

Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross

Geneva, 23-31 October 1986

The Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross was held in Geneva from 23 to 31 October 1986. It was attended by delegations from 137 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and 113 States party to the Geneva Conventions, as well as by many observers from National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the process of formation and from governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The International Conference was preceded, as from 14 October, by various Red Cross meetings, including the Executive Council and General Assembly of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and, on 22 October, the Council of Delegates.

OPENING CEREMONY

At the opening ceremony on 23 October, *Mr. Kurt Bolliger, President of the Swiss Red Cross*, which was hosting the Conference, gave a welcoming address to the delegates. He recalled that 85 years ago, in 1901, Henry Dunant had received the first Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian action. "It behoves us, particularly during this 'International Year of Peace', to do our utmost to show ourselves worthy of this heritage—not by making mere solemn appeals, nor by interceding in high-level politics, but through specific, daily humanitarian action which demands neither gratitude nor publicity", declared Mr. Bolliger.

Professor Jean Pictet, former Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and a key personality in several diplomatic conferences which have furthered the development of humanitarian law, gave a formal reading of the seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross—Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These Principles guide all the activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

In his address, *Dr. Ahmad Abu-Goura, Chairman of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross*, emphasized the troubled climate of today's world with its wars, political tensions, social and economic inequalities and nuclear threat. He wondered whether international Red Cross organizations, after devoting so many years to alleviating human suffering, should not start focusing on prevention and tackle the problem at the roots. He noted also that prospects for peace had always existed. What was lacking was the dedication and determination to achieve it.

After reminding his audience that "frenzied competition" had brought the stockpile of armaments to unprecedented levels that could wipe out all human life within minutes, Dr. Abu-Goura launched a fervent appeal for action in favour of peace. Calling for a reawakening and a reassessing of priorities and needs, he declared: "We must unite our efforts. I appeal to all governments and organizations—governmental or non-governmental—to do their utmost to spare humanity such a destiny".

Dr. Abu-Goura concluded with the hope that one day mankind would enjoy lasting peace in a world free of worry, fear, distress and doubt.

The floor was then given to the *President of the Swiss Confederation, Mr. Alphons Egli*, who said how proud and delighted his country was to be hosting the Conference, whose special feature was that it was purely humanitarian, non-political and universal. While noting that all armed conflicts had political causes and consequences, Mr. Egli reminded his audience that sitting side by side at the Conference were representatives of countries engaged in active hostilities against each other, but that the object of the Conference was not to single out guilty parties or to denounce the actions of States. "On the contrary, it offers an area of quiet in the storm that enables all countries, including those locked in battle, to meet—not to argue about their differences, but to discuss the down-to-earth humanitarian problems they are up against. At the heart of the discussions is concern for the victims, men and women, and their distress and suffering", Mr. Egli declared.

Touching upon one of the main themes of the Conference, namely respect for international humanitarian law, the President of the Swiss Confederation said he was convinced that greater humanity and respect for humanitarian law tended to lessen tension and create a climate conducive to renewed dialogue and negotiation, and could contribute in a practical manner to re-establishing peace.

Mr. Egli concluded by saying that Switzerland's overriding hope was that the Conference would contribute to strengthening, spreading and unifying the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and mark an important step towards improved implementation of international humanitarian law. "Millions of men, women and children who are the

victims of conflicts, disasters, ill treatment and situations of distress throughout the world expect it of us", he said.

Mr. Christian Grobet, President of the Council of State of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, recalled the close links between Geneva and the Red Cross. He hoped that the work of the Conference would be guided by the "spirit of Geneva" and that it would fulfil the expectations of the delegates and substantially further the development of international humanitarian law.

Speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization, Mr. Erik Suy, Director of the European Office, emphasized the close co-operation between the UNO and the Red Cross, which both strived to achieve the same humanitarian goals. He recalled the United Nations' support for the ICRC's work when difficulties arose out of non-application of or non-compliance with international humanitarian law, and the close co-operation between the specialized agencies of the United Nations (such as WHO, UNICEF, FAO and UNDRO) and the Red Cross in emergency situations caused by conflicts or natural disasters.

Mr. Suy commented that all the challenges the international community had been facing over the past few years—whether violations of the existing international order or appalling disasters—had shown that actions of a single kind, however effective, were not enough to achieve the goals set and that complementarity of action and close collaboration were proving to be of infinite value. He called for even closer co-operation in order to meet these challenges and ensure that the humanitarian cause prevails.

