

# 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

*Geneva, 3-7 December 1995*

*The 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was held in Geneva from 3 to 7 December 1995. It was organized jointly, for the first time, by the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and brought together approximately 1,200 delegates representing 143 States party to the Geneva Conventions, 166 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC, and the Federation, as well as 68 governmental and non-governmental organizations and emergent National Societies attending as observers.*

*The Conference was preceded by several meetings of the Movement itself, including those of the Executive Council and the General Assembly (Xth Session) of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and of the Council of Delegates (1 and 2 December 1995).*

## OPENING CEREMONY

*(3 December 1995)*

Following an impressive multivision slide show on humanitarian action entitled "The Way Things Are", *Botho Prince of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein*, as Chairman of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, welcomed the participants. He then appealed to governments to facilitate the work of the Movement and to continue supporting its efforts to strengthen humanitarian aid and social assistance. He ended by urging the participants to unite in honouring the Movement's commitment to counteract violence and oppression and to safeguard respect for human life, health and dignity.

*Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga*, President of the ICRC, recalled the contribution the International Conference had made to the Movement for more than a century: "It was the cradle of humanitarian law; it gave the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement its strength and its *raison d'être*; it also enabled the Movement to affirm its cohesion in the very midst of diversity by uniting so many different National Societies around the common principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Through the resolutions it has adopted, the Conference has gradually fostered the emergence of a universal humanitarian conscience whose demands no one, especially today, can deny. Lastly, by bringing together the States party to the Geneva Conventions and the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, our Conference is also the incarnation of a modern concept of the international community, in which civil society can make its voice heard(...) In these troubled and violent times, it is our responsibility, and it is indeed a solemn one, to ensure that this dialogue is productive, for the sake of all the victims. In this forum, therefore, we must rise as one above our quarrels, political disputes and selfish interests, summon up the resolve and find the means to ensure that the notions of compassion, tolerance and respect for the individual, which are at the very heart of international humanitarian law, are upheld even in times of conflict." The ICRC President concluded his speech by expressing the wish that the Conference would "prepare the ground for a new **contract of humanity**, one for which each of us feels personally and fully responsible".

The President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Mr. Mario Villarroel Lander*, paid tribute to the work of millions of volunteers who were the strength of the Movement and represented a "potential for peace and solidarity". He regarded the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent as one of the world's major events on the humanitarian front, and said that it forged links between States and the components of the Movement, namely the National Societies, 169 of which had been recognized to date, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "The Conference's composition makes it an admirable forum for **apolitical dialogue** where humanitarian matters of common interest are discussed."

The President of the Federation urged the participants in the 26th International Conference "to do everything within their power to see to it that the Fundamental Principles of the Movement are reinforced and that respect for human dignity and humanitarian values is enhanced, in order to strengthen our capacity to assist vulnerable groups throughout the world".

*Mr. Kaspar Villiger*, President of the Swiss Confederation, welcomed the participants on behalf of the Swiss government. Speaking of the human crises besetting the international community and the repeated violations of humanitarian law, Mr. Villiger praised the outstanding work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to alleviate the suffering of victims of war and regional crises. Sadly, it was not enough. "These problems call for a vigorous reaction on our part", he said. "We, as the representatives of governments whose policy is to support these organizations and which have pledged to improve the plight of suffering individuals, must mobilize all our resources. If we do not do so now, the danger is that we will have to face even more serious crises in the future. Switzerland, for its part, more than ever sees commitment to the humanitarian cause as one of the priorities of its foreign policy. That was the spirit in which it organized the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims in 1993, and it hopes that the Conference opening here today will ensure that a follow-up is given to that meeting(...) Politicians and the members of the armed forces must acquire the humanitarian reflex. This is crucial if we are to prevent humanitarian crises, instead of having to cope with them once they erupt. States are showing signs of fatigue in the face of the proliferation of such crises. What we need to do is to reverse the order of priorities and focus on preventive action, using all the means at our disposal. And when a crisis does erupt, it is essential to ensure that the independence and neutrality of humanitarian work are respected."

Finally, in his capacity as President of the State Council of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, *Mr. Olivier Vodoz* welcomed the delegates, thanking them for their unwavering commitment and for the support and hope they brought to so many people. "Your presence in Geneva," he went on to say, "will serve to remind the whole world that your struggle on behalf of the victims is a permanent one, one which unfortunately has no end(...) The growing gap between humanitarian needs and available resources means that the world must mobilize even further to provide you with the means you need to fulfil your mission."

He ended by expressing the wish that the 26th International Conference would strengthen humanitarian convictions and confirm the crucial importance of advancing the cause of humanitarian law.

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Various other events took place during the opening ceremony. The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent were read out by a group of children from a Geneva school, and well-known actors spoke the words of delegates and victims testifying to their experiences. The undisputed climax of the proceedings was a performance by "Dissimilis", a group of young disabled musicians from Norway, of works by Grieg and Jobin.

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