

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE MOVEMENT

SEMINAR ON INFORMATION AND DISSEMINATION OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AS A CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

(Leningrad, 10-14 October 1988)

At its meeting of 27 November 1987 in Rio de Janeiro, the Council of Delegates, in its resolution No. 4 entitled "Information and dissemination of international humanitarian law as a contribution to peace", had urged the Commission on the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and Peace "to take all necessary steps to improve ways and means of making better known and understood the role of the Movement in favour of peace by pointing out the connection between disseminating international humanitarian law and the Movement's Fundamental Principles and developing a spirit of peace."

In order to pursue this objective, the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR (the host Society), the ICRC and the League organized a seminar in Leningrad, from 10 to 14 October 1988, on information and dissemination of international humanitarian law as a contribution to peace, which formed part of the programme to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Movement.

The seminar was sponsored by the Commission on the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and Peace, which is currently chaired by Mr. Alexandre Hay, former President of the ICRC. It was attended by 14 members of the Commission, information and dissemination specialists from 17 National Societies, and seven communication experts from outside the Movement.

At the First World Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference on Peace, held in Belgrade in 1975, peace was defined "not (...) simply as an absence of war, but rather as a dynamic process of co-operation among all States and peoples; co-operation founded on freedom, independence, national sovereignty, equality, respect of human rights, as well as a fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet the needs of peoples."

The participants in the Leningrad seminar, who were divided into four working groups—Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe, reaffirmed this concept and stressed the Movement's valuable contribution to peace, while underscoring the various difficulties it encountered in making itself known to the media and the general public as a factor of peace. They laid particular emphasis on problems such as the scant attention given by the Movement to publicizing this particular aspect of its work; the lack of promotional material

adapted to the knowledge and needs of the general public and the specific requirements of different cultures and social strata; the difficulty of projecting an image of peace to the public when—more often than not—Red Cross and Red Crescent work was reported only in relation to man-made or natural disasters or to controversy likely to tarnish its reputation; and the disparities of development between the National Societies and of needs when some regions were in conflict while others were at peace.

The working groups then went on to envisage various solutions to the present situation which might improve the way public opinion perceived Red Cross and Red Crescent peace work. A general consensus emerged as to the Movement's need to publicize its work to promote peace. In order to spread a peace message in the simplest possible terms accessible to all, the Movement must first of all project a coherent and unified image. This presupposed the creation and/or the strengthening of truly professional information services and constant co-operation with the media. In this connection participants felt it was essential to attract professional communicators and arouse their interest in Red Cross and Red Crescent action, possibly even by involving them in humanitarian missions, for they were particularly qualified to stimulate the general public's interest in the Movement's peace message. In establishing their communication strategy, the various components of the Movement must also establish priorities among the various target groups, while devoting special attention to children and young people, both in school and outside, and in universities, which were ideal vectors for the peace message (particularly through the study and in-depth analysis of international humanitarian law).

The division of participants into separate regional groups proved an extremely judicious working process, for it enabled each group to identify the methods and means of communication best suited to each environment. It also helped to create a momentum that must be maintained over the years to come.

The reports of the four regional groups were presented at the seminar's plenary session on 31 October, which summed up by recommending that the Movement should formulate a coherent and consistent communication strategy.

The Commission on the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and Peace took cognizance of the general report drawn up by Dr. Guillermo Rueda Montaña, President of the Colombian Red Cross and rapporteur-general of the seminar. At its meeting of 14 October, the Commission decided to forward the above document and the four reports prepared by the regional working groups to the National Societies, inviting them to make useful comments on these reports and to express their reactions to the various proposals made during the seminar.