The President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr Alexandre Hay, gave a broad outline of the development of the Red Cross Movement since the last International Conference held in Geneva in 1925, and the evolution of international humanitarian law over the same period and drew attention to the major progress achieved by each International Conference either for the Movement itself or for international humanitarian law:

- 1928: *The Hague*. Adoption of the first Statutes of the International Red Cross. The draft Convention protecting prisoners of war became a reality one year later in 1929.
- 1934: *Tokyo*. Presentation of the draft Convention protecting interned civilians or those in occupied territories. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented the formal adoption of the Convention.
- 1948: *Stockholm*. Presentation of the four draft Geneva Conventions, which were adopted in 1949.
- 1952: *Toronto*. Revision of the Statutes taking account of recent events.

- 1957: *New Delhi*. Draft regulations were proposed by the ICRC to afford better protection for civilians against the effects of hostilities.
- 1965: *Vienna*. Adoption of the “Fundamental Principles” which ensured the Movement’s cohesion and enabled it confidently to face a second century of existence.
- 1969: *Istanbul*. The Conference spoke for the first time of the application of the Fourth Convention in occupied territories and of respect for human rights.
- 1973: *Tehran*. Being brought up to date, humanitarian law now afforded better protection for civilians during fighting and was adapted to new forms of conflicts.
- 1977: *Bucharest*. By accepting the Report on the Reappraisal of the Role of the Red Cross and by adopting by consensus the Programme of Action of the Red Cross as a Factor of Peace, the Movement provided itself with guidelines for the future.
- 1981: *Manila*. Respect for humanitarian law became an issue for the whole community of States as well as for the entire Movement.

“As the history of our Movement has shown”, the President continued, “it had been able to adapt itself to the changing realities of history without losing its essential elements. It has succeeded in keeping alive the flame of tradition while discarding the ashes. Faithful to its principles and faithful to the victims for whose sake it exists, it has been able to keep up with the times while avoiding politicization, to continue being useful while remaining true to itself, and to adapt to the ever-changing present without surrendering itself to passing trends.

“The broad outlines of the future are already apparent: in a world threatened by chaos where extreme standpoints are hardening, there is an essential role to be played by our world Movement founded on humanitarian law and the Fundamental Principles of universal import. There is a role for a Movement capable of doing humanitarian work effectively, without discrimination, and in a spirit of peace to help all those who, both in time of war and in time of peace, expect from us that grain of human kindness which will restore their dignity.”

Mr. Enrique de la Mata, President of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said that the Federation, with its 144 members, represented universality and pluralism. Its recent meetings had tackled sensitive and controversial issues serenely; it had undertaken self-criticism and had searched for solutions in an honest and courageous way. Its determination to do so, he said, was one of its greatest strengths.

The League had also analysed changes which had occurred in recent years and their human consequences. Demographic growth was the source of numerous problems such as mass migration, with people clustering on

the outskirts of large cities, which suffered from highly inadequate health, education and nutritional facilities and were incapable of providing these people with any means of gainful employment or subsistence. The consequences of delinquency and drug abuse were also major threats to peaceful co-existence.

Mr. de la Mata, referring to the serious economic imbalance in the world, further emphasized the increasingly destructive power of the arms race and the continuous and endless spread of violence and conflict throughout the world.

“Together with all this violence”, he continued “goes something we must denounce as still more dangerous, and that is the moral disarmament of modern society and the loss of mankind’s noblest values, so that humanity is degraded and deprived of a code of values that it feels to be reliable and sure and that guide it in public and private life.

“This world, full of divisions, inequalities and dangers, is what we are going to hand down to the younger generation, to the young people now observing us sceptically and with some signs of fatigue—the fatigue of people who think they have already come back, whereas in actual fact they have not yet been anywhere. This is serious, for no country can forge ahead unless its young people are creative and idealistic. The younger generation will have to take its place in a society—our society, adult society—with which it feels no identity, perhaps because we are more interested in imposing our ways on them than in listening to them and being receptive to their lifestyle, their ways of self-expression. By acting in this way we are reproducing the already existing division between the developed countries and the young countries now developing with difficulty.

“The Red Cross and Red Crescent can be a symbol of hope, of a future that will be better and therefore more humane. Of a world, in short, continually evolving in a way that can transform noble ideals which, like that of peace, are universally accepted, into tangible facts of the everyday life of individuals and nations. That is really the important thing—to apply the idea of peace, meaning by peace a universal value that everyone wants, to the actual circumstances in which it flourishes and can be applied. In other words, we have to find within the narrow limits of human life and family life opportunities to behave in a way, and follow a cultural policy, that are conducive to peace”.
