

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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The world is weighed down by the victims of too many tragedies. Today, at this 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, it is *in the name of those victims*, the sole reason for our presence here, that I am addressing the representatives of the States party to the Geneva Conventions and those of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Our Movement is faced with the challenge of protecting and assisting these hapless individuals, whose numbers, alas, are growing day by day. Moreover, the situations in which we have to take action are ever more complex, whether they result from *natural or technological disasters*, which often occur in developing countries where there is no proper infrastructure, or from *armed conflicts* and other forms of violence affecting entire populations whose authorities are generally powerless to protect them. It is our *solidarity with the victims* of these situations that gives us our strength — and this solidarity is expressed through the separate but complementary activities conducted by the National Societies, their International Federation and the ICRC. *The complementary nature* of our respective tasks, which is the result of experience and is enshrined in our Statutes, is precisely what makes us effective.

Within the International Movement of which it is the founding body, *the ICRC*, created 132 years ago to provide assistance to wounded and sick soldiers, *bears historical and legal responsibility for taking humanitarian action in behalf of military and civilian victims of armed conflict.* In order to carry out its task as effectively as possible, it works in increasingly close cooperation with the *National Societies*, those vital components of our Movement whose activities and development must be given unstinting support.

In these troubled times, our entire Movement *is more than ever in need of the backing and commitment of governments.* If the Red Cross and Red Crescent are a beacon of hope, then this assembly bears a great responsibility indeed: let us not forget the unique importance of the International Conference, which is the main multilateral forum for debating humanitarian issues and a unique meeting place for the Movement and the world's governments. For over a century, new ideas for the development of humanitarian law have emerged from the Conference, which has proposed means that seemed most appropriate for preventing or easing the suffering of millions of our fellows. Rising above conflicts and

differences of opinion, we must resolutely stand together and act as one lest we disappoint the hopes that have been placed in us.

It is the tradition at International Conferences for the President of the ICRC to give a report covering the period since the previous Conference. In the present case, however, the last Conference took place as long ago as 1986, since the one that was to have been held in Budapest in 1991 was cancelled at the last minute. It would take too long to present a systematic review of the various ways in which humanitarian law was either respected or, only too frequently, violated during those nine eventful years. Instead I should like to share a few thoughts which, I hope, will enable us to move forward together.

Some anniversaries are bound to evoke powerful memories. Much attention has already been paid to the events that are being commemorated this year, but how could I fail to mention the fact that the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is meeting 50 years after the world awoke from a nightmare? A deadly conflict which spread over a great part of the world, claiming millions of victims and leaving terrible scars, both physical and mental, on entire populations. At the heart of the nightmare was a plan to exterminate a whole people, together with other minorities, in a systematic and "industrial" way, simply because they existed. *A failure for democracy*, this has been called by some. A setback, indeed, for civilization itself. And also a setback for the Red Cross, which no doubt was thought to have more powers than it actually did, but which, despite the heroic exploits of some of its delegates, did not entirely escape the prevailing tendency to compromise.

Fifty years ago the first *atomic bombs* exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing instant devastation on an apocalyptic scale. For the first time in its history, mankind had acquired the ability to destroy itself and wipe out the heritage of all the civilizations to which it had given birth over thousands of years.

"Never again!" These were the words on everyone's lips in the immediate aftermath of the war. A number of ideas were to emerge from the trauma of the holocaust and the horrendous destruction caused by the conflict, and some of those ideas took root. Henceforth, it was decided, States would cooperate within the brand-new *United Nations Organization* so as to prevent any recurrence of the cataclysm. In the general euphoria, war itself was outlawed.

Pursuing aims that were both more modest and more realistic, the International Committee of the Red Cross set about having the four *Geneva Conventions of 1949* adopted by the international community. These Conventions took up and expanded texts dating back to the nineteenth century and reflecting universal humanitarian traditions. Since it seemed unlikely that war would be done away with once and for all, the Conventions sought to ensure that certain basic

principles of humanity would be respected even in the heat of battle. To keep pace with the changing times, the legal provisions they contained were reaffirmed and supplemented in 1977 by two *Additional Protocols*.

