

The 125th anniversary of the
International Review of the Red Cross

A FAITHFUL RECORD

by Jacques Meurant

Officers, soldiers, medical personnel and the inhabitants of areas near and far from the theatre of war — these are the categories of people whom writers should address to explain, in the language best suited to each, the basic humanitarian ideas and sentiments which it is so urgent to impress on their minds and hearts.

(Bulletin international des Sociétés de secours aux militaires blessés, No. 1, October 1869.)

When the Second International Conference of the Red Cross, held in Berlin in 1869, approved the principle of issuing a bulletin to be produced by the International Committee, its main aim was to help “central committees of various countries (...) maintain contact and learn of the official events and other facts which they should know”. Ever since, the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de secours aux militaires blessés*, renamed *Bulletin international des sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* in 1886 and *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge (International Review of the Red Cross)* in 1919, has continued to “ensure a steady flow of information and provide the necessary link between the members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement”. This was reaffirmed by the ICRC Assembly in March 1988 when, re-examining the nature and aims of the *Review*,

it stressed that the official organ of the ICRC was at the service of all the Movement's components, accurately reflecting its policies and reporting on its activities to the outside world.

Over the years the *Review* has faithfully carried out this permanent assignment, ever striving to keep its readers informed and above all to provide a forum for reflection regarding the mission of the Movement and the activities of its components. At the same time, it has shown a constant concern with the many and various humanitarian aspects of international events.

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The history of the Movement as seen through the *Review* has yet to be written; perhaps one day it will arouse the interest of an historian or provide a student with a topic for his thesis. Our aim is more modest. Referring more particularly to the events of the past 25 years, which are more familiar to present-day readers, we shall endeavour to show how the *Review* has reported on ICRC protection and assistance activities, followed the development of humanitarian law and the policies which guide those activities, and attested to the Movement's acts of solidarity in its constant quest to ensure the protection, well-being and dignity of the individual.¹ In the process we hope to reveal the outstanding features of what is, after all, the recent history of the Movement — a history which has been anything but “a long, quiet river”.

I. PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE

1. The ICRC on the scene of operations

From its very inception the *Review* has been concerned with war; it shows us the hidden side of war — a side which history books too often neglect to mention — with all its attendant forms of suffering. From the

¹ Two historical overviews were published in the outstanding centenary issue of the *Review* (No. 103, Oct. 1969): Jean Georges Lossier, “A glimpse into the past — Fifty years of the *Bulletin*”, pp. 539-545, and Victor Segesvary, “Fifty years of the *International Review*”, pp. 546-552.

war of 1870-1871 to the current conflict in the former Yugoslavia, official declarations, communiqués, reports and studies attest to the ICRC's activities in various theatres of operations — whether making representations to belligerent States to urge them to respect their commitments, or negotiating with the warring parties to obtain access to the victims. Sharing, as it were, the life of ICRC delegates as they repatriated the wounded and the sick, organized exchanges of prisoners, searched for missing persons and distributed aid, readers have been able to grasp how important it is for these delegates to be at the victims' side, how valuable their presence is in the field, in prisons and in camps.

Being present to conduct a protection and assistance mission means being permanently available, remaining constantly in touch with the authorities and the communities concerned so as to build up an atmosphere of trust. It also means being prepared to see the task through to the end, with the risk of being left behind after everyone else has pulled out, alone and without resources, as happened in Kurdistan in 1990, in Bihac in 1993 and in Kigali in 1994.

It is worth rereading the excellent article that Pierre Boissier wrote about the delegate, describing him as “a systematic organizer and an inspired improviser”² whose occupation is a dangerous one indeed. Delegates have been taken hostage, murdered in ambulances and killed in ambushes along with local agents. A simple perusal of recent years' issues of the *Review* reveals the heavy price the ICRC has paid for its commitment to the humanitarian cause.

While reports and commentaries on ICRC operations constitute a valuable source of information for historians, they also provide basic reference material for the ICRC itself, helping it to assess its operations and determine their strengths and weaknesses.

On a number of occasions, especially since the 1960s, the *Review* has published periodic overviews of ICRC operations in protracted conflicts, assessments covering several years of activity³ and critical analyses of

² Pierre Boissier, “ICRC delegate: A demanding and fascinating career”, *IRRC*, No. 174, September 1975, pp. 435-444, and “Standards of medical care and protection in detention camps”, *ibid.*, pp. 445-453.

