

## **125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT**

*The commemoration of the 125th Anniversary of the Movement will last until October 1989 and will provide a unique opportunity to make the general public, and especially young people, aware of the ideals and the humanitarian activities of the Red Cross and Red Crescent; it must also be a time to reflect upon the task accomplished by the Movement in 125 years of existence and on its prospects for the future.*

*The International Review of the Red Cross has therefore invited a number of men and women who have rendered outstanding services to the Red Cross and Red Crescent and have marked the life of the Movement in recent years, including persons not actually belonging to the Movement but who are deeply committed to its principles and activities, theorists and people involved in field work, leaders of National Societies and simple volunteers, to give us a personal account of their experiences and share their memories with us, in short to tell us what the Red Cross or the Red Crescent has meant to them in times of hardship and in their lives in general, and why they believe in the timeless value of Henry Dunant's message.*

*Mr B. Chenot, who is the Permanent Secretary of the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques of the Institut de France, a former French Minister of Health and former Minister of Justice, explains in his article entitled "The International Red Cross" in what circumstances he called on the Red Cross for assistance in 1961, when he was keeper of the Seals, and why he thinks that in this troubled world of ours the Red Cross "brings . . . a ray of light and hope".*

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# The International Red Cross\*

by **Bernard Chenot**

On 12 November 1961, at the height of the Algerian crisis, I received the following handwritten note from then French President Charles de Gaulle: "In dealing with the Ben Bella<sup>1</sup> affair, we must avoid becoming bogged down in legalities; what we must do is ensure that no accidents happen. I hold the Minister of Justice to be directly responsible in this matter, for it is a major affair of State".

I mention this at the outset because for me it evokes a difficult situation which happily was resolved at the national level, thanks to discreet action by the International Red Cross. This organization carried out its essential mission with absolute impartiality. I have owed it a debt of gratitude for the past 25 years and I would therefore like to give a brief outline of that situation before going on to look at the history of the Red Cross and its ever-growing tasks in our troubled world.

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\* Based on the text of a lecture given in December 1986 to the annual public meeting of the *Académie des Sciences morales et politiques of the Institut de France*.

In October 1986, the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross adopted new statutes for what is now known as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This movement, which is also known as the International Red Cross, consists of the recognized National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies around the world, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Ben Bella, leader of forces fighting for Algerian independence against the French. While flying from Morocco to Tunisia in 1956, his aircraft was forced by the French to land in Algiers and he was then interned in France until Algerian independence in 1962.

By late 1961, the French government was facing both an insurrection by Algerians demanding independence, and armed violence by others demanding that Algeria remain French. The nation's prisons had become battlefields. When I took up my portfolio as Minister of Justice I found a chaotic situation. A literal open-door policy was in force and in most prisons there were several hundred Algerian detainees moving freely from cell to cell, day and night.

They thus lived in what amounted to a no-go area for the guards. Strict discipline was enforced by certain detainees who acted as leaders and formed, according to a report which I saw, "a clandestine but omnipotent structure".

The leaders of the rebellion—of whom Ben Bella was the most important—were interned in the Château de Turquant in very special conditions. It could be said that the conditions they enjoyed were a result of the guilt feelings of successive governments owing to the circumstances in which they had been captured towards the end of the Fourth Republic, and of the idea which was gaining ground that these men could play a role in settling the Algerian crisis.

It was a strange situation in which thousands of detainees chose representatives who dealt with the administration on an equal footing, in which the leaders, though internees, found themselves at the centre of serious diplomatic disputes, for example between Morocco and France. They embodied one hope for a solution to end what was known as "the Algerian war".

At the beginning of October, I had to remind the people in charge of the prison services that they had better put an end to the open-door system in which the detainees had the run of the prisons and the guards, as a result, did not.

In response to the authorities' move, the leaders in the Château de Turquant decided to go on hunger strike and later to instruct some 5,000 Moslem detainees to do the same.

What was to be done? My first instinct as former Minister of Public Health was to turn to the medical profession for advice. I asked three eminent physicians to come to the Château de Turquant but the Château's involuntary guests, Ben Bella, Mohammed Khider, Mohammed Boudiaff and Hocine Ait Ahmed, refused to receive them. The doctors' professional code of ethics required them to accept this and they merely warned the leading hunger-strikers that even if they survived they risked permanent damage. The latter also refused to see Madame Laporte, who had been delegated by the French Red Cross, as soon as they saw her National Society badge.

