

# Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations Organization

*Statement by Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga,  
President of the International Committee of the Red Cross  
at the United Nations General Assembly*

*(New York, 20 November 1992)*

The end of the cold war raised hopes for a more peaceful world. While in the new climate of international relations tension has indeed eased in several areas of conflict, violence has flared up in other parts of the world and is today claiming *not thousands but millions of victims* on every continent.

In an effort to provide a more effective response to growing humanitarian needs, the United Nations has recently set up certain coordination mechanisms. These measures, while obviously worthwhile, must necessarily be *translated into operational reality* and accompanied by *active support from diplomatic circles in the world's capitals*. Indeed, as far as the victims are concerned, action in the field remains the vital element.

Apart from the formal assignment of tasks, *the approaches adopted must also be harmonized*. Everywhere we look, the spectre of famine hangs over countless civilians. Indiscriminate shelling, forced population displacements, torture, massacres — all these are violations of international humanitarian law.

The increasing politicization of humanitarian work does not favour respect for the law. While it is encouraging to see that humanitarian issues are higher on the agenda of the international community today, the trend towards politicization is worrying and must be checked. This calls for a *more precise division of tasks and responsibilities* between the humanitarian organizations that are working to alleviate suffering and the political bodies whose duty it is to tackle the causes of conflict.

In addition, a *general mobilization to promote respect for international humanitarian law* must be initiated as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, the erosion of the law will weaken the very foundations of humanity.

\* \* \*

## **Coordination and a concerted approach**

Both the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies take an active part in the meetings of the Inter-agency Standing Committee and its working groups. In this context, the ICRC's independence is judiciously reflected by its *status as an observer*.

*This constructive form of cooperation* certainly deserves to be pursued and developed: it makes it possible to avoid duplication of effort or failure to respond, thanks to a distribution of tasks in accordance with the respective mandates of the different organizations concerned.

The ICRC, anxious to maintain its independence and especially the speed with which it can take action, within minutes of a conflict breaking out, wishes to emphasize the necessity of continuing to launch its own financial appeals. Giving the donors a synoptic view by including our figures in the United Nations' consolidated appeals must not eclipse the ICRC's own financial needs, which remain very substantial. These consolidated appeals, moreover, should clearly reflect the division of tasks between the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the non-governmental organizations, and make a distinction between their respective budgets.

The problem remains that only too often, following constructive discussions leading to the distribution of urgent tasks, the ICRC, together with certain non-governmental organizations whose courage I should like to commend, finds itself alone for long periods out in the field.

Yet the sheer magnitude of needs calls increasingly for a concerted effort. Meeting them is beyond the capacity of the ICRC alone, which must concentrate on protection activities.

*The operational aspect of United Nations humanitarian agencies must be strengthened.*

Resolution 46/182 provides for early-warning mechanisms, in which the ICRC plays a part on a case-by-case basis and in accordance with its principles. However, more important than early warning, which was in fact given in Somalia, for example, especially by the ICRC, what is sadly lacking at the moment is *a rapid response*.

What worries me personally is the fact that these atrocities inflicted on entire populations, these immense deficiencies in the humanitarian standards that protect each and every one of us, this worldwide upsurge of violence that we see on our television screens all elicit such a feeble and slow response.

Of course needs exist everywhere, not only in emergency situations. But bringing help in time and on the spot is far more economical and effective than bringing it too late or coping with hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people.

In this connection, efforts being made in the sphere of disaster preparedness, especially by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies under the auspices of their Federation, are worthy of encouragement.

In view of the tragic experiences of recent conflicts, the ICRC is currently giving prominence to the preventive approach, by spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law through a combination of training programmes and media coverage. It is hoped by these means to promote the humanitarian message more effectively and on a wider scale, in an attempt to prevent violations of international humanitarian law by all those who bear arms. This approach, too, will call for widespread cooperation and the support of Governments, organizations, opinion-makers and the media.