³ See for example Max Petitpierre, “A contemporary look at the International Committee of the Red Cross”, *IRRC*, No. 119, February 1971, pp. 63-81; Jacques Freymond, “The International Committee of the Red Cross within the international system”, *IRRC*, No. 134, May 1972, pp. 245-266; Walter Bargatzky, “Red Cross unity in the world”, *IRRC*, No. 163, October 1974, pp. 515-526; “Under the presidency of Mr. Alexander Hay, the ICRC from 1976 to 1987. Controlled expansion”, *IRRC*, No. 261, November-December 1987, pp. 621-638; “Respect for international humanitarian law: ICRC review of five years of activity (1987-1991)”, *IRRC*, No. 286, January-February 1992, pp. 74-93.

emergency situations from the moment when the ICRC became involved to the moment it withdrew.

The internal conflict in Nigeria/Biafra is a well-known case in point. Lasting from 1967 to 1970, it gave rise to the largest humanitarian operation to be carried out by the ICRC since the Second World War. It was also one of the most thankless.

In his article "Aid to the victims of the civil war in Nigeria",⁴ Jacques Freymond, the then Vice-President of the ICRC, analyses the decision-making process and operational procedures involved in the ICRC's work in a conflict which gave rise to an unprecedented show of solidarity within the international community. On the positive side, he mentions the swiftness with which the ICRC took action, the scale of its relief operations and the tenacity shown by its staff despite constant crises and obstacles of all kinds. On the negative side, he points to the shortcomings in the law which prevented the ICRC from moving about freely in the secessionist zone and deplors the confusion that prevailed in regard to the mandates of the various international humanitarian organizations involved.

The author concludes his assessment by calling for the law applicable to internal conflicts to be developed and strengthened and for improved coordination between humanitarian organizations.

The above example was not chosen at random. It reveals the profound changes which have been taking place in the nature of conflicts and the conduct of hostilities. In Vietnam, the ICRC was involved in an internationalized civil war to which the Geneva provisions could be applied only with difficulty, while in the Middle East, the military occupation of territories following the Six Days War raised a new problem: the applicability — disputed by the Israeli government — of the Fourth Geneva Convention. During the Indo-Pakistan war the repatriation of prisoners of war in the hands of one of the belligerents was made subject to political conditions contrary to the provisions of the Third Geneva Convention.

To cope with these new types of situation the ICRC took a pragmatic line, maintaining a constant dialogue with the governments involved to remind them of their obligations. Nevertheless, a number of commentators expressed concern about the danger of politicization which threatened

⁴ *IRRC*, No. 107, February 1970, pp. 65-77.

humanitarian action,⁵ while others felt that the ICRC had to review its working procedures and become more “professional”.⁶ To adjust while remaining true to its basic mission of protection and assistance, such would be the challenge facing the ICRC in the 1970s and 1980s.

2. The ICRC’s humanitarian policy

From the 1970s on, the ICRC had to cope with three simultaneous developments: the proliferation of internal conflicts with complex ramifications, the radicalization of ideologies and the fact that recourse to violence was becoming increasingly commonplace.

“The difficulties encountered by the ICRC in its operational activities obviously evolved as the institution had to face increasingly complex situations, negotiate with new elements in the international arena, such as national liberation movements and guerrilla forces, resolve a growing number of problems not covered by law and rally the legal and material support it needed to carry out its work.

“However, more familiar factors also contributed to increasing the problems associated with humanitarian work.

“The ICRC found that it was no longer alone in carrying out operations on behalf of conflict victims. It became increasingly obvious that many other organizations were active in situations resulting from man-made disasters: United Nations humanitarian, assistance and coordination agencies and non-governmental organizations. The situation constantly raised problems relating to the coordination of the operations and respective roles of these organizations and agencies, particularly in situations rendered explosive by political complications and security risks”.⁷

To cope with these new problems the ICRC took action at two levels: in the field of law, it strove to reaffirm and develop the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions (see Part II, “Conquests of the law”), while in operational terms the increasing duration of its involvement in conflict

⁵ Walter Bargatzky, *op. cit.*, pp. 521-522.

⁶ Jacques Freymond, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

⁷ “Controlled expansion”, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

situations compelled it to revise its notion of “emergency”. The ICRC went beyond the idea of limited emergency by setting up rehabilitation programmes designed to help rebuild the medical, hospital and sometimes economic structures of affected countries, drawing on local resources. This type of approach has been very successful, for example, in relation to the war in Angola.

These adjustments also resulted in a spectacular development of the ICRC’s medical activities and the work of the Central Tracing Agency. In recent years the *Review* has elaborated on this evolution, thus contributing to a greater awareness of the tasks entrusted to the ICRC’s Medical Division, set up in 1977 to conduct medical activities in behalf of prisoners of war and political detainees and to provide medical assistance for displaced populations. The *Review* has shown how these activities gradually expanded to include new aspects such as nutrition, sanitation, rehabilitation and training.

