

### **Unity and plurality of the emblems**

*The armed conflicts which are causing bloodshed in a number of regions of the world have led special emphasis to be laid on one of the fundamental problems of humanitarian action in times of war: how to ensure respect for emblems providing protection for the victims of violence and for those who come to their assistance.*

*In 1864, the Geneva Conventions established a distinctive uniform sign for the armed forces' medical services as a means of improving the protection of wounded soldiers and members of medical services. Nearly one hundred and thirty years later, the protective value of the emblem of the Conventions has been vitiated by two factors; abuses of the emblem, and its plurality.*

*The loss of human lives and the unnecessary suffering resulting from this situation are a matter of primary concern for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, one of whose major challenges is that of securing absolute respect for the emblems. Opinions regarding the symbolic scope of the red cross and red crescent emblems should give way to concern for strengthening their protective value, since the protective system established by international humanitarian law would lose much of its substance in the absence of respect for the emblem and of the conditions governing its use. The particular aspect of these problems which is examined below is that of the unity and plurality of the emblems.*

In recent years, problems related to the red cross and the red crescent emblems and the religious connotations attached to them have arisen from time to time in various countries of different continents. In particular, the emergence of new National Societies faced with difficulties in choosing an emblem has raised problems for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Some ten years after the decision by the Council of Delegates in Manila in 1981 to dissolve the Working Group on the Emblem, it must be admitted that the problems which led to that group being formed have still not been solved and that events since then call for further consideration of the matter. It is important to analyse here the reasons why the present situation

is unsatisfactory and to list the conditions that any realistic solution should fulfil.

The objective of unity of the distinctive sign, which symbolizes selfless help for all who suffer, is a corollary of the basic ideals of the Movement. The use of the same emblem by the medical services of various parties to a conflict emphasizes the basic values which must remain common to the adversaries: humanity towards all the victims, neutrality of those who come to their assistance and impartiality of the aid provided. It is a confirmation of the unity of human civilizations with respect to certain standards of behaviour. The expansion of the Movement to embrace practically all cultures, religions and nationalities, its persuasion of most of the States of the world increasingly to extend the protection offered by international humanitarian law to the victims of armed conflicts and the fact that it also comes to the assistance of populations stricken by natural disasters, by accidents or disease all endorse the original justification of a single emblem.

The rule of the unity of the emblem laid down in Article 7 of the 1864 Geneva Conventions was broken during the Balkan War of 1876-1878, when the Ottoman Empire informed the depositary of the Convention that, while respecting the red cross emblem as protecting enemy ambulances, it would henceforth adopt the sign of a red crescent on a white ground<sup>1</sup> for the protection of its own ambulances. Since then, over 25 States with Muslim majorities have also adopted the red crescent emblem.

The attitude of the ICRC has been consistent in this regard: it has warned against the dangers inherent in the fragmentation of the protective sign whereby the red crescent, which was the national and religious sign of the Ottoman Empire, was placed in antithesis to the red cross, which Muslims regarded as a religious emblem.

In 1981, in his address as President of the ICRC to the International Conference in Manila, the late President Hay stressed that "*The emblem worn by each of us is not the privilege of any one State, people or religion, but a sign of respect for wounded and defenceless victims and a token of solidarity with human beings in distress*".

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the historical events which led to the choice of the red cross as the protective emblem and then to the admission of the red crescent: the intrinsic value of the two emblems cannot be placed in question, any more than can the profound faith that millions of human beings have in them. Yet the coexistence of the

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Emblem of the Red Cross. A Brief History*, by F. Bugnion, ICRC, 1977.

two emblems has had the effect of accentuating their religious connotation in public opinion, for there can be no doubt that this identification with a religious group has to some extent affected the victims of conflicts in which each of the adversaries uses a different emblem. As we have already said, "*the emblem derives its protective value from the fact that the same sign is used by friend and foe*",<sup>2</sup> and if the emblem loses its neutrality, there is a great danger of its becoming a target.

The ICRC's experience of conflicts in the latter part of the twentieth century has made it very much aware of the possible weakening of the protective value of the emblem to the detriment of the victims. Moreover identification, though erroneously, of the authorized emblems with two of the great monotheistic religions is *hardly compatible with the principle of universality*, since it can give the impression of favouring Christianity and Islam at the expense of other religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism, and other schools of thought of a religious or secular nature. This also detracts from the credibility of the emblem in the eyes of those who rightly attach no religious connotation to it, for although the individuals composing the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement often derive their humanitarian motivation from faith, the emblem should above all symbolize the unity of their inspiration and of their striving towards a single goal. Yet the reservation that members of the Movement must observe in their humanitarian activities with respect to the various religions, or even to religion in general, in no way curbs their individual freedom in spiritual matters.

In the public view the unity of the Movement should be reflected in a single emblem. Instead, the plurality of signs gives evidence of division and of an inability to overcome certain divergences and to transcend religious or cultural differences: the Movement has thus failed in an area in which other universal organizations, particularly United Nations agencies, have succeeded.

