

26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

EDITORIAL

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE 26th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

There can be no doubt that the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was a success. This event, awaited with mixed feelings of hope and apprehension by our entire Movement, first of all removed a doubt which had lingered among many of us: it proved it is still possible to hold this gathering which is unique in the world, and to keep up this tradition which is more than a century old.

This undeniable success is based on several factors:

- an attendance which confirmed the universal character of the Conference, with over 1,200 delegates representing 143 governments, 166 National Societies, the ICRC and the International Federation, as well as 68 observers;
- the adoption by consensus of all the resolutions, including the recommendations of the Group of Intergovernmental Experts set up after the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims;
- the quality of the resolutions, which provide a firm basis for strengthening international humanitarian law and developing the activities of the Movement throughout the world;
- the active participation of the National Societies in the debates and in negotiating the resolutions, which was entirely on a par with that of governments.

This Conference has thus unquestionably strengthened the Movement's position in the world and its leadership in matters concerning international humanitarian law.

The challenge of ensuring that the spirit of the Movement and respect for its fundamental principles prevailed throughout the Conference was successfully met. While there were admittedly some "slip-ups" in this

respect, they were very rare. Statements made in the Commissions were extremely positive; negotiations in the Drafting Committee, though sometimes difficult, were always marked by a wish to succeed; and it was clear that the message conveyed throughout the preparatory phase, namely that the Conference was not an area of confrontation, had been generally understood. The tone set by the very beautiful and sober opening ceremony also helped to imbue the Conference with a humanitarian spirit, as did the substantive statements delivered by the Presidents of the ICRC and the Federation at the first plenary meeting.

Moreover, the Conference certainly helped to enhance the cohesion of the Movement, owing to the very smooth cooperation that prevailed between the ICRC and the Federation throughout the Conference and during the preparatory stage, and also thanks to the active involvement of many National Societies.

It goes without saying that this success did not come about by itself, and a well-deserved tribute should be paid to its main architects:

- first of all, the Chairwoman of the Conference, whose calm and friendly authority won everyone over and enabled her to smooth out difficulties;
- the excellent Vice-Chairmen, who effectively supported her in her onerous task;
- the Chairmen and Rapporteurs of the Commissions, who carried out their difficult duties with great competence and tact;
- the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, very effectively backed up by his deputy, who had to draw on all his knowledge and experience to accomplish the feat of obtaining a consensus on all the resolutions, by means of a judicious blend of consideration and firmness;
- the Secretary General of the Conference, who, with equal persuasion and affability, spared no effort to avoid snags in the proceedings;
- all the administrative staff in charge of security, translation and interpretation, who worked by day and night to make their essential contributions to the success of the Conference;
- finally, the ICRC and Federation staff who were constantly on the alert in order to oil the wheels whenever necessary.

Yet the success of the Conference was not achieved only during the event itself. It was also due to the efforts made during the preparatory stage, under the auspices of the Standing Committee. In this connection,

a number of positive experiments were made, which must be taken into account in the preparations for the next Conference:

- the very active involvement of a group of ambassadors, set up over a year beforehand, in the search for solutions to political problems. This group took its task very seriously and deserves the warmest thanks for its work. It provided essential support in settling difficulties related to the participation of certain States and entities;
- the preparation of reports which, while substantive and well written, were also relatively brief and few in number;
- the organization of in-depth consultations of governments and National Societies on the agenda and then on the draft resolutions of the Conference. Despite all the talents of the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, the brevity of the Conference would never have allowed it to adopt its resolutions by consensus without those prior consultations;
- the very early appointment of a highly qualified Conference commissioner responsible for coordinating relations between the host country and the organizers and contributing actively to the practical and political preparations for the Conference;
- the establishment of a homogeneous group of competent individuals representing all parts of the world to occupy posts in connection with the Conference.

To sum up, the Conference was a success which was achieved within the set time limit and which gives every reason for satisfaction.

Nevertheless, for several reasons we should not become euphoric.

First of all, there are still some organizational aspects that could have been improved. In particular, there is the procedure for the election of the Standing Committee, which must be made simpler and quicker.

It should also be noted that the success of an event of this kind after all partly depends on chance and thus remains problematic. It will be noted in this connection that the participation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which had been invited as a State party to the Geneva Conventions, was contested by a number of States and that the FRY preferred to renounce participation in the Conference rather than to provoke incidents which might seriously disrupt the proceedings.

It may furthermore be questionable whether it will really be possible in the future to assign so little time to a forum attended by so many people. Indeed, the time pressure was almost unbearable, and we must reconsider this problem while remaining aware that many National Societies would not want to prolong unduly a stay which already has to allow for meetings of the Movement preceding the Conference.

But apart from these questions, two others, of a more fundamental nature, come to mind.

First, did this event really serve to mobilize public opinion in various parts of the world?

Let us not forget that one of the main purposes of the Conference was to highlight the victims and to mobilize public opinion on their behalf. Has this been accomplished throughout the world? It would be interesting to take stock and particularly to obtain an analysis from the National Societies which endeavoured "to give the floor to the victims".

The second question is even more vital and does not lend itself to any quick or easy answer. It is of concern to all those who worked for the success of the Conference: can the resolutions which it adopted and the humanitarian impetus to which it gave rise really improve conditions for war victims and all the vulnerable people whose needs our Movement seeks to address? Many of the resolutions certainly point the way, particularly with regard to measures that can be taken at the national level, but we cannot speak of success unless pledges are translated into deeds.

While we were talking in Geneva, men, women and children were being subjected to appalling treatment; others were facing grim reality while risking their lives in inextricable and desperate situations. All this cannot be ignored.

We certainly can and must rejoice wholeheartedly at the success of the Conference, but in doing so we must remember that it is not an end in itself, but a source of momentum that should enable us to make further progress and move closer still to the victims. It is our duty to use that momentum without delay: for humanitarian workers there is no respite!

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