At the same time the Central Tracing Agency, decentralizing its activities and collecting information in the field, stepped up its tracing programmes for refugees and political detainees. In addition to developing its role as intermediary between National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, it also expanded its activities as coordinator of the National Societies’ tracing services and as technical adviser.

These changes led the ICRC to adjust its policies, both to improve its ability to foresee the course of events and to ensure that it was adequately provided in terms of qualified personnel and logistics. Greater emphasis was placed on training programmes and on human resources management.

This was the time of “controlled expansion”. Never before had the ICRC carried out so many operations in the world: some of them were successes, others failures, while many gave mixed results. In any event the ICRC was always careful to ensure that the effects of this expansion would not undermine the principles on which its action was based; in other words, it showed “unconditional adherence to the Movement’s Fundamental Principles and continuity in the institution’s work”.⁸

3. Making politics more human

With the end of the Cold War, many people looked forward to the advent of a new world order ushering in an era of international stability

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 625.

and peace. Overtaken by the pace of events, however, the international community was caught up in a whirlwind of bewildering changes which have greatly complicated the ICRC's task.

In many cases the ICRC has been refused access to conflict victims and has been unable to bring them the necessary assistance. Forced to suspend its activities in Sudan and Ethiopia after the authorities had forbidden it to enter the combat zones, it has also been unable to carry out its treaty-based activities on behalf of prisoners of war in Iran. In the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda, to mention only the most recent cases, the ICRC has had to cope with even more tragic situations. How can it protect and help victims — and do only that — when conflicts such as these are claiming the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, destroying the infrastructure and the environment, and shattering all frames of reference?

What position should be taken regarding the use of armed force to get relief supplies through? How can the ICRC safeguard its specific role when humanitarian agencies take action in a haphazard manner? How can ICRC operations be better coordinated with those of the United Nations agencies and non-governmental humanitarian organizations? How can material aid be truly effective unless it is accompanied by legal guarantees and political concessions?

These questions have been of constant concern to the ICRC, prompting a debate which the *Review* has fostered by seeking out the opinions of experts, theoreticians and practitioners representing different schools of thought.⁹

The law as it stands can of course supply answers to these questions, as can the efforts undertaken by governments and the United Nations to deal with serious breaches of the law and to address the pernicious effects of the massive use of conventional weapons and the threat represented by new types of weapons. These points will be discussed further in the section dealing with the development of humanitarian law.

⁹ Starting in the late 1960s the *Review* gradually reduced its coverage of ICRC operations. The reason for this was twofold: in the first place, the theatres of operations were becoming too numerous to be reported on comprehensively in time to remain of topical interest to the reader; secondly, from 1977 on the *Review*, previously a monthly, appeared every two months. Other ICRC periodicals have taken over this task, and the *Annual Report* gives a detailed account of the ICRC's activities.

This change in orientation was also reflected in an increase in series of studies devoted to a given theme and reports on topics of current interest.

Turning now to operations, the *Review* has also published special features on the issues involved in humanitarian assistance, shedding light on the ICRC's position with respect to the problems created when political, military and humanitarian aims become confused and supporting the ICRC in its staunch defence of its working principles.¹⁰

All too many agencies limit their humanitarian action to relief operations, which are more mediagenic. If they are to be effective, however, humanitarian operations must involve representations on the legal front to ensure the protection of victims. Protection and assistance thus go hand in hand, a notion which the ICRC has always upheld.

Experience has proved that in the long run relief operations are successful only when they are carried out with the consent of the States or authorities concerned; furthermore, they are dependable only when they are conducted by an impartial and independent organization such as the ICRC, under the banner of the red cross or red crescent.

Only too often humanitarian action is used as a pretext for not settling disputes, or as a way to avoid the issue altogether. On several occasions the ICRC and other organizations have pointed out that humanitarian action cannot serve as a substitute for political negotiation, and even less as a means of pursuing political or military aims. The "right of intervention on humanitarian grounds" is, in fact, a highly ambiguous notion, if only because it is often interpreted as entailing political intervention, which many States do not accept. In short, any attempt to link humanitarian and political action in a single negotiation process "may lead to the politicization of humanitarian action, which will then become hostage to the political and military manoeuvring associated with any conflict".¹¹

Similarly, neither should military and humanitarian action be linked in any way. In the first place, "the use of armed force to get relief supplies through cannot be justified by international humanitarian law since (...) the obligation to 'ensure respect for' this law rules out the use of force";¹² indeed, the use of force may raise doubts as to the impartial nature of such

¹⁰ See in particular the special section on humanitarian assistance in No. 288, May-June 1992, pp. 215-263, and No. 289, July-August 1992, pp. 363-382.