As I mentioned, if we are to enhance the effectiveness and quality of our response to crisis situations, it is important not only to ensure the coordination of humanitarian activities, but also *to agree on a common approach*.

The work currently being carried out by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with a view to establishing a *code of conduct* for non-governmental organizations is a welcome step in that direction. Only by presenting a united front can the humanitarian organizations hope to prevent a repetition of the excesses committed by the warlords who are perpetuating many conflicts today.

The consolidation of peace should also be high on our list of priorities. The ICRC considers it essential to ensure a *smooth transition between emergency situations and the subsequent stages of rehabilitation, reconstruction and development*. In order to reduce or altogether avoid the long-term dependence of victims on aid, we must prepare local bodies to take over the tasks of outside agencies, and relief operations carried out by institutions working in emergencies, such as the ICRC, must be of limited duration.

The work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is guided by seven Fundamental Principles, which were adopted by governments too at the International Conference of the Red Cross held in Vienna in 1965. The Movement notes with great satisfaction that three of these principles, namely, *humanity, impartiality and neutrality*, were mentioned in General Assembly resolution 46/182 and thus recognized as the cornerstones of all humanitarian endeavour.

The principle of impartiality, which requires that assistance be provided in accordance with the degree of suffering and priority given to the most urgent cases of distress, is crucial. It is observance of this principle that enables humanitarian organizations, in accordance with the acknowledged right of victims to receive assistance, to respond to emergency situations while providing all necessary guarantees of non-interference.

The principles of humanity and neutrality are equally important in ensuring that humanitarian activities remain apolitical.

## **Political action and humanitarian endeavour**

*It would be impossible, and perhaps even undesirable, to dissociate humanitarian endeavour completely from political action.*

Humanitarian work concentrates on the acute symptoms produced by crises, but the crises themselves cannot be resolved without political measures to tackle their underlying causes. Moreover, just as humanitarian work needs political support, political negotiations stand to benefit from the relief afforded by maintaining a measure of humanity in the midst of conflict.

We are nevertheless convinced that *humanitarian endeavour and political action must go their separate ways* if the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian work is not to be jeopardized.

In any situation in which humanitarian concerns become the overriding issue, it is rather dangerous to regard humanitarian action as just another political tool or, conversely, as an excuse for States to shirk their political responsibilities.

Indeed, to tie humanitarian activities too closely to political concerns is to run the risk of seeing humanitarian work rejected on political grounds.

In this regard, I wonder *how wise it is to resort to military means to support humanitarian activities* and, in certain circumstances, to protect the people who conduct them. The effectiveness of our operations is, admittedly, directly affected by the conditions of extreme insecurity in which we have to work. In the former Yugoslavia, and even more so in Somalia, it has unfortunately proved necessary to use armed escorts to protect humanitarian convoys. This, however, must remain a temporary and exceptional measure, and we must take care not to start thinking of it as an acceptable long-term solution. If we resign ourselves to these means, are we not in fact giving up all hope of persuading the belligerents to respect not only humanitarian work but above all defenceless civilians and prisoners? We must also demand and restore respect for protective emblems, especially those of the Red Cross and Red Crescent which are so often disregarded. This is vital to ensure that humanitarian action loses neither the impartiality it must maintain to work efficiently in behalf of all the victims, without discrimination, nor its necessary and concomitant independence vis-à-vis all the belligerents.

For all these reasons we believe that it is *dangerous to link humanitarian activities aimed at meeting the needs of victims of a conflict with political measures designed to bring about the settlement of the dispute between the parties.*

Moreover, in the light of the establishment by the Security Council, in its resolution 780, of a Commission of Experts to enquire into grave breaches of international humanitarian law, a *clear distinction must be drawn between justice and humanitarian assistance.* Although the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations are ready to take considerable risks — some might even say too many — in order to bring the victims assistance and protection, their role is not to act as judge and even less as prosecutor. However, we should be more than happy if the States were to fulfil that role, as they undertook to do in the final provisions common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and, more recently, in Article 90 of the Additional Protocol I of 1977, and we urge them to meet their obligation in that respect on a universal basis. This would discourage further violations and, in

parallel with other measures, facilitate the restoration of dialogue and lasting peace.