Looking back — since that is what anniversaries are for — how should we assess the results of all these efforts? I would not venture to say whether the world is on the whole a better or a worse place than it was half a century ago. Scientific progress has substantially improved the health and living conditions of many people across the globe. The decolonization process has been completed. And the Cold War, which split the world in two so soon after the end of the Second World War, is now a thing of the past.

However, there is little cause for self-congratulation: *from 1945 to the present, 22 million people have died in more than 120 conflicts*. Moreover, mankind is faced with new challenges: *the deterioration of the natural environment* has assumed alarming proportions in many countries; *rural depopulation* and *urban poverty* are still on the increase; a number of major *epidemic diseases* have recently reappeared; and, in the poorest countries, millions of people have no guarantee that their most basic rights, including the right to a decent life, will be respected. *These people have no access to education or health care*, and cannot look forward to seeing their lives or even those of their children improve. As we enter the age of virtual reality, paper economy and information highways, it is worth remembering that the chasm between the developed world and an ever-growing proportion of the planet's population is widening daily. Unless we take care, this glaring disparity will be the cause of tomorrow's conflicts.

The years that have elapsed since the last Conference have seen sweeping changes and radical breaks with the past. The Cold War is over, and with it the balance of terror. Now we have entered a rather indefinable period in which the parameters have changed and we have no familiar landmarks. All options are open, any path can be taken, but no obvious course lies ahead. It is hardly surprising that at a time of political crisis humanitarian values should go by the board and well-established principles be called into question. However, let us not forget the immense surge of hope that arose when the division of the world into two antagonistic blocs, opposed in every respect, came to an end: indeed, there was reason to believe that the world would now move in the direction of greater unity, humanity and solidarity.

I welcome the *favourable developments* that have come about in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and South Africa — a country that has recently rejoined the international community after having peacefully brought to an end the unjust system of apartheid; in Latin America, and here I am thinking of El Salvador; and in Cambodia, as far as the continent of Asia is concerned. There are also grounds for optimism in regard to the

Arab-Israeli conflict, a situation in which former foes have established relations that we hope will be constructive, and to Northern Ireland, where violence has given way to dialogue. Progress has been made in other parts of the world as well.

Yet, alongside these encouraging events, a multitude of *tragic situations* remain unresolved, pointless suffering and wanton destruction continue unabated, and many *new crises* loom on the horizon. As I speak, *more than 30 conflicts* are raging around the globe: power struggles, territorial disputes, ethnic and religious strife. All these situations require the best efforts of the ICRC and of numerous National Societies.

Everyone knows about these conflicts and I do not intend to list them all here. However, 16 years after the *dreadful events in Cambodia*, where a whole people was decimated far from the media spotlight, how can I fail to mention what took place in *Rwanda*? Once again, horror knew no bounds, but this time, appalled, we were able to watch it happen on our television screens, those mirrors of so much barbarity and depravity. In *Rwanda*, the ICRC was alone. Its delegates were able to save a few thousand lives, but could do nothing to halt the carnage all around them. Nor can I keep silent about what I saw in *Sarajevo*, in the midst of those terrifying events that have cast a pall over a large part of what used to be *Yugoslavia* — the “*land of the southern Slavs*” — now a land of infamy, grief and sorrow where increasingly bitter resentment has taken root in people’s hearts. Finally, how can I not speak of the upheavals and human tragedies that ensued from *the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*? Or of those in *Afghanistan*, a martyred nation where fighting among warlords is still causing suffering, or of those in *Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan and Sierra Leone*... It would take too long to mention all the countries in which the events taking place at this very moment are deplorable evidence of man’s inhumanity to man.

While it is true that war is made up of countless individual incidents that are impossible to foresee, in the current political turmoil the demagogic voice of racism and xenophobia is fanning strife and passion all over the world, with the results we know only too well. First among them is the revolting policy of “*ethnic cleansing*” — a hideous term that is the very embodiment of hatred and rejection.

Let it be said: what we have seen in recent years is nothing short of *barbarity*, and a return to methods that everyone had thought belonged to the dim and distant past. The pace of events is constantly accelerating, one brutal act leads to another, and violence has reached a level far beyond anything we have seen in a long time.