I then took two decisions. The first was to transfer them—against their will if necessary—to a hospital in the Paris area. That precarious undertaking is a story in itself, though it was ultimately successful.

The second decision was to place them under observation by a medical commission whose competence would be universally recognized and at the same time call upon the moral authority of the International Red Cross.

I remain very grateful to the International Red Cross and to the delegate it sent, the late Mr. Pierre Boissier. Not only was that thankless mission accepted but the date on which it was to begin was brought forward to 13 November 1961 and the delegation, which had been granted absolute freedom of enquiry, immediately began a round of visits to French prisons.

In the meantime, the medical commission met, composed of leading French specialists. Its initial report to me spoke of “a major risk of sudden death, though this is difficult to judge without being able to examine the hunger-strikers. . . Any attempt at force-feeding (would be) particularly dangerous. . . The only reasonable course of action is to try to persuade them to stop. We would be willing to take part in such an effort”.

The International Red Cross completed its enquiry. Its delegates visited Ben Bella and told him that, having inspected our prisons, they felt that nothing there warranted protest. If Ben Bella and Boudiaff persisted, the International Red Cross could only conclude that they alone would be responsible for the deteriorating condition of several thousand detainees. That was on 20 November 1961. On 21 November, Ben Bella informed me through Jean Hamburger, a member of the commission, that he intended to call off his hunger-strike and order it stopped in the prison. He did so that same day.

This then was an episode that ended well and I am grateful in equal measure to “my” doctors, among whom Jean Hamburger played a decisive role, and to the International Red Cross which threw the full weight of its moral authority into the balance in which those difficult men weighed their decision.

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The history of the Red Cross is too well known for us to spend time on it here. The astonishing thing is that that mighty institution in Geneva was born of the initiative and unconquerable will of one man

whom nothing had prepared to play such a role, and who stepped aside after setting up a marvellous structure for the benefit of the most severely deprived and direly threatened among our fellow human beings—the wounded, the prisoners, the children, the victims of armed conflict and natural disaster.

It was the warmth of Christian charity which rose in Henry Dunant's breast and kindled the fire of action following the battle of Solferino.

He was not a doctor; he was 30 years old, alone, and had nothing to do with the bloody fighting in which Austrian, Sardinian and French troops had just slaughtered each other. It was the sight of wounded men, lying abandoned on the battlefield or impossibly crowded together in a church, which lit that flame in Dunant's heart. Within a few hours, he had appealed to many people, without thought of their nationality—people of Castiglione, tourists, a doctor who had just been taken prisoner, etc.—and organized them into a team to help the wounded, tending them without any discrimination. In his book *A Memory a Solferino*, published three years later in 1862, Dunant set forth several principles which govern the work of the Red Cross to this day: he proposed that relief societies be formed in every country to train volunteers who would care for wounded soldiers regardless of their nationality. Things moved quickly after that and one year later, in 1863, 16 States held a conference in Geneva. In 1864, the first Geneva Convention was signed and an international committee created; an emblem, its form paying tribute to Switzerland, was adopted. A short time later, Henry Dunant faded from the scene. The pioneer, whose faith had moved mountains, saw his personal life collapse. He withdrew with dignity and was not seen again in public for many years until he received the Nobel Peace Prize. And how he deserved that Prize! But soon after his merits had thus been duly acknowledged, he died in Heiden, Switzerland, in 1910.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the First and Second World Wars posed new problems for the Red Cross. Progress in military technology brought civilians into the thick of armed conflict; assisting prisoners of war became a large-scale operation; the number of wars undeclared as such, either internal or fuelled by alien enmities, rose and the distinction between natural and man-made disaster blurred. It became necessary to act, quickly and everywhere.

The Red Cross was able to face these new challenges thanks to its tradition and the privilege made possible by Swiss neutrality. Whether they wanted to or not, everyone had to recognize the moral authority of the Geneva-based institution.

The fruit of its labour following the Second World War is now there for all to see.

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What is it about the Red Cross that makes it able to face such challenges? Its structure is less well-known than its history. The Red Cross is above all a Movement with 250 million members throughout the world. It consists, in addition to the ICRC, of 145 National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies and their federation, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The 1864 Geneva Convention was succeeded by several others; there are now four Geneva Conventions and 165 States are party to them. The 1864 Convention referred only to the red cross but a second emblem, the red crescent, came into existence several years later and receives equal recognition. For although the cross was chosen as a tribute to Switzerland and has no religious significance, the Ottoman Society for Relief to the Wounded decided in 1876, during the Russo-Turkish War, to renounce the cross in favour of a red crescent.

