the 14th Inter-American Conference of the Red Cross, held in Ottawa from 23 to 27 June 1991, the ICRC President gave an opening address and took part in the Conference's early sessions. Before leaving Ottawa, he had a meeting with Mr. de Montigny-Marchand, Under-Secretary of State at the Canadian Department of External Affairs.

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Mr. Sommaruga went on to New York on 25 June to deliver an address at the invitation of the Council on Foreign Relations. This organization, which was set up in 1921 and now has some

3,000 members, is an authoritative voice on international affairs in the United States. In his speech, entitled "National sovereignty versus humanitarian needs: lessons from the Gulf experience", Mr. Sommaruga pointed out the limits to national sovereignty imposed by the Geneva Conventions and went on to give a precise definition of the humanitarian needs that the ICRC endeavours to meet in its work. He reviewed the ICRC's various activities during the Gulf war and pointed out that the parties to the conflict had invoked national sovereignty to oppose humanitarian activities in certain circumstances. Finally, Mr. Sommaruga reaffirmed the necessity of maintaining a clear distinction between humanitarian action and political action, warning his audience against excessive use of the expression "right of humanitarian intervention" but urging them to do everything they could to strengthen, in all circumstances, the victims' "right to humanitarian assistance".

At United Nations headquarters in New York, Mr. Sommaruga met with UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to discuss the possibility of convening a conference of the States party to the Geneva Conventions to deal with matters arising from the situation in the Middle East. They also reviewed current ICRC operations.