Moreover, in many of the new conflicts that have broken out since the end of the Cold War there has been an upsurge in predatory and lawless behaviour,

and war and banditry have become inextricably linked. Until recently, in situations where a government was pitted against a rebel movement, both sides usually had structured and organized armed forces pursuing identifiable ideologies and goals and more or less coherent military objectives. Today we are faced with quite different situations, in which the "belligerents" are often very young and poorly organized. While the ideologies and objectives involved in many conflicts are generally difficult to define, at first glance it would seem that the chief aim is to *destroy the other side*, whether for racial, religious, nationalistic or economic reasons. Front lines no longer exist, and *the traditional and vital distinction between combatants and non-combatants*, which is the very cornerstone of humanitarian law, *is all too seldom recognized*.

Such conflicts are dominated by local interests; there is no clear chain of command and the most basic standards of humane behaviour are often flouted. What we see is a total *breakdown of State structures*, with a proliferation of warring parties all acting on their own account, not to speak of the multitude of armed groups answerable to no apparent authority and the hidden snipers who take innocent civilians as their targets. Civil war and ethnic strife sweep across vast areas where chaos and anarchy prevail. Moreover, there is far less scope for exerting outside influence to put an end to such conflicts and to find political settlements.

For the humanitarian organizations, operating in such contexts has become highly dangerous, and also very frustrating. The hazards involved are aggravated by the *proliferation of weapons* and the flourishing arms market, which is as accessible to armed bands and fringe groups as it is to the military. This massive and unsupervised flow of weapons, still fed by the vast stocks which were built up during the Cold War and are now often looted, can fan tensions until they erupt into fully-fledged armed conflicts.

If one considers that, by the nature of its mandate, *the volume of the ICRC's activities* constitutes a sort of barometer of the state of the world, it is interesting to note that between 1987 and 1993 the institution's total expenditure soared from less than 300 million Swiss francs to more than 800 million. During the same period the value of the relief supplies it distributed increased fivefold and the number of its staff almost doubled.

Faced with such widespread violence, humanitarian law has proved its sterling worth amidst all the fire and the passion. Throughout the conflicts in which we have deployed our full range of activities, the Geneva Conventions, in particular Article 3 common to all four of them and applicable to non-international armed conflict, and their Additional Protocols have rendered and continue to render invaluable services in providing legal protection for war victims. Nevertheless, we have also witnessed innumerable *violations* of the

Conventions and of basic humanitarian principles, leading to unspeakable suffering and grief which could have been avoided if the laws and customs of war had been respected. Another effect, and not the least, of all these violations and their extremely grave consequences is to make the restoration of peace much more difficult. Such occurrences do not stem from any shortcomings in the humanitarian rules; they reflect a lack of willingness to respect those rules and even in many cases a disturbing contempt for the elementary principles of humanity.

Murder, torture, degrading treatment and arbitrary detention, often in conditions of extreme deprivation, have been the lot of countless victims. *The taking of hostages*, in violation of a basic rule of humanitarian law, has assumed alarming proportions. *The family unit*, the cornerstone of any society, has been seriously endangered by the calamities that befall the civilian population; with increasing frequency families are split up and people have to live with the anguish of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones. *Women* are often among the first victims of such situations, and we are horrified by the practice of rape used as a method of warfare. *Children*, the most vulnerable of all, are often marked for life by what they have endured. Their lives fall apart when they see their parents killed and their homes destroyed before their very eyes. Children are also indoctrinated and encouraged to take part in the violence. These youngsters, taken away from their families at a tender age, know no law but that of the gun. Some boys are already war veterans at fifteen; *these child soldiers* represent a tragedy for humanity that, far from being eradicated, is spreading.

The mass population movements that we thought were a thing of the past are with us again: several sources put the number of refugees in the world at more than 23 million, and the number of displaced people at over 29 million.

The use of certain methods and means of warfare is another area where the consequences are increasingly dramatic. Every year more than 20,000 people, many of them children, are killed or maimed by *anti-personnel landmines*. The ICRC's medical teams are surrounded by the anguished cries of those who have had a limb mangled or a relative killed by these instruments of blind terror. I invite you to think about the fact that, according to the United Nations, there are currently more than one hundred million landmines already laid in 64 countries.

