

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

“Mrs. Issa-el-Khoury is the incarnation of a long tradition of devoted and heroic work in the service of the Lebanese Red Cross. A member of the Central Committee of the Lebanese Red Cross since 1951, she succeeded her mother as President of that Society. She has also been Vice-President of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross.

Under her leadership the Lebanese Red Cross has been able to regain and maintain a truly unique position of impartiality and humanitarian spirit, which is respected by all the parties to the tragic conflict in Lebanon. Her complete devotion to the Red Cross mission, her courage and endurance in a climate of permanent danger and anxiety have made her someone to whom very few Red Cross leaders can be compared.

The Standing Commission would like to pay a very special tribute to her remarkable personal qualities which she has demonstrated time and time again in exceptional circumstances at the risk of her life.”

With these words Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh, at that time Chairman of the Standing Commission, awarded the Henry Dunant Medal to Mrs. Alexandra Issa-el-Khoury, President of the Lebanese Red Cross, at the meeting of the Council of Delegates held on 6 November 1981 in Manila.

Ever since, this great lady of the Red Cross has continued her untiring efforts to alleviate suffering and save lives without fear or favour in a country rent by a ruthless war.

On the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Review has special pleasure in publishing an article received from the President of the Lebanese Red Cross.

This message comes from the heart. Simply and directly, it conveys Mrs. Issa-el-Khoury's admiration and respect for the invaluable work—

much of it humble and unnoticed—of her colleagues, of the first-aid teams, of Red Cross Youth, always in the forefront of the battle, always doing more than their duty. She speaks so feelingly, with such unshakable confidence in the Fundamental Principles of the Movement and with such faith in the future, that no-one can fail to be moved by her words.

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Lebanese Red Cross: Caught up in the maelstrom

October 1965: At the XXth International Conference of the Red Cross in Vienna the delegates stood and listened in deep silence to the solemn proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, which they subsequently adopted unanimously in a storm of applause. I swore then that I would be faithful to those Principles for the whole of my Red Cross life. It seemed easy enough at the time; it was only what Red Cross workers had been doing ever since the Red Cross was founded.

Who could have foreseen what was to come?

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April 1975: It was then that what we Lebanese call the “other peoples’ war” began in our country. I have no intention of describing these tragic years; I simply wish to tell from my own experience what the Red Cross means, 125 years after its foundation, to anyone who believes in humanity.

We are riding the storm, holding aloft like a shield our Principles, the Geneva Conventions, international humanitarian law, and human rights. In all its branches and regional sections across the country the entire Lebanese Red Cross works with equal courage and compassion.

In 1975 the first armed clashes took place between the Lebanese army and the Palestinian organizations. For the first time we had to preserve Red Cross neutrality. Although it was an auxiliary to the army medical services, the Red Cross was also bound by the principle of humanity to help both sides. And this is what it did, with the unflinching

aid of the delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross. When hostilities first broke out our impartiality was called into question by each in turn of the numerous factions that sprang up in the field; but as time went on they all recognized that when they needed the Red Cross it was there to alleviate their suffering.

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May 1988: We were given striking proof of this when the national television corporation Télé-Liban donated a day of television coverage—a real marathon from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.—to the Lebanese Red Cross, to mark the 125th anniversary of the Movement and the start of our fund-raising campaign. We were deeply moved by the public's fervent response all over the country. Young people were wildly enthusiastic, breaking open their piggy banks, wanting to join our ranks, telephoning to ask us questions about the Red Cross. Many people came forward to say that the Red Cross had saved them from all sorts of dangers.

It is a consoling thought for the future of our country to see more and more young people coming to join our Movement, either in first-aid teams or as members of Red Cross Youth. They are dedicating themselves to the relief of suffering with admirable devotion. Night and day they are at everybody's services, proud to feel that their Red Cross flag gets them through all the road blocks and battle lines to transport the wounded and sick, help overworked medical staff in hospitals, collect and distribute blood, and look after displaced persons, old women and children. For so many days and nights the Red Cross was alone in being able to move about freely and bring help. All of us, the Central Committee, the Regional Committees, nurses, social workers, blood banks and volunteers of all kinds, work in one and the same spirit of humanity irrespective of ideology, politics or religious differences. Everybody can turn to the Red Cross at any time in emergency. It has never let them down.

In a country ravaged as ours has been (and, alas! still is) the need for a Red Cross and what it stands for is all the more obvious.

And we in the Red Cross keep on planning, organizing seminars, attending international conferences and working for peace.

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To give you just an idea of our team work, take the three weeks starting on 6 May 1988. The southern suburbs of Beirut was ablaze.

Fierce house-to-house fighting was going on in the streets. It was a war to the death. Our first-aid teams were by then very efficient, experienced and highly trained. Yet again they proved that their motto "Beyond the call of duty" was no empty phrase. They managed to get 177 wounded to hospital, and gave on-the-spot treatment to 250 people.

Red Cross Youth rose to the occasion at once. It set up posts at hospital entrances, where its teams carried patients from ambulances to emergency rooms. They looked after children who had lost their parents in the turmoil, they collected blood of rare blood groups, they gave all the help they possibly could to the overworked medical staff.

The Social Service looked after the displaced persons who were fleeing from their homes under bombardment and through fires. It recorded their identity and gave them food and care: 1,349 families—something like 10,000 people—were given Red Cross aid.

Red Cross blood banks were ready day and night to receive donors and collect blood for the hospitals. The Dispensing Service distributed what medicaments it could where they were needed.

And all the time the Information Service was using the media to keep the public informed about the work being done.

People were killed in their homes and in the streets by indiscriminate shelling of residential quarters. Car bombs exploded in front of hospitals or next to market gardens, killing or wounding hundreds of innocent victims. Chance passers-by were killed in street fighting. Little was spared us. But in spite of everything the people of Lebanon want to live on. They are sick of the murderous battles being fought by others on our soil. Everyone looks on the Red Cross as a refuge and an oasis of stability in an unstable country.

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My mind is teeming with memories, but what is done cannot be undone and we are working for the future. Our faith in our people, in our destiny, is unshaken and makes us hope for better times. Throughout this ordeal the presence of the International Committee of the Red Cross and its generous aid have been an immense help to us, an immense moral support. The same is true of many friendly National Societies.

My country wants to live on in freedom and independence. The Red Cross too will live on; it will always be an institution unique of its kind anywhere in the world, and will be more and more of a necessity.

Sursum corda! Lift up your hearts!

Alexandra Issa-el-Khoury
President of the Lebanese Red Cross
