

COMMISSION II

HUMANITARIAN VALUES AND RESPONSE TO CRISIS

Commission II met under the chairmanship of Mr Ousmane Diagne, President of the Senegalese Red Cross, to discuss humanitarian values and response to crisis. Representatives of the Federation and the ICRC began the proceedings by introducing the topics outlined in two documents entitled "Principles and response in international humanitarian assistance and protection" and "Strengthening capacity to assist and protect the most vulnerable" (Docs. 95/C.II/2/1 and 95/C.II/3/1 respectively).

In her capacity as Vice-President of the Federation, Lady Limerick, Chairman of the British Red Cross, spoke of the tragic plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons throughout the world; she stressed the need for the Movement to establish appropriate operational relations with States and international organizations and mentioned the quality and the openness of operations conducted by the components of the Movement, as reflected in the Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief. A concern to set high standards of professional conduct and practice for humanitarian action was also reflected in the Code of Conduct for the Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. In conclusion, she underlined the need to minimize the harmful effects of economic sanctions, and the importance of providing support for National Societies and promoting their development on both the national and the international level.

Mr Eric Roethlisberger, Vice-President of the ICRC, recalled the major work done by the ICRC on behalf of persons displaced within their own countries, a task which always formed part of broader action to assist all the victims of a conflict. In a fast-evolving global environment where humanitarian concerns were increasingly entangled with political, military and economic considerations, it was vital that the Movement's operations should continue to be guided by the Fundamental Principles, particularly those of neutrality, impartiality and independence. The Code of Conduct

sought to strengthen the professional nature and the credibility of humanitarian action. As to the complex and sensitive issue of economic sanctions, the ICRC had noted an increasing necessity to make a careful analysis of their effects while never losing sight of the need to alleviate the suffering of victims.

Mr Roethlisberger urged States to support their National Societies so as to enable them to offer more effective assistance to the victims of conflicts and other disasters, and to especially vulnerable populations.

1. General issues

On a general note, the delegations reaffirmed the importance of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the humanitarian values it represented; they paid tribute to the action of the various components of the Movement and the dedication of their members and volunteers, particularly those who had sacrificed their lives for the humanitarian cause. Most of them also stressed the need to reaffirm the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, mentioning *inter alia* the vital role of education in the promotion of those principles and various measures conducive to the establishment of a humanitarian culture at the international level.

Many delegations raised the issue of the independence of humanitarian action. Several considered it essential that such action remain separate from and independent of political and military initiatives. In the field, too close a link between political, military and humanitarian measures could result in the politicization of humanitarian action, thereby compromising the Fundamental Principles and jeopardizing the safety of Red Cross and Red Crescent personnel.

A large number of governmental delegations asserted that political and humanitarian issues could not easily be separated. In their view, humanitarian action could not replace the political measures that governments had to take; political action was important in helping to prevent conflicts and reducing the need for humanitarian assistance.

The concerns expressed elicited a set of recommendations which are reflected in a draft resolution adopted by the Commission and later by the Conference (Resolution 4 G).

Delegates also spoke of the pressing need to avoid duplication of work among humanitarian organizations and to define relations between the

components of the Movement and other institutions, particularly United Nations agencies, with a view to ensuring the closest possible coordination.

Certain National Societies took the opportunity to highlight the unique and specific role of the Movement; they felt that the proliferation of humanitarian players addressed no need whatsoever but led instead to the squandering of increasingly limited resources.

2. Principles and action in international humanitarian assistance and protection

The debate on the above topic prepared the ground for Conference Resolution 4, which covered a number of subjects:

(a) Refugees and displaced persons

Several governmental and National Society representatives drew attention to the alarming increase in the flow of refugees and internally displaced persons caused by conflicts and other disasters.

Among other things, delegates called upon States "to ensure efficient and adequate access to internally displaced persons and refugees for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian organizations, (...) in particular the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, according to their respective mandates, so that they may provide protection and humanitarian assistance to those persons".

The components of the Movement were invited "to devise and apply innovative approaches to humanitarian response, including mechanisms for rapid action, based on effective mobilization and use of resources, which will enable them to provide timely and appropriate assistance for internally displaced persons and refugees, taking due account of the action of other humanitarian organizations".