Other causes for concern are attacks on essential public services, in particular *water supply systems*, which are very often damaged either deliberately or as an incidental effect of the hostilities. In some conflicts denial of access to water is used as a fearsome and particularly cruel weapon, large cities being left without water for long periods. Moreover, for lack of supplies or because the infrastructure has been destroyed and qualified staff have fled, *health services* are paralysed and the population has no means of protection against infectious diseases.

Then again there are *terrorist attacks*, which strike blindly at defenceless innocents. Such acts must be condemned without reservation, for they are a negation of the most basic humanitarian principles. On the other hand, it is unacceptable for governments to denounce their opponents as *terrorists* out of hand, so as to deny them their right to humane treatment when they are captured or arrested.

The balance of terror, sustained by the prodigious arms stocks of which we are only too well aware, nevertheless gave rise to a number of measures under international law to limit the indiscriminate effects of some terrifying developments in *weapons technology*. Such was the case, for example, with regard to chemical and biological weapons. As for *nuclear weapons*, which are a denial of all life and thus of all humanitarian action, suffice it to say that the dire threat they represent has increased because they are falling into all sorts of unauthorized hands during the current period of geopolitical upheaval.

That being said, at a time when genocide can be perpetrated with nothing more than machetes, perhaps the debate on methods and means of combat should not be our primary concern. I am convinced that what we are now facing is *a human problem*. Why, we may well ask, has the progress achieved thanks to human intelligence not enabled us to put an end to barbarity? The answer is that violence is part of human nature, and progress on the moral level has not kept up with scientific and technological advances.

In these circumstances, we must breathe new life into humanitarian law. The infinitely tragic plight of war victims demands that the Conference find responses to the major issues I have raised today. On the eve of the third millennium, I expect a commitment on the part of governments to work with our Movement so that together we can rise to the challenge of Louis Pasteur: "*The future belongs to he who does most for suffering humanity*".

First and foremost we must close the gap between *moral progress* and scientific and technological advances. By promoting a new sense of *solidarity worldwide*, we must restore *tolerance and respect for others* to their proper place and create among ourselves an awareness of our *collective responsibility*. In view of the dangers looming over mankind, it is essential that we *rebuild the system of values that lies at the heart of the Red Cross and Red Crescent ideal: the rights of victims, the right to receive assistance, and respect for humanitarian endeavour*.

It must be borne in mind that modern humanitarian law has its origins in a century that saw the predominance of the Nation State, and thus reflects a community torn by international conflict. Today, however, most conflicts are taking place within State borders. *The basic problem therefore is to ensure respect*

for humanitarian law in internal armed conflicts. To this end, States must be convinced that they are not the only ones concerned by the law. Above and beyond inter-State relations and the mutual interest that prompts the parties to a conflict to comply with certain rules, *the law is intended to protect all victims*. No category of belligerent is exempted from meeting humanitarian obligations. Moreover, suffering is indivisible and it would be absurd, and indeed immoral, for a State to tolerate acts directed against its internal opponents, its own citizens, that would be prohibited in the event of an international conflict.

What is important is to rediscover the basic rules, such as Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions, which applies to internal conflicts and constitutes a sort of miniature Convention in its own right. These rules express principles that transcend cultural barriers and are common to all civilizations; no one would ever contest them. "You must not do ill to others, and you must not take life unless it is absolutely necessary", declared Buddha. "The perfect man is the one who is most helpful to others", says the Koran. "Enemies taken prisoner in the course of a war must not be killed; on the contrary we must treat them like our own children", affirms the Mahabharata, echoing a Kenyan proverb: "When you are the victor you must not crush the vanquished". And in the words of St James: "Faith without works is dead". These ideas are simple, clear and just; they apply to everyone.

In recent years, at the United Nations General Assembly, in the Security Council and in the Commission on Human Rights, in regional organizations such as the Organization of African Unity, the Organization of American States, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, within the Non-Aligned Movement and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, increasingly frequent references have been made to international humanitarian law. The States you represent have clearly and repeatedly expressed their determination to see the texts they have ratified applied in practice. The ICRC for its part can only welcome the States' resolve to mobilize in favour of respect for the law and in defence of the victims.