¹¹ Address by Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the ICRC, to the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims, *IRRC*, No. 296, September-October 1993, pp. 365-368 (p. 391).

¹² Yves Sandoz, "Droit' or 'devoir d'ingérence' and the right to assistance: the issues involved", *IRRC*, No. 288, May-June 1992, pp. 215-227 (p. 220).

an operation. Secondly, “the ICRC cannot (...) be associated with armed action for humanitarian purposes, but must analyse the new situation created by such action in order to envisage, together with all the parties involved, the role it is required to play to ensure respect for international humanitarian law and to cooperate actively in the implementation thereof”.¹³

These problems highlight the need to coordinate the humanitarian activities of the United Nations agencies and other humanitarian organizations. As the ICRC has repeatedly stated, such coordination is vital. When action is taken on behalf of refugees and displaced civilians who are victims of armed conflict, for example, the ICRC has stressed the need to agree on how tasks should be distributed among the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, other organizations involved and itself, in accordance with the statutory competences and respective mandates specific to these organizations and their capacity to operate in situations of armed conflict or political instability.¹⁴

To cope with the many aspects of conflict situations, the ICRC has gradually developed a global operational strategy combining the inseparable activities of protection and assistance in emergency situations and rehabilitation activities designed to promote the development of the countries concerned.

This strategy was ably summed up by Frédéric Maurice: “... law, diplomacy and field work constitute an interdependent whole. For no assistance can be extended to the civilian population for long without the independence and neutrality which guarantee the impartiality of the aid being offered to the populations of the belligerents. The right to medical or material assistance counts for nothing if there are no rules on the conduct of hostilities to outlaw famine and the destruction of civilian property as methods of warfare. Work in prisoner-of-war camps has generally had a decisive effect on the conduct of the armed forces, particularly towards civilians. The search for missing persons, family reunification and the exchanging of messages between people separated or isolated by war also have their effects long after the cessation of active hostilities, when the time has come to solve the myriad problems of restoring peace.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 223 (italics added).

¹⁴ Frédéric Maurice and Jean de Courten, “ICRC activities for refugees and displaced persons”, *IRRC*, No. 280, January-February 1991, pp. 9-21 (p. 18).

“The ICRC has formed the conviction that those approaches must be combined in a consistent whole if humanitarian action in wartime is to be not only effective but above all feasible and credible in the eyes of the belligerents”.¹⁵

The ICRC’s operational strategy represents an attempt to respond to the needs of suffering humanity. However, it cannot provide a solution on its own to the conflict between political and humanitarian concerns. States and the international community at large have a duty to follow up on the basic issues which the ICRC raised as far back as the early 1980s, and which remain as pressing now as they were then: “How should one go about stimulating this awareness of humanitarian values among political leaders? How should one foster the humanitarian spirit in politics? How can one demonstrate that in every political situation there are aspects which one ignores at one’s peril?”¹⁶

The “humanitarian mobilization” which Alexander Hay called for so eloquently in 1981¹⁷ is more vital than ever before. The ICRC intends to continue to play its part by pursuing its mission of protection and assistance “with perseverance, thoroughness and humility”, as President Sommaruga often says.

To a great extent, the burden of this mission will continue to be placed on the shoulders of ICRC delegates. And even if the barbarity and ignorance we are witnessing today have rendered their task more dangerous, there is no doubt that the ICRC’s mandate will continue to inspire vocations. For there will always be men and women driven by the “humanitarian ambition”, to quote Frédéric Maurice, an “operator” (as he was fond of calling himself) who lost his life at all too early an age.

*(To be continued)**

¹⁵ Frédéric Maurice, “Humanitarian ambition”, *IRRC*, No. 289, July-August 1992, pp. 363-372 (p. 372).

¹⁶ Alexandre Hay, “The ICRC and international humanitarian issues”, *IRRC*, No. 238, January-February 1984, pp. 3-10 (p. 9).

¹⁷ The basic message contained in Mr. Hay’s appeal is worth repeating: “To cope with the increasing number, variety and duration of conflicts, with the inhumane treatment arising from the hardening of ideological, or even religious and racial attitudes, and with the declining respect for treaties and law in general, only a concerted action by all the forces of humanitarianism, a mobilization of States and peoples, might raise in any decisive manner the level of respect for humanitarian rules in conflict — short of abolishing war altogether.” “ICRC appeal for a humanitarian mobilization”, *IRRC*, No. 244, January-February 1985, pp. 30-34 (p. 33).

* Sections to follow:

II - Conquests of the law

III - The Movement: solidarity and unity