Nor has the Movement achieved the universality which it has established as one of its Fundamental Principles, and this partly for reasons connected with the existing emblems. The populations of certain countries and the members of certain Societies feel that they cannot identify with the emblem of the red cross or the red crescent: that is why, for example, the Red Shield of David Society (the "Magen David Adom" in Israel), which renders valuable humanitarian

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<sup>2</sup> See François Bugnion, "The red cross and crescent emblems", *IRRC*, No 272, September-October 1989, p. 418.

service in a troubled part of the world, cannot formally belong to the Movement since it considers itself unable to adopt either of the present emblems. Other National Societies have in the past applied for the recognition of various emblems corresponding to their particular religious, philosophical or ethnic aspirations, but have subsequently withdrawn their requests.

The position of certain Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies in countries populated by different religious communities is now arousing serious concern. One part of the population identifies itself with one emblem and another with the other, thus creating a division in the National Society. Such antagonisms can be detrimental to the recruitment of volunteers and to the credibility of the Society. In cases of international conflict, when the cohesion of a National Society is most sorely tried, the fragmentation of local branches adopting one or the other emblem might well destroy the protective value of the distinctive sign. A National Society might thus be paralysed by such division at the very time when its action is most needed.

Attention must also be drawn to the danger of the proliferation of emblems that is inherent in the existence of two emblems each identified with a particular religion. When such connotations become fixed in the mind, requests for the recognition of other emblems are bound to arise, although every increase in the number of emblems would have the effect of diminishing their protective value. In the worst case, partisan emblems would become targets. Accordingly, the adoption of one or more new signs with a specific connotation, which would be valid only in one country or in a small number of countries, would contribute to dividing the Movement and weakening the protective value of the emblem.

At the present time, there is no easy solution for these problems. The inability of the Movement's Working Group, which was disbanded in 1981, to formulate any acceptable proposals testifies to the numerous difficulties encountered in any search for a solution. Nevertheless, the Movement cannot evade the challenge. It must do its utmost to meet and overcome it, in accordance with the principle of humanity, which calls upon it to promote mutual understanding and friendship between peoples, and the principle of universality, under which the Movement must be open to all. To prevent the political, religious and ideological differences which divide the modern world from becoming breaking points fraught with the danger of new conflicts, the Movement is duty bound to demonstrate a cohesion at the humanitarian level which should also be reflected in the way it tackles the question of the emblem. Over and above the specific prob-

blems created by the religious connotation ascribed by some to the emblems of the red cross and red crescent—problems which are all the more important because in times of conflicts or unrest human lives depend on respect for these emblems—the challenge set is that of the very coexistence of different cultural and religious communities.

The ICRC therefore considers that the question should be re-examined, and wishes to contribute openly to such a re-examination. The search for a solution, whatever it may be, will have to meet four requirements whose pertinence has been demonstrated by experience within the Movement:

- *the solution must be very widely acceptable;*
- *the States and National Societies which use one of the recognized signs must not be forced to renounce or change their emblem unless they wish to do so;*
- *any new sign must be graphically simple enough to ensure good visibility at a distance, must be devoid of any religious, political, ethnic or other connotation, and must be made widely known in peacetime so that it is easily identified by those who are required to respect it;*
- *any proliferation of emblems, which would not fail to occur if too much freedom of choice is allowed, must be avoided.*

If a new search is to be undertaken, it must be realistic from the start as regards two points. First of all, a return to the red cross as the only emblem, which the ICRC had long wished for, can no longer be contemplated; it is equally inconceivable that all the components of the Movement would agree to abandon the existing emblems, to which millions of people are deeply attached.

Also, the use of the red cross and red crescent emblems in juxtaposition (which is contrary to existing law, since Article 38 of the First Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 provides for the use of the red crescent *instead* of the red cross, not side by side with it) would certainly have serious disadvantages: the religious connotation of the two signs would be emphasized; generalized use of the double emblem would also have the unfortunate result of precluding any solution for Societies which are unable to accept either the red cross or the red crescent; and intermittent requests for the recognition of new signs would continue to be received. Furthermore, numerous tests have shown that the visibility at a distance of any combined and graphically complicated sign (red cross and red crescent together, or any other juxtaposed signs) is far from satisfactory. At a time when considerable efforts are being made to improve identification of the persons and

property protected by international humanitarian law, this argument must be taken into due account.

The ICRC would therefore like a calm and candid debate to be held on this subject and would be prepared to contribute to such a debate and to examine any proposal likely to lead to a solution. For its part, the ICRC has come to the conclusion that a third sign would offer considerable advantages and would be a solution worth examining in depth within the Movement. If the Movement were to agree that a new, third sign be made available to the States and National Societies wishing to have it, the disadvantages mentioned above with regard to the existing emblems could probably be avoided. This sign would have to meet the requirements of visibility, be free from any religious, political, cultural or other connotations and be chosen with the utmost care.

The emblems of the red cross and the red crescent certainly continue to enjoy great respect and to perform their function of protection in the large majority of cases. Moreover, the ICRC is fully aware of the fact that States alone are competent to change the existing situation with regard to emblems.

Nevertheless, the considerations set out above should encourage the Movement to re-examine these problems, and the study on the future of the Movement that has now been undertaken gives it an opportunity to do so. All proposals should be submitted to the Council of Delegates and then, of course, to the States party to the Geneva Conventions, if the proposal entails any amendment of these instruments.

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