To give this apparent community of interests and sentiments an opportunity to express itself in a practical and constructive manner, the Swiss Government, acting on the initiative of the ICRC, convened *the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims* which was held in Geneva in August/September 1993. The event was quite a success, and proved to be extremely useful as a forum for preparing the present International Conference. The 1993 Conference's Final Declaration concluded, in substance, that *jus est ars boni et aequi*: *"We confirm our conviction that, by preserving a spirit of humanity in the midst of armed conflicts, international humanitarian law keeps open the way to reconciliation, facilitates the restoration of peace between the belligerents, and fosters harmony*

between all peoples". The recommendations of the *Intergovernmental Group of Experts* set up at the Conference's request will be examined by Commission I and, I trust, accepted.

With *186 States now party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions*, the treaties can be considered as practically universal in scope. The same cannot yet be said, however, for the *1977 Additional Protocols*. Indeed, to date only *141 States* are party to *Protocol I*, which relates to international armed conflicts, and *132 to Protocol II*, which relates to non-international armed conflicts. This state of affairs is difficult to accept more than 18 years after the signing of the two treaties. The ICRC has made every possible effort to have the Protocols universally recognized. In view of the barbarity we are witnessing today, I must say in all conscience, on behalf of the victims, that the time has come for every State that has not yet done so to ratify or accede to the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions. *After all, respect for international humanitarian law depends to a large extent on its universality.*

Becoming party to the treaties of international humanitarian law is a first step which is naturally important but is not enough. The States that you represent have pledged, under the terms of Article 1 common to the four Geneva Conventions, not only to respect but also *to ensure respect* for the provisions of those Conventions in all circumstances. This is an obligation of universal solidarity vis-à-vis *all war victims*. The victims' right to receive assistance and protection, whoever they are and wherever they may be, this inalienable right laid down by law, therefore concerns each and every one of us.

If rules are to be applied, they must be known. *The dissemination of humanitarian law, "to include the study thereof in (...) programmes of military and, if possible, civil instruction, so that the principles thereof may become known to all [the] armed forces and to the entire population"*, as stipulated in Article 127 of the Third Geneva Convention, is an essential precondition for compliance with its provisions. The States party to the treaties cannot evade this fundamental obligation. The Intergovernmental Group of Experts discussed means of stepping up dissemination activities, and called on the ICRC to cooperate with other bodies in that area. This form of cooperation, which the ICRC is ready to develop, and the crucial role that every National Society must play in this regard will be examined by Commission I.

To encourage and provide support for efforts made by States in the sphere of implementation and dissemination, the ICRC has already set up a unit to offer *Advisory Services in international humanitarian law*. This is in response to the request made by the Group of Experts in its Recommendation III. The States, and of course the National Societies and any other interested body, are invited to make wide use of these services and thus to contribute to their success.

Recommendation VII of the Group of Experts asks States, among other things, to “*act, jointly or individually, in situations of serious violations of international humanitarian law in cooperation with the United Nations and in conformity with the United Nations Charter*”. Indeed, what is the use of rules and principles, and what can be the practical impact of the law that embodies them, if they can be violated with impunity? Apart from the *collective responsibility* of the States party to the Conventions, there is the *individual responsibility* of those who have to apply the provisions of humanitarian law or see that they are applied. It must be made perfectly clear that criminals will be punished. I should like to point out that the Geneva Conventions enjoin the States party *to search for, prosecute and try* persons accused of having committed or having issued orders to commit any of the grave breaches listed in the Conventions, as an obligation of solidarity. In this connection, the *international tribunals* set up to prosecute the large-scale violations of international humanitarian law and human rights committed in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda offer the prospect of putting an end to the reign of impunity. The ICRC earnestly hopes that an *international criminal court* with worldwide jurisdiction will also be established. Allow me to emphasize, however, that *judicial measures are complementary to humanitarian action, and that the two should not be confused*. Indeed, humanitarian organizations cannot act as judges and certainly not as prosecutors.

Some States have not yet made the declaration accepting the competence of the *International Fact-Finding Commission* provided for in Protocol I to enquire into any allegations of grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions or of the Protocol. These States may nevertheless use the services of the Commission. It is at their disposal in particular to open an enquiry, with the consent of the parties concerned, in the event of serious violations of international law in the context of non-international armed conflicts. Why then is such a possibility not put to use?

Earlier I mentioned the tragedies caused by widespread use of *anti-personnel mines*, and I think what I had to say was quite clear: this carnage must stop! There is only one way of achieving this end, and that is to impose a total ban on the production, stockpiling, transfer and use of landmines. The few military advantages they offer are in no way commensurate with the terrible effects they have on civilians. We can only hope that when the Vienna Conference resumes next January the discussions will be open-minded and far-sighted enough to break the current deadlock regarding *Protocol II to the 1980 United Nations Weapons Convention*. On the other hand, we welcome the adoption of a *fourth Protocol* to that Convention banning *blinding laser weapons*. This is the first time since the 1868 Declaration of St Petersburg, which prohibited exploding bullets, that it has been possible to ban a weapon before it has been used. I trust that the States represented here will become party to the new Protocol without delay.

I also mentioned the devastating effects of a phenomenon which has grown steadily ever since the end of the Cold War: *the proliferation of weapons*, especially light weapons, which seem to be available in unlimited quantities all over the world. The danger is that all these weapons, which can often be had for a nominal sum, will become perfectly commonplace objects. This must not be allowed to happen! These death-dealing devices must be strictly controlled, with due regard to moral principles. The ICRC is deeply concerned by this matter and, in response to a recommendation of the Group of Experts and in close cooperation with the other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, *intends to examine the link between arms transfers and violations of international humanitarian law.*

After these considerations regarding legal provisions and problems of application of international humanitarian law, the time has come to review the humanitarian action carried out by the ICRC, the National Societies and their Federation in accordance with their respective mandates. Nowadays the term "*humanitarian action*" is given a wide range of meanings. Indeed, a large part of the response to conflict situations is currently labelled "*humanitarian*": military peace-keeping units engage in humanitarian operations; governments conduct their own humanitarian activities directly, through operational government structures and under their national flags. In some cases, such as that of Somalia, operations blazoned as humanitarian have gone astray. To me, this bandying about of the term "*humanitarian*" seems to reflect increasing uncertainty and confusion about roles and responsibilities within the international community. Some clarification is therefore needed.

Everything points to the fact that international control mechanisms have not yet adapted to the realities of today's conflicts, in which anarchy and chaos prevail to a vastly greater degree than was the case during the Cold War period. In this new context humanitarian agencies, and also politicians and generals, have no clear points of reference. Governments seem to find it difficult, if not impossible, to reach a realistic consensus on political or military options or operations. A humanitarian operation offers the opportunity to act and thus to fill the vacuum. This type of activism serves to ease the pressure brought to bear on governments by the media and public opinion, but in fact all it does is perpetuate the ambiguity relating to the respective mandates of the various players on the international scene.

I wish to reaffirm in the strongest terms that *humanitarian action must be conducted in parallel with political or military action. It must not and cannot be a substitute for the latter.* If it is used as an extension of foreign policy, often prompted by internal political motivations, it is divested of the *neutrality* which should be its essential attribute. Ultimately humanitarian action loses its identity and can even become the target of armed attacks.

*The integrated approach whereby political, military and humanitarian activities are launched in response to today's emergency situations could, by means of the synergy created among the different players, increase the international community's effectiveness without there being any need for additional resources. This is the right approach, I feel, for *conflict prevention*: preventive diplomacy, economic aid, development aid, humanitarian assistance and the deployment of military observers can contribute significantly to stabilizing situations which might otherwise degenerate. The same type of synergy can come into play in the *post-conflict phase*, when peace must be consolidated, reconstruction work begun and, in many cases, humanitarian activities conducted for the most needy.*

But I am convinced *that the integrated approach is not appropriate during the acute phase of a conflict*. At this stage humanitarian work focuses on the immediate effects of the crisis and cannot take political or military problems into account. To be effective, what we need is *a neutral and impartial humanitarian approach and room for independent humanitarian action*, without any political motivation, so that we can reach *all the victims* with the consent of all the parties. In such situations, only truly independent, neutral and impartial organizations like the ICRC can reach those in need of assistance and protection. Indeed, the States were fully aware of this when they drew up and signed the Geneva Conventions, which stipulate *the neutral and impartial nature of humanitarian action*.

