

Some highlights of the First Session of the General Assembly of the League of Red Cross Societies ¹

Delegates from 101 of the 126 members of the international federation of National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies met in Geneva from 4 to 6 October 1979 at the headquarters of the International Labour Office to make decisions that will guide the progress of the Red Cross movement until the Second Session of the General Assembly meeting in Manila in 1981.

The delegates faced a crowded agenda that included—to offer only some examples of its scope and variety—proposed amendments to the League Constitution and Rules of Procedure, the adoption of the Plan and Budget 1980-81, a working paper on refugee relief, the definitive admission of the Swaziland Red Cross Society to the League, reports of Advisory Committees, and also on meetings and seminars organised by National Societies.

Presided over by Justice J. A. Adefarasin of Nigeria, President of the League, the First General Assembly began with speeches by—in the order they spoke—Prof. Hans Haug, President of the Swiss Red Cross; Mr. Pierre Aubert, Federal Councillor of Switzerland, Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs; Mr. S. K. Jain, Deputy Director General, International Labour Office; Dr. Thomas A. Lambo, Deputy Director General, World Health Organization; Mr. Dale de Haan, Deputy United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; Mr. Faruk

¹ Text communicated by the League of Red Cross Societies.

N. Berkol, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations Co-ordinator for Disaster Relief; Mr. Jacques Vernet, President of the Conseil d'Etat of the Republic and Canton of Geneva; Mr. Alexandre Hay, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross; Mr. Luigi Cottafavi, Deputy Secretary-General, Director General of the United Nations Office at Geneva; and Justice Adefarasin himself. Each speaker stressed the importance of the Red Cross movement and the need for it to co-operate with other organisations sharing its goals and philosophy.

In his remarks Mr. Pierre Aubert sounded a note that was to be heard again at the end of the meeting: "It is important... to unite all efforts and all resources to assure and organise the distribution of the aid which, for the distressed, is the most tangible manifestation of Geneva's institutions. On this point, how could I conceal the pain that we feel over the tragic situation of the peoples of Kampuchea, decimated by famine, war and disease? Humanitarian aid to victims of man-made or natural catastrophes must not be used to political ends; its essence is non-discriminatory. I therefore ask you to use all your influence on behalf of the peoples of Kampuchea, for it is urgent to send them help through a relief action of wide scope which, in the opinion of my Government, could only be multilateral and in conformity with the Principles of your movement."

Among the items considered in the course of the meeting was a working paper on refugees. This document, which the General Assembly endorsed, re-affirmed that, on the national level, refugee relief responsibility lay primarily with "the Government of the country concerned", while on the international level such responsibility fell on "the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)". The document endorsed the traditional Red Cross relief activity, acting in an essentially auxiliary capacity "during the initial emergency phase" and phasing out its activities when "other national or international organisations are in a position to continue the...programmes required". The document spelled out the distribution of the efforts and activities of the Red Cross in protection and assistance.

However, the working paper added a qualification based on the contention that flexibility must be maintained for maximum effectiveness and timeliness: in certain circumstances, Red Cross action may continue beyond the initial emergency phase, "primarily in protection, tracing and supplementary assistance to vulnerable groups... Assistance programmes may also be extended to the resettlement phase, especially in helping refugees to establish themselves in host countries."

The Assembly also acted unanimously to admit to membership the Swaziland Red Cross Society which originated in 1936 as a branch of the British Red Cross Society and continued to function as an autonomous Society after Swaziland achieved independence. In accordance with Article 6.3 of the League Constitution, the League's Executive Council admitted this Society provisionally until the first General Assembly, which, in accordance with Article 5.1 of the Rules of Procedure, admitted it definitely.

The delegates also considered the amendments to the League Constitution and Rules of Procedure proposed by the Jordan National Red Crescent Society. The Assembly voted in favour of the amendments which re-affirmed the equal status of all three emblems: the red cross, the red crescent and the red lion and sun.

In addition, the Assembly decided to set up a Commission to examine the question of fair geographical distribution and present to the Second Session of the General Assembly in 1981 its final report whose conclusions would be such that they could be put into force if accepted, at the elections to be held at that session.

The delegates furthermore approved a recommendation underscoring the urgent need for wide-scale primary health programmes to which National Societies can make contributions. The recommendation specifically invited League co-operation with WHO, UNICEF and other governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the primary health care field.

The National Societies assembled also heard and adopted reports of the advisory committees on health and social service, relief, nursing, youth and development programmes.

Among the many documents before the meeting was an introductory report on the protection of human beings in disaster situations. The Assembly took note of this document which dealt with background reasons for a League study project entitled "Natural Disaster Relief Actions and International Law". Citing the fact that "as far as a global relief policy is concerned, the legal protection of the victims of natural disasters is the principal factor which has not so far been brought under regulation in international instruments in a way that would be binding on Governments", the document described the study as aimed at giving "an answer to many suggestions, remarks and proposals concerning the protection of human beings in natural disaster situations". Among the aims of the study as spelled out in the report will be to "urge a review of those national laws that affect the status and rights" of natural disaster victims. The final phase of the study will be to elaborate suggested

modifications, new formulations, or codifications to “take into account not only existing laws but the social and economic factors which give rise to such laws. This synthesis of practice and theory and of realism and idealism could help generate the necessary interest in legal reforms as well as provide the basis for concrete action.”

And as almost its last official action, the General Assembly launched an appeal to the world for aid to the suffering peoples of Kampuchea, specifying clearly that such aid should be given with no discrimination of any kind. In the appeal, the Assembly asked support for present Kampuchea relief operations as well as future joint ICRC-UNICEF actions.

The Assembly was the first full gathering of League members since the 34th Session of the Board of Governors in October 1977 in Bucharest, Romania, at which a new League Constitution was adopted; the Assembly reflected numerous changes introduced by the new Constitution, among them a change in the name of the body from the Board of Governors to the General Assembly.

The Second Session of the General Assembly will meet in Manila in November 1981 as part of the Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference.