

The ICRC and some of its present tasks ¹

by Alexandre Hay

You have once again kindly invited the International Committee of the Red Cross to take part in your annual conference. We greatly appreciate the honour shown to our institution and the expression of confidence which your invitation represents, and I wish to thank you most sincerely.

The past year was a very difficult one. The conflicts ravaging the Middle East were again a source of deep concern for the International Committee of the Red Cross and the numerous Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies which, by generously giving every possible assistance, expressed in tangible form their solidarity with the victims. We wish to voice our particular gratitude today to those Societies which provided us with the means to act, both by their moral support and by sending qualified personnel, relief supplies or funds. We have unfortunately to note that the implementation of the international humanitarian law by States which are involved in armed conflicts is far from satisfactory. For example very grave violations of the rule of humanity as well as of the Geneva Conventions have been perpetrated during the recent conflict in Lebanon . . .

At present, the International Committee is also very much concerned by the conflict still going on between Iraq and Iran. The task of our delegates in visiting the 50,000 prisoners of war detained in both countries is extremely difficult, since some among the most important rules of the Third Geneva Convention are not respected.

¹ Speech by the President of the ICRC at the Fourteenth Conference of Arab Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Manama (Bahrein), 23-25 January 1983.

Furthermore this activity which we are bound to fulfill in conformity with the Geneva Convention costs us a lot of money. Unfortunately, the governments are not supporting our action in Iraq and in Iran in a sufficient way, so that we have already a deficit of over several million Swiss francs which we have to finance ourselves. We shall therefore not be able to pursue this assistance any longer if an adequate financial coverage of our expenses is not secured rapidly. We have made a special and urgent appeal to most of the governments in December last, including the governments of your countries. Although encouraging, the response received so far is still short from our present needs. I would be very thankful to you if you could urge your respective governments to give us as quickly as possible the financial support we absolutely need to pursue our help to prisoners of war in both countries.

* * *

I should also like to take the opportunity of this Conference of Arab National Societies, which will be devoting particular attention to development problems, to stress the contribution which the International Committee of the Red Cross intends to make to this joint endeavour.

The growing number of conflicts throughout the world has made us more clearly aware than in the past of a statutory obligation incumbent upon each and every one of us, namely our duty to prepare in time of peace for any emergency situation which might arise, including armed conflicts.

This duty renders an increase in International Committee of the Red Cross personnel essential, and likewise calls for efforts by National Societies to strengthen their operational capacity so that they are able of helping victims quickly and efficiently.

In view of the fact that the need to reinforce the operational capacity of our movement was reaffirmed at the Manila Conference, the International Committee of the Red Cross contribution becomes an integral part of the strategy for National Society development prepared and conducted by the League. Close collaboration is of course necessary between these two institutions and the societies which you are representing here.

As a practical response to this need, a new post was created last year at the International Committee of the Red Cross. It has been

assigned to Mrs. Jeanne Egger, here with us today, whose task as "Delegate for National Society development" is to coordinate, on one hand, the contributions made by the various services concerned within the International Committee of the Red Cross, and, on the other hand, those of the International Committee of the Red Cross with the national development programmes drawn up by the National Societies and the League.

Mrs. Egger has a vast experience of the work of our movement. She has spent fifteen years in Africa as an International Committee of the Red Cross delegate. She has long shown a keen interest in development problems, and has worked in this capacity as a League delegate in several African countries. I am sure that her contacts with you will prove most useful.

In addition, a "Guide" is currently being prepared for the National Societies on their activities in the event of conflict. It will explain their competences and duties.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is well aware that this approach will require a constant adaptation on its part to the diverse mentalities and cultures in the world, and to purely national contingencies which may influence developments. Evidently this adaptation cannot be made at the expense of the fundamental principles, which constitute the essence, the unity and the strength of our movement.

* * *

May I finally draw your attention to another point of great importance to use, namely the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions, which were adopted in Geneva on 8 June 1977, and their ratification.

There is no need to remind you of the scope and contents of these two texts, for they have already been widely publicized. But I do want to express my profound conviction that these two Protocols are a big step forward in the protection of human beings against the horrors of war. At the same time they provide an even stronger basis for the activities of our movement.

To date, 27 states have become parties to Protocole I and 23 to Protocole II, including Libya, Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania. I should like to congratulate these four Arab countries, which are represented by their National Societies here today. At the same time I address an urgent appeal to those of you who represent the National Societies

of the other Arab countries to approach your respective authorities and press them to speed up the ratification procedure. In making this appeal I refer to recommendation No. 2 adopted by the Amman Conference in April 1981, which had already launched an appeal for ratification of the Protocols.

I cannot conclude my speech without wishing you every success in your work both during and after the Conference, and without thanking the Bahrein Red Crescent once again for its warm and traditional hospitality.

Alexandre Hay
Président of ICRC