For the sake of efficiency, should we not concentrate on *the special skills of the different entities* working in present-day conflict situations, each acting according to its own competence? In my opinion there is a pressing need to put an end to the confusion currently prevailing in this regard. The respective responsibilities of the humanitarian agencies and of politicians, generals and judges must be defined more clearly.

The growing magnitude of the task before us and the proliferation of agencies make it more necessary than ever to strengthen the process of consultation and cooperation among the various organizations involved in humanitarian work. Within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, it is the ICRC's role to coordinate humanitarian operations in situations of armed conflict. Both with the components of the Movement and with its other partners in the field, the ICRC engages in this permanent consultation process in a spirit of openness, complementarity and solidarity, with due respect for each entity's specific mandate.

When a conflict breaks out, the ICRC is often the only organization on the spot. There are two reasons for this: first, its presence in all the world's troubled areas through its network of delegations; and secondly, its rapid response to crises. When other agencies arrive, the ICRC initiates a process of cooperation in behalf of the victims, who are usually too numerous and whose needs are too

great for it to cope with alone. Through cooperation and complementarity, an effort must be made to improve *the planning of humanitarian action in terms of time and space*. The concentration of agencies in the same theatres of operations, spotlighted by the media, then their withdrawal without any gradual progression to reconstruction and development programmes, are examples of poor coordination and planning, and it is the victims who pay the price.

Agencies specializing in emergency operations and those more concerned with reconstruction and development programmes must come to an arrangement among themselves: the former must prepare the way for the latter to take over. This kind of ordered progression is essential if we are to help the victims to regain their dignity and their self-sufficiency as rapidly as possible. The ICRC feels that it is unacceptable to simply abandon them; *assistance programmes must be carried through to the end*. Indeed, this is one of the strengths of our Movement, since its component parts can relay each other and thus ensure the continuity of humanitarian action. More important than assistance itself is *the way in which it is provided*, to my way of thinking. Assistance must make a contribution to *protection*, to upholding the dignity and integrity of the individual. Moreover, far from focusing on certain categories of beneficiaries or on a certain activity, the ICRC's work, conducted more and more often in cooperation with National Societies, is multidimensional. It encompasses all victims: the sick and wounded, prisoners, displaced persons, women and children, the elderly, and members of dispersed families.

The ICRC's mandate is *to help all victims of all conflicts*. It cannot act in accordance with priorities set by its donors if they are not prompted by humanitarian considerations. The ICRC is an independent organization which takes action in all situations where human beings are suffering at the hands of their fellows. *The financing* of its operations is a secondary consideration. The institution does not intend to change that approach, which is not without risk. Any change — putting financial security before action - would hamper its services to victims, and this is unacceptable. To maintain this policy we must be able to count on financial support in the future, as we have done in the past. Here, on behalf of all conflict victims, I should like to express my warmest thanks to the generous donors — governments, National Societies and private individuals — who in recent years have enabled the ICRC to discharge its mandate and meet ever-growing needs, and urge them not to slacken their efforts at this difficult time when funds are often hard to come by. I earnestly hope that the governments will not force us to abandon the victims by cutting back on their funding of our activities.

Emergency operations often attract considerable media attention. In countries at war, the media can be excellent means of promoting moral values and

humanitarian principles. But they can also engage in political manipulation and distort facts, sometimes going so far as to fan hatred and incite to murder. Elsewhere, the media limelight focused on certain conflicts can have favourable effects, such as drawing attention to human distress which would otherwise go unnoticed. Yet the influence of the media on public opinion and the resulting pressure on governments can be weakened when the audience becomes accustomed to violence and pictures and accounts of atrocities become daily fare. Moreover, the fact that only a few conflicts are in the headlines at any given time means that others sink into oblivion. Media interest is very selective. Who still wants to know about Afghanistan, Sri Lanka or Liberia? Audiences have grown tired of them and so they have been consigned to oblivion. Meanwhile *the victims of these forgotten conflicts* suffer no less, in body and in mind, amidst general indifference as the world tunes in to the story of the day.