## **Call for a humanitarian mobilization**

Let me stress once again, humanitarian action deals only with the acute symptoms of a crisis: even if humanitarian agencies are given all they need to work effectively in the field and even if all doors are opened to them, States cannot rely on emergency humanitarian work alone to provide a solution. *A global approach intended to tackle the underlying causes of the crisis is a must*, and this falls within the competence of *governments*.

Humanitarian action undeniably facilitates — but in the long term can never replace — the negotiation process and the dialogue necessary at the political, military and economic levels.

The persistent violations of international humanitarian law we are witnessing foreshadow a threat which the international community must address as a matter of urgency. If today we allow the population of entire countries to be starved, forcibly transferred, threatened, terrorized or massacred, arguing that the situation they are in is too far removed from our concerns, too complex or too dangerous to handle, then one of these days, and perhaps sooner than we think, we and our own families may have to face similar risks, similar outrages and similar indifference. What is at stake today is *respect for the principle on which the very survival of mankind depends*.

In all these circumstances, compliance with the existing rules of humanitarian law would have helped to save hundreds of thousands of lives and to prevent countless civilians in need of protection and assistance from being forced into exile.

We can no longer tolerate that in so many conflicts whose effects spill over national borders the fate of the victims should depend on the whim of the parties concerned. We must be more forceful in letting the belligerents know that they will have to answer for their acts to the international community. Article 1 common to the four Geneva Conventions is perfectly clear on this point: the High Contracting Parties undertake to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian law at all times. That is an obvious legal obligation, which is not only binding on the individual States involved in a conflict, but is part of a much wider framework, since every State has undertaken to ensure respect for the law. Thus, when a State at war violates the commitments it made on adhering to the Conventions, all

other States become answerable too if they do nothing to put a stop to such violations.

How can we reverse this negative trend?

I believe that if we are to secure greater respect for humanitarian endeavour, we must remind the community of States of their joint responsibility in that regard, as set out in Article 1 common to the Geneva Conventions. States must be prepared to put pressure on other governments to ensure that the Conventions are complied with even outside their own borders.

An *ad hoc* meeting of States party to the Geneva Conventions, for example, would enable the ICRC to go beyond the representations it makes to the belligerents and its repeated public expressions of concern. It would provide the ICRC with an opportunity to urge governments — with which the ultimate responsibility lies — to make the rules of international humanitarian law standards of moral behaviour binding on individuals and States alike, as universally recognized and accepted as those laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We have proposed to the Swiss Federal Council, the depositary of the Geneva Conventions, that it convene a multilateral assembly of this kind so that in an exceptional and solemn forum humanitarian law may be restored to its rightful place in the concerns and duties of the international community.

\* \* \*

Our individual and collective security can no longer be guaranteed by a *balance of power*, but only by one inspired by *solidarity*. This balance of solidarity naturally has a humanitarian aspect, whether it be respect for humanitarian law or support for humanitarian organizations. But it must also extend to measures of reconstruction, the development of mechanisms to ensure economic and environmental conditions favourable to all, and the peaceful settlement of conflicts, in compliance with international law and the values common to all mankind. If we are to succeed in this task we must be ready, each and every one of us, to fulfil our respective mandates, not only by conferring with one another in these comfortable surroundings, but also by acting decisively to help victims in the field, whether in the midst of the continental winter or in desert drought and heat.

To conclude, I should like to take this opportunity to thank, on behalf of the ICRC, all the Governments, organizations of the United Nations system, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, with

*their Federation, and non-governmental organizations* which work alongside the ICRC to bring humanitarian assistance and protection to victims of conflict.

The ICRC would also like to *pay tribute here to all those men and women* who work in the field — both in their own countries and abroad — to bring assistance and protection to the victims, often at considerable risk to themselves, and to remember all those among them who have given their lives in the service of the humanitarian cause.

---