

The ICRC and the World today

*Address by Mr. Alexandre Hay,
President of the ICRC, at the opening meeting of the
Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference.*

Since the honour devolves upon me in my capacity as President of the International Committee of the Red Cross to take the floor at this point of the opening session of the Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference, I will make use of this opportunity to express all the gratitude of the ICRC to the Philippine Red Cross which, with the generous assistance of the government of this country, has prepared, organized and welcomed these sessions of the movement of the Red Cross in this marvellous setting. And I wish also to express my greetings to the people of the Philippines whose reputation for hospitality is so strikingly confirmed today.

Our meeting takes on a symbolic value in this country which has interwoven traditional values and modern ideas, in this city where the most diverse influences mix without clashing. The ideal of our movement exists in the consciences of all peoples, whatever may be their beliefs or their civilizations.

This ideal, perpetuating itself through the young, constantly provides the movement with the renewal it needs in an epoch when we are overwhelmed by the extension of conflicts and internal tensions, by the eruption of tragic situations, at a time when the means for fighting an enemy, and ideology, a belief, have been frighteningly developed: terrorism, the taking of hostages and torture are destructive mechanisms from which more and more victims have to be saved.

I would be falling short of my duty if I did not take advantage of this occasion to tell you about the concern of the ICRC in the face of these developments. The increase of violence perpetrated indiscriminately, the constant violation of basic humanitarian principles, are assuming agonizing proportions, especially in conflicts involving ideologies or race prejudice—whether restricted to one country or inter-

national—where the struggle has all the horror of total war. Just as the attempt was made, in the past, to annihilate human beings because they belonged to a certain race or a certain people, so today, a man who thinks differently seems to lose his status as a member of the human family. He becomes an “outsider”, and the principle, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, no longer applies to him or to his next of kin, because ideological blindness keeps us from being able to recognize human character in him. This is the source of all terrorism: State terrorism which leads to attacking civilian populations, to the secret “elimination” of opponents, to their summary execution or their torture in prisons; group or even individual terrorism which strikes out blindly at anything within reach, women and children, natives and foreigners alike, who may have any connection, no matter how tenuous, with the enemy.

In both cases, any pretext is put forward to justify these unjustifiable actions: military imperatives, State security, and the last means resorted to by oppressed peoples. In all such cases the ICRC is aware of one element: contempt for the human race and violation of the fundamental rule of humanitarian law, that is respect for the non-combatant. What shreds of humanity can be left if our ideologies keep us from seeing the human being in our defenceless enemy, and even deform our vision so that we see an enemy in the innocent?

We are making an appeal to governments and to individuals, to those who hold power and to those who are fighting to gain this same power: while waiting for the real peace that we all hope for, we ask them that, in their conflicts, they spare the little enclaves of humanity before they are crushed in the machinery of violence that knows no limits. That is the message of Henry Dunant, and that is also expressed in the many humanitarian traditions of the various civilizations of our globe—those of the past, like those of the present, in the South as in the North, in the East as in the West.

Another matter that seriously troubles the ICRC is the invasion of politics in the humanitarian field. Many governments authorize the ICRC to intervene in case of armed conflicts, international or non-international, as well as in cases of internal tensions and strife. Even if, too often, their decision is not devoid of ulterior political motives, they generally are also influenced by honourable and humanitarian motives. In contrast, if the authorities oppose the humanitarian initiatives of the ICRC, it is almost always for political reasons alone.

Obviously, the ICRC is not blind to the political environment in which it must exercise its humanitarian tasks. Armed conflicts, whether

international or internal or mixed, are an intensified form of politics, and it is impossible to ignore this fact. The same is true of internal strife and tensions. . .

However, the ICRC expects governments to refrain from distorting humanitarian action by using it as a means for obtaining political goals. This attitude is not only contrary to humanitarian principles; experience has shown that it does not work. To use humanitarian action for political aims may give the illusion of settling basic problems, but actually it confuses cause and effect. When there is a sincere desire to contribute to peace, it would be wiser to look for a solution to political problems during the temporary lull provided by humanitarian action, than to try to politicize this action to produce a solution.

