

The Red Cross and Refugees ¹

by Jean-Pierre Hocké

Mr. Chairman,

I should like to thank you most sincerely for giving the International Committee of the Red Cross an opportunity to speak at the important debate which marks the beginning of the annual session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's programme and to express our satisfaction at the harmonious collaboration which has been established with the UNHCR, where we are always sure of finding understanding, support and determination to reach a solution for the problems confronting our two institutions.

In accord with the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, I should first like to draw your attention to the fact that this session of your Committee is the first since the adoption, by the 24th International Red Cross Conference in Manila in November 1981, of an important resolution, namely Resolution 21 on International Red Cross Aid to refugees, which makes a statement of policy concerning the respective duties and responsibilities of the UN High Commissioner's Office for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross. The High Commissioner moreover refers to this document in the introduction to his report on "Assistance activities in 1981-1982 and proposed voluntary funds, programmes and budget for 1983" (document A/AC.96/606, paragraph cv) and the complete text of these directives is at the disposal of the Executive Committee members.

¹ Speech at the 33rd Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, Geneva, October 1982.

This document, which was adopted by the Manila Conference, was drawn up to define the general policy of International Red Cross aid to refugees, and to specify the tasks which the institutions constituting the Red Cross movement (the ICRC, the League and the National Societies) can perform in collaboration with the UNHCR, whose "primary function in the field of international protection and material assistance to refugees" is acknowledged in that policy statement. It should therefore be considered first and foremost as an effort *to ensure that co-ordination is as effective and efficient as possible between the International Red Cross and the UNHCR*, which "will have regular consultations on matters of common interest and, whenever considered useful, will co-ordinate their humanitarian assistance in favour of refugees and displaced persons in order to ensure complementarity between their actions".

For this reason the ICRC will shortly be following up the Manila Resolution by sending a questionnaire, in conjunction with the League, to the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in order to clarify and define with them each institution's respective duties and responsibilities for assistance to refugees.

The ICRC attaches the utmost importance to the practical application of these directives, and hopes that as our institutions progress in the implementation of certain current programmes or the elaboration of those which future circumstances might unfortunately yet demand of us, the efforts thus begun will play an increasingly effective part in the co-ordination of our respective activities. We are particularly aware that good co-ordination and a wise allocation of the respective tasks are indispensable, both for the donor countries giving our programmes their financial support and for all those who benefit by them, and on whose behalf we are duty bound to watch without fail that the actions undertaken to help them are conducted on a sound basis and that maximum effectiveness is achieved.

Under the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 the ICRC, as you know, has been entrusted with the special task of providing *protection and assistance for victims of armed conflicts*; allow me to stress its willingness to continue giving its humanitarian aid to displaced persons and refugees whose plight is due to armed conflict.

I should like to remind of the services which the *Central Tracing Agency* is providing to help refugees, namely by inquiring into the where-

abouts of missing persons, forwarding family messages, arranging for the reuniting of families or issuing travel documents. In the period from 1981 to 1982, for example, the ICRC had the opportunity of co-ordinating the activities of the Central Tracing Agency with those of the UNHCR in several situations. In this connection I should like to cite the Agency's work among Ugandan refugees in Sudan and Zaire to trace missing persons and reunite dispersed families; the continuing activities, in conjunction with the National Red Cross Societies in south-east Asia, of a system of tracing and mailing services on behalf of Vietnamese refugees; and the endeavours to trace the parents of unaccompanied refugee children in camps in Thailand and reunite them with their families in Kampuchea. Unfortunately these latter efforts have so far been without avail, to our very deep regret.

I should also like to mention a particular problem which the ICRC and the UNHCR have jointly endeavoured to solve, namely the unscrupulous *attacks on refugees at sea in the Gulf of Siam*. These acts of piracy, which have made a profound impact on public opinion and numerous governments, were the subject in June this year of an agreement between the UNHCR and the Thai authorities, made possible by the financial support of a number of governments. The ICRC is glad that thanks to the Royal Thai Government, new impetus has been given to efforts to find a solution for this cruel problem. But there is still a lot to be done and further sustained efforts will certainly still be demanded from us all before a final remedy for this intolerable situation is found.

Another problem we are striving to solve, together with the UNHCR, is that of certain *refugees from Vietnam who have arrived overland at the Thai border*. Thanks to the collaboration of the Thai authorities and of several governments, we hope to give those refugees who have relatives elsewhere the possibility of rejoining their families, and enable the others to find refuge in a final country of asylum. Unfortunately this problem is only one of many, far too many, which still persist along the border between Thailand and Kampuchea, where the fate of some 250,000 people is still in the balance.

Your Executive Committee will examine *other questions relating to protection*, as it does at each of its sessions, and in particular that of military attacks on refugee camps, a phenomenon which, alas, has occurred in various parts of the world. The Sub-Committee on Protection has been presented with a preliminary report on this subject, and the ICRC is prepared, if so requested, to examine how it could help still

further within the limits of its competence and its resources to set up the appropriate measures to ensure such protection.

It is in this spirit of collaboration for the utmost benefit of those whom we wish to protect and help that we are here today, following the work of this session of the Executive Committee. We are at your entire disposal, Mr. Chairman, for the examination of any questions in which the ICRC and the League might be of assistance.

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Jean-Pierre Hocké