Every four years an International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is held. In addition to the representatives of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the League and the ICRC, the Conference is attended by delegates from the States party to the Geneva Conventions.

But the nucleus of the Movement, the direct descendant of the institution created in 1863 by Henry Dunant, Gustave Moynier and the Swiss general Henri Dufour, is the Committee with 25 members, all of them Swiss, which has its headquarters in Geneva. This is the International Committee of the Red Cross, the guardian of the Movement's traditions and principles: total independence from government authority, absolute political neutrality, and protection and assistance for all victims of natural or man-made disaster, regardless of their nationality, religion or political allegiance. The Committee recruits new members by co-optation. I thank Maurice Aubert, Vice-President of the ICRC, and Ambassador Louis Dauge, President of the French Red Cross, for the information upon which this account is based.

It is certain that whatever the quality of the individuals involved, the principles of independence and neutrality which are the ICRC's strength cannot be found with such purity in all those other bodies around the world which serve the Red Cross and Red Crescent Move-

ment. The contingencies of international life and the diversity of political systems make the moral authority of the ICRC unique and mean that, willingly or reluctantly, every government and even every revolutionary movement seeking to replace a government must take it into consideration. To cite but one example, at the end of the Italian fascists' war on Ethiopia Field-Marshal Badoglio remarked with a sigh, "The Red Cross would have done better to keep out of this." With the shortcomings of the League of Nations there did indeed remain only the International Red Cross to bring assistance to the victims of the conflict—several of its delegates gave their lives in doing so—and to protest against the bombing of hospitals and ambulances by Mussolini's air force.

And there are people today who more or less openly share Badoglio's views.

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So where and how does the ICRC work? We should not imagine a circle of wise old men sitting on comfortable chairs in Geneva and merely issuing opinions, directives and verdicts—far from it! It is in the field that the Red Cross does its work and the means at its disposal are today much more formidable than they once were.

The task is tremendous and requires a great deal of manpower. Most ICRC operations are at present located in developing countries, for those countries are often the belligerents or simply the arena in which clashes between the great powers take place. Since the Second World War, the great powers have been wont to do battle by remote control, using Third World countries as surrogates. Countries believing that they are settling disputes with their neighbours or within their borders become, whether they realize it or not, soldiers fighting on behalf of the great powers. And the suffering they endure is no less because of it. The same fire, the same blood, and now organized famine has become a method of waging wars, wars which remain "cold" only for the countries which foment them. In such chaotic situations the Red Cross works with a degree of discretion which many of us would like to see emulated by all good-will organizations that have taken on similar tasks. Such discretion strengthens the moral authority of the International Red Cross and enables it to intervene, often successfully, to give assistance and act as a neutral intermediary. The resources deployed are considerable.

The ICRC currently has nearly 1,100 full-time employees. It has 44 delegations abroad which employ more than 2,300 locally recruited personnel.

The ICRC is mainly geared to take action in armed conflicts, whereas the League co-ordinates relief activities among National Societies to deal with natural disasters, during which their co-operation probably requires less delicacy. A Standing Commission co-ordinates activities between the ICRC and the League.

Liaison and co-ordination are further facilitated by the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent which takes place every four years; the last was held in Geneva in 1986. It brings together the ICRC, the League, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the States party to the Geneva Conventions. It is a kind of parliament in which useful work is done, and the meeting place should ensure a minimum of tranquility for the participants. Yet it must be acknowledged that the resolutions and so on adopted at such gatherings carry little more weight than those voted by United Nations General Assemblies. The ICRC remains the guardian and guarantor of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, but these can be misinterpreted when political considerations hold sway. That is what happened at the 1986 Conference when the South African government delegation was banned, by a majority vote, from taking part in the work of the Conference.

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When natural disaster strikes, the key role in the Movement's response is played by the League. The task involved is mainly shouldered by the National Societies in the countries affected, with support from the League and assistance from other Societies and the ICRC. There were two recent examples of this in the Sahel and in Cameroon.

Operation "Sahel 84" was initiated by Msgr. Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris. The French Red Cross, as is usual in French-speaking Africa, carried out most of the work. Lorries dubbed "bearers of hope" rolled through the region during 1984-1985 distributing food and medicaments to the drought-stricken population. The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of former French colonies took part in this operation, a much more useful way to send large vehicles through the Sahel than the much-glorified Paris-Dakar road rally!