When it comes to interpreting international humanitarian law, we recognize the same unfortunate trend toward politicization. Much too often the ICRC finds that it has been authorized to visit military prisoners, chiefly to prove that there is an international conflict; or, on the other hand, access to prisoners may be refused because of fears (without any basis in law) that this would amount to an admission that a state of occupation or of international conflict exists. Then again, and too often, the declarations of intention to observe humanitarian rules are made principally for their propaganda value, as sometimes the total absence of any application clearly reveals. The tree is known by its fruits, and the primary interest of the ICRC is the protection of victims, and not to provide a legal definition of a conflict situation, or to specify the status of persons to be protected. Besides, the ICRC is perfectly aware that it has neither the competence nor the power to impose its views in these matters. The international community has given the ICRC its mission to provide protection and assistance, and in fulfilling this mission, the ICRC looks for possibilities of concrete action, not for itself, but for the victims, and this goes far beyond the limits of legalistic definitions. A particularly repugnant practice is to use humanitarian law itself to restrain the ICRC, when the very purpose of the law is to make humanitarian action possible. . .

Finally, I want to introduce a subject which is very close to my heart: the contribution of the Red Cross as a whole and the ICRC in particular to the efforts being made for disarmament.

Since the beginning of its history, the ICRC has believed that Red Cross work for the victims of conflicts goes further than the immediate aim of alleviating suffering; it is also to make a contribution towards peace. The first step toward lasting peace is disarmament, and the ICRC considers that the Red Cross movement cannot hold itself aloof from

the humanitarian problems raised by the armaments race, by the massive delivery of arms throughout the world: nor can it ignore the difficulties that assail those who work for disarmament.

Until now, the major contribution of our movement in this field has consisted in stating its deep distress in the face of a predicament which is constantly growing more dangerous, and in pleading with governments to do everything possible to end a situation which may prove fatal to the human race.

It is only honest to admit that this is not enough. But we can also clearly state that it has not been our indifference that imposed limits on this action: disarmament has been and remains at the heart of our concerns. What else would be possible for a movement that was born on a battlefield, and day after day thereafter has been the direct witness of all of war's horror?

If it has been impossible for us to act more effectively so far, it is because two major obstacles block the way.

The first is technical in nature. Problems related to disarmament, when examined in depth, call for a high degree of specialization and as a rule the various bodies of the Red Cross cannot count on the services of qualified experts. The Red Cross being always in need of funds for its traditional activities, it is hard to imagine how it could launch into costly investigations by experts without any guarantee that there would be tangible results.

The second major obstacle that bars the way to more concrete Red Cross action goes far deeper. In order to be really effective, a disarmament drive must have well-defined and concrete goals. In other words, it must go beyond the stage of general exhortations about which everybody is already in agreement, and tackle the problem of procedure. Because it is especially there that the real difficulties are encountered. All the Powers proclaim that they are in favour of disarmament, but they cannot agree on how to achieve it.

And this is precisely where our movement faces a dilemma—one that may have no solution. It is impossible for us to take specific positions on procedures to be adopted for disarmament without trespassing on the political field and so deviating from the fundamental principles of the Red Cross. Are we not all fully aware that if we took positions of a political nature, they would be doomed to failure? And finally, all that we would succeed in doing would be to shatter the backbone of our movement, its unity. How could we pay such a price, and then get nothing for it?

Now that the problem has been set in context, we want to state

very clearly how fully we understand those who refuse to be the passive witnesses of this monstrous extension of weapons in a world that is suffering from hunger. We share their feelings of frustration and we agree with them that every avenue must be explored that might enable our movement to take a more active part in the cause of disarmament while still remaining true to its principles. It is in fact a very narrow path, but have we really done everything we can to move along it?

I must admit that, at this stage, the ICRC does not see how we can do much more. But it would be unpardonable if we were to fail solely because of lack of will and imagination. Proposals have been made recently, and ideas have been presented. All of them must be analyzed with utmost care.

But even if we are forced to conclude that our movement must be limited in the future, as it has been in the past, to exhorting the States to put an end to their mad armament race, we must continue to do what we can, since that is our duty, on behalf of our members and, above all, on behalf of the countless victims of so many conflicts. But if the movement chooses to do no more, we must be certain that it is because we lack the power, but not the will.

Apart from the question of what the Red Cross movement as a whole can or cannot do in that field, there is the question about what the ICRC—and within the movement, the ICRC alone perhaps—might be able to do. Let me say here and now that the ICRC is ready and that it is open to any requests that the Powers might make, if they can agree together that we could contribute, no matter how modestly, to genuine progress in disarmament.

In conclusion, allow me to voice the ardent hope of the ICRC that the present International Conference will reaffirm our worldwide movement's humanitarian resolve before the whole international community. By remaining above politics, our movement can only strengthen its authority, its credibility and its competence. Let us have a confrontation of ideas, but let us discuss them in the spirit of understanding so that we may reach harmonious conclusions to guide our action. If this Conference is conducted in such a spirit, we will have taken one further step toward greater respect for the individual human being.

Alexandre HAY