Implementation of international humanitarian law is a matter for the entire Movement. The magnitude of humanitarian needs has led the Movement to adapt and to strengthen its components while reaffirming its *Fundamental Principles*, proclaimed 30 years ago in Vienna. We are thus celebrating another particularly symbolic anniversary today. The Principles, of which the ICRC is the acknowledged guardian, are more than ever the cement that holds the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement together and provide the guidelines for its action. All of us — the National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC — are duty bound to apply them to the letter. For the ICRC, with its specific mandate to work for the victims of armed conflict, the principles of *neutrality, impartiality and independence* are crucial. The governments which approved the Movement's Statutes have to respect at all times the obligation of all its components to observe the Fundamental Principles.

As I stressed earlier, *the principle of independence* is an essential asset for our work. It enables us to preserve the rapidity and efficiency of our operations in behalf of all victims of armed conflict, for the ICRC in particular, and of all vulnerable people, whatever the cause of their plight, for the Movement in general. The material support a government may offer its country's National Society should not be seen as a form of supervision. Just as the ICRC and the Federation refuse to be used as instruments of international politics, a National Society can in no way become a political instrument for its government. The Movement's various components must also bear the principle of independence in mind in the relations they may establish with other organizations within the wider concept of humanitarian cooperation and consultation that I mentioned previously.

Times change and with them the focus of humanitarian needs; with courage and imagination we must constantly adapt our activities to the realities of the

day. In a world where political action aimed at preventing or resolving crises is sadly inadequate and military operations do nothing to promote *tolerance*, the role of the Movement — stronger and more united through the specific but complementary activities of each of its components — is more essential than ever. Essential in emergency and reconstruction work, naturally, but also in *preventive action*. By actively combating all forms of hatred, fanaticism, racism and exclusion we can do more, on the international level as well as that of every country represented here, *to promote the value of tolerance*, which alone can spare coming generations from evils even greater than those we are witnessing today. For tolerance implies subscribing to certain standards of civilization and culture, an *art of living* in the sense of coexisting on a daily basis and observing recognized and accepted principles, based on listening and dialogue.

To respond to the vast challenges I have outlined, the objective of this Conference, which prolongs the positive momentum created by the 1993 Conference for the Protection of War Victims, *must be to ensure that humanitarian action is universally recognized and respected*. As the expression of a common and long-term resolve, I invite you to subscribe to *a new contract of humanity*, whereby States and the entire international community undertake to give their unreserved support to efforts aimed at applying international humanitarian law. This implies, among other things:

- *speeding up the process of ratification of the existing instruments of humanitarian law;*
- *intensifying efforts to disseminate the law;*
- *reaffirming that it is unacceptable that rules applicable in international conflicts should not apply in internal conflicts and, hence, applying and ensuring the application of Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions;*
- *doing everything possible, in the event of violations of international humanitarian law, to remedy the situation, in the spirit of Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 9 of Protocol I, and imposing penal sanctions on those who commit grave breaches of the law, as stipulated in the Conventions.*

To put an end to the current confusion with regard to the respective roles of humanitarian agencies, political bodies and the military, and to make it easier to protect and bring aid to victims, *States have the duty to preserve a space for humanitarian action which will guarantee the neutrality, impartiality and independence of such action.*

The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent meets only every four or five years. The ICRC therefore supports Recommendation VII of

the Intergovernmental Group of Experts, which proposes, inter alia, that *the depositary of the Geneva Conventions organize periodic meetings of the States party*. Such meetings, which would be complementary to the Conference and in harmony with its proceedings, could only be conducive to the maintenance and strengthening of the dialogue within the international community on general problems relating to the application of international humanitarian law.

For my part, I know that we are inspired by the same conviction and that we are capable of fulfilling the terms of the new contract of humanity I have the honour to propose to you today. On behalf of the victims, I thank you for your commitment. In the final analysis, the principle that counts for the Red Cross and Red Crescent is that every human being is responsible for the suffering of his fellows.