The disaster that struck Cameroon in 1986 was of volcanic origin—emanations of toxic gases. A relief operation was quickly mounted by the French Red Cross—too quickly, some say, but was there time to wait? With 1,200 people dead, another 3,000 fleeing the area and 2,500 head of livestock lost, Spain, Germany and National Societies from the region immediately gave help. The second phase of the operations is now to restore the economic structure and reintegrate the refugees. The local Red Cross has the primary role in this.

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Alas, it must be recognized that armed conflict has graver consequences than natural disaster. It is therefore more difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to protect and assist the victims of armed conflict. In such circumstances it is the ICRC, upholding its principles with the strength born of years of experience, which plays the main part.

Today's armed conflicts are characterized by their complexity and increasing length. A great many people are affected by them and this means that the ICRC must mobilize considerable resources, both material and human. Its activities are often restricted by the dictates of security. In addition to coping with emergency situations, the ICRC must also do its utmost to ensure that the right of the victims to receive assistance is universally acknowledged. This right is demonstrated by action, which itself requires constant humanitarian diplomacy. In spite of its strict neutrality, the ICRC must work at the hub of extreme political tensions which frequently make it difficult for the institution to gain due recognition for its mandate.

The growing size of ICRC operations is also cause for concern. In 1984-1985, the ICRC came to the aid of one million people in Ethiopia. In 1988, it is once more necessary to provide massive assistance in that country. To be able to do so, the ICRC appealed last November for "open roads for survival", for a kind of truce to ease the grip of famine and enable assistance to be brought where it was needed, thus averting large-scale population movements in search of food. The situation in Mozambique and Angola also illustrates the difficulties encountered in humanitarian work.

Afghanistan is another example of a conflict of long duration. The ICRC has for several years been assisting people wounded in that conflict and striving to develop a more extensive protection programme. Then, finally, there is Sri Lanka where the ICRC has still not received

permission to work but is persisting in its approaches to the authorities concerned.

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And there are many further examples throughout the world! Returning to Geneva, we find another major element of the ICRC's work, the Central Tracing Agency, which was formed to meet an imperative need. Under the four Geneva Conventions adopted in 1949 and now ratified by 165 States, provision is made for the ICRC to offer its services to belligerents for the tracing of missing persons and the reunification of families. The Central Tracing Agency has meanwhile processed over 50 million index cards. This activity, conducted under the auspices of the ICRC, has taken on a new dimension since the wars of 1870, 1914-18 and 1939-45. As well as prisoners of war it now covers political detainees. It is carried out not only in cases of international armed conflict but also during international conflicts which these days are often prompted by undercurrents of an alien international war. The ICRC offers its services and those authorities which accept them must at the same time accept the ICRC's conditions—visits to the places of detention and personal communication with the detainees. If its offer is refused, what can the ICRC do but note and deplore the refusal?

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It is clear that the main strength of the International Red Cross lies in its moral authority and the institution imposes constraints upon itself to preserve it. It remains aloof from all political controversy. It refuses to condemn any form of government. It denounces abuses of power when it considers that such denunciation will do some good but it does not divulge all that it has observed in the course of its missions. The ICRC's duty to remain discreet is certainly not image-building, but its humanitarian work largely depends on its compliance with it. This discreet, non-committal approach governs the ICRC's activities and is the *sine qua non* of its efficacy.

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Such conduct may well be a constraint, but it is also a strength. The story from the Algerian War which began this account is a case in point. The ICRC has, whatever the personal views of those who run it, been able to preserve a political neutrality conducive to objectivity.

This flexibility has its limits. The International Red Cross deploys its personnel and resources undeterred by the heat of battle, but never contrary to its fundamental principles. It will not risk its emblem, and all it implies, where the rules governing its work are not accepted or where it will not be in a position to ensure respect for them. France obtained the ICRC's consent to intervene in 1961 by allowing the delegates to visit freely all places of detention, interview any detainee without witness and pass on any family messages entrusted to it. Likewise, the Red Cross today refuses to provide assistance and make visits if, under whatever pretext, its work will be restricted or somehow used for other than humanitarian purposes. Finally, it preserves complete neutrality by refusing to pronounce judgment on issues which could conceivably take on a political colour such as disarmament, nuclear weapons or unbridled pacifism.

In this way the International Red Cross stands apart from political controversy and latent or open international hostility. True to its ideals and self-imposed constraints, demanding respect for its principles at all times, it brings a ray of light and hope into this tormented world. Though it works in silence, the work it accomplishes is beyond all measure.

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