The ICRC, the Federation and the National Societies were invited to pursue and encourage operational cooperation with the United Nations, particularly UNHCR, in a spirit of complementarity.

(b) Natural and technological disasters

The Movement was invited to become more alert to the risk of technological disasters and prepare for them accordingly, although preventive

measures, relief operations and the rehabilitation of victims were primarily a matter for governments.

(c) Principles and rules governing disaster relief operations

Delegates took note of the revised Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief and invited the components of the Movement to implement them.

Many delegations spoke of the need to incorporate long-term development criteria in humanitarian assistance, a move which implied strengthening the structures and operational capacities of beneficiary National Societies.

(d) Code of Conduct for the Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief

Delegates welcomed the Code of Conduct because its ethical principles encouraged relief organizations to observe a minimum of professional ethics and to direct their activities towards meeting the needs of victims.

(e) Humanitarian implications of economic sanctions

Several speakers referred to economic sanctions, all mentioning the need to consider their impact in humanitarian terms on the civilian populations affected, particularly the most vulnerable groups. States were therefore requested to authorize strictly humanitarian relief operations on behalf of those categories of persons. For their part the ICRC, the Federation and the National Societies were invited "to contribute to the reduction of the undesirable side-effects of sanctions on the humanitarian situation of civilian populations, through assessing the impact thereof and providing relief to the most vulnerable persons, in accordance with their respective mandates".

3. Strengthening national capacity to provide humanitarian and development assistance and protection to the most vulnerable

Commission II discussed the above topic at length and the Conference subsequently adopted Resolution 5 on the subject.

A large number of National Society delegations outlined their programmes and activities for assisting and protecting vulnerable groups. Some of those from developing countries spoke of the increasingly inadequate resources available to them for coping with ever-expanding needs.

Several requests were addressed to States, namely that they recognize the need to preserve the independence and autonomy of action of National Societies but also that they “make better use of the potential of National Societies as cost-effective providers of health care, social services and emergency assistance for the most vulnerable, and (...) recognize that National Societies will need to develop new ways, including systems of cost recovery, to fund work carried out in cooperation with the public authorities”.

States were also invited to grant National Societies financial and fiscal advantages, for example, and “to support the development of the global network of National Societies by providing adequate financial resources to development cooperation programmes in order to address the needs of the growing number of the most vulnerable populations, both in normal times and in times of disaster”.

The Commission, noting with satisfaction the efforts made by National Societies and the Federation with regard to institutional development, resources and programmes, called upon the Federation and the ICRC, in cooperation with National Societies, “to draw up a model law of recognition of a National Society suitable for adaptation to individual national requirements, and present it to the 27th International Conference”. Last but not least, the States concerned and the Federation, in cooperation with the ICRC, were invited to encourage the establishment and development in each country of an independent National Society meeting the statutory conditions for recognition and subsequent admission as a member of the Federation in cases where National Societies were not full members.

4. Final remarks

Following a presentation by the Rapporteur of a summary of the proceedings of the Commission, the representative of the Federation thanked delegates for the firm support and encouragement they had offered the Movement as a whole. He urged governments to give material backing to the support expressed for National Society development and

said he was gratified by the commitment made by governments to protect the integrity and independence of the National Societies. As for the Federation, it would do all in its power to secure approval of the Code of Conduct by all humanitarian organizations in order to improve the general quality of humanitarian assistance. The Federation supported the proposal by one government to set up a group of experts on the question of separating humanitarian, political and military issues. In its future activities the Federation would attach particular importance to efforts aimed at improving the situation of the most vulnerable, promoting human dignity and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Principles, and protecting the Movement's independence of action.

Lastly, the ICRC representative drew attention to the specifically neutral role played by the ICRC in conflicts and other situations of violence. The National Societies fulfilled a crucial function and it was vital to support their activities and to avoid duplication among different organizations which should be mutually complementary. The ICRC was prepared to accept the offer made by one government to set up a group of experts to reflect, in cooperation with the Federation, on the separation of humanitarian, political and military issues. The dissemination of humanitarian law was also a matter of considerable importance. In conclusion he, too, expressed concern about the effects of economic sanctions on the most vulnerable groups among the population.

Both representatives paid tribute to the Chairman of the Commission for his efficient conduct of its proceedings, and to the Rapporteur for his excellent services.