

Opening message
to the Second World Red Cross and Red Crescent
Conference on Peace

by **Alexandre Hay, President of the ICRC**

As we get down to the work of this Conference, I would like to say how grateful the International Committee of the Red Cross is for the opportunity of sharing with the whole Red Cross and Red Crescent movement a few general thoughts on the theme of peace and more particularly on the contribution to peace which may be expected of the ICRC.

What could be more natural than our movement's passionate concern for everything that has to do with peace? The tragedies experienced at first hand by numerous National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies at the side of the victims of so many conflicts throughout the world cannot fail to move us and activate our good will. A great many of you here today come from countries where war is still raging. We know that the fervour which you bring to your task of helping the victims of those conflicts is also an expression of your will towards and hope for peace, commensurate with the tragedies you have experienced.

What could be more normal for the ICRC than to perceive every one of its own actions as a moment of peace in the turmoil of conflict? As the sadly privileged witness of so many wars since the battle of Solferino, the ICRC sees in the respect accorded to non-combatants a reaffirmation of the dignity of man, the defence of which is the first condition for any lasting peace.

As is stated in the first fundamental Red Cross principle, "the Red Cross promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples". Such peace is firmly based on reconciliation, on a spirit of peace, to which our movement more than

any other can contribute, especially if it is willing to set the example within itself.

It was thus that peace was defined by our movement nine years ago in Belgrade—as a genuine peace based not on domination by force or threats but, above all, on respect for human rights, on an equitable distribution of resources and on the peaceful settlement of disputes. At Belgrade the Red Cross movement recalled that many millions of men and women had died for these ideals, giving their lives for true peace. Similar sacrifices are still being made today by people who believe that their own lives are not all-important and that they should be used in service of a just and lasting peace.

However, our movement has not only made its standpoint known on the nature of the peace to which it aspires for humanity; in its *Programme of Action for Peace*, it has also specified the ways in which it can contribute and the limits of its specific contribution to peace. It is one thing to put forward an ideal and quite another to say how one can contribute to its achievement.

The analysis and exposition of the ways in which our movement can contribute to peace, and at the same time the definition of the limits of this contribution, seem to us to form the main aim of this Aaland Conference. In the question of peace, as in that of human rights, the Red Cross has to avoid extremes: it should neither exaggerate nor minimize what it can and should do.

On the one hand, we have to avoid propagating the illusion that we are going to find miraculous solutions to the problems of the modern world, since the resultant disappointment would be commensurate with the hopes aroused; we can only remain credible by eschewing facile demagoguery and misleading promises.

On the other hand, we must avoid pessimism, the negative approach and the idea that the Red Cross can do nothing for peace, that peace is not its business and that ultimately, it is up to governments to settle their problems. This would be tantamount to cutting ourselves off from the world in an ivory tower and would be the surest way of stifling our movement.

We have to learn how to be “realistic idealists”, people who strive resolutely for peace but who know how to apply their efforts within readily acknowledged limits.

These efforts and these limits, as we well know, are to be found in the respect for the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, the respect which alone will guarantee the perpetuity of our movement and its continuing effective action on behalf of

humanity. It is beyond all doubt to the credit of the Red Cross movement that it has been able to prevent the natural, profound and universal aspirations of man for peace from being deflected towards limited or misleading, selfish or aggressive ends. The consensus which reigns within our movement on the importance of respecting its fundamental principles at all times is truly vital to its existence; it also affords the best guarantee that we shall be able to keep to this path irrespective of the different views which will inevitably be held in a movement which strives to be universal.

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When in the Red Cross we talk about peace, we should distinguish between three separate aspects:

- in the first place, the responsibility of the individual to contribute to peace,
- secondly, the contribution of the Red Cross itself to peace,
- and thirdly, what the Red Cross expects others to do for peace.

I would like to discuss each of these three aspects separately, concentrating in particular on the contribution which the ICRC can make to peace.

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Working for peace is in the first place an individual responsibility. Peace in the family, peace in the community, peace at the place of work and in the hours of leisure is one of the prerequisites for peace in the community of nations.

Within our movement, therefore, it is in the first place a personal attitude, a manner of looking at things, a style, a commitment. How can anyone be believed who talks of peace in threatening tones? The first requirement for any valid discussion of peace is credibility. How can anyone appeal for peace in the world, if he does not have the spirit of peace within himself? This is something our movement fully understood when instituting the rule of consensus in regard to peace. However outspoken the discussion, the spirit of peace reigns; this is confirmed at the end in texts with which all can identify.

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A great deal has already been said with regard to the contribution of the Red Cross to peace, and doubtless there will be more to fol-

low during the coming days. I shall therefore confine myself to a few thoughts on points which appear to affect the ICRC particularly closely.

One of these points is the relationship between the contribution of the Red Cross to peace and its contribution to human rights. It seems very clear to us that the humanitarian activity of the Red Cross, undertaken in compliance with its fundamental principles, is not only a contribution to peace but also a contribution to the respect for certain basic human rights. This applies in particular to the so-called "indirect" contribution of the Red Cross to peace. An analysis of the *Red Cross Programme of Action for Peace* shows that the essential contribution of our movement to peace is to be found in the fields of relief, development, health, protection and assistance founded on humanitarian law. But although these humanitarian activities constitute indirect contributions to peace, are they not in the first place direct contributions to the respect for certain rights of the individual and of whole peoples? The right to health, for example, is certainly one of the most important and basic of human rights. Which non-governmental organization has done more for health than the Red Cross and the Red Crescent? There is no doubt that this activity was also a contribution to peace, but primarily it was a contribution to an essential human right.

This also applies to our efforts to ensure respect for and the dissemination and development of international humanitarian law, a substantial part of which is also to be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Protection and assistance, based on humanitarian law, certainly form a Red Cross contribution to peace but are first and foremost a decisive contribution to the respect for certain basic rights of the human person, in the first place a right to life.

The relationship between human rights and humanitarian law has long been a subject of study, because these two branches of public international law are complementary or even overlap to some extent, depending on changes in the situations and in the fierceness of the associated conflicts.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement has very recently undertaken an initial detailed analysis of the possibilities and limitations of its contribution to the respect for certain human rights.

Recent meetings of our movement, such as those in Moscow and Costinesti, have demonstrated that the young regard the dissemination of humanitarian law as a major element of its contribution to peace.

There is a general feeling that the time has come for a global vision and a global approach to these ideas: humanitarian action, seen both as a contribution to real peace and as a contribution to the respect for

certain human rights, in fact constitutes an indivisible unity, and we shall probably have to get used to considering it as such. It is certainly an approach to which part of the present conference should be devoted, without necessarily stating any final conclusion at this stage.

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Consideration should also be given to the attitude which we members of the Red Cross sometimes seem to be adopting towards the world. We are perhaps inclined, in our resolutions, to consider man in too angelic a light, as if we were unaware of his real nature and the tensions within it. We sometimes appear to forget that our humanitarian action is what gives our movement its life and *raison d'être*. This action also gives us our strength, it is our rallying flag and our pride, it is our primordial challenge. Nevertheless, the action is taken in a world of tensions, which we have to know thoroughly and in which each has to play his own part—the National Societies, the League and the ICRC.

We must use to the full the exceptional flexibility of our movement, a flexibility which has its roots in history and which makes the movement a living organism, remarkably well adapted and adaptable to the changing times, to changes in peoples and in States. But all this has to be seen in the light of humanitarian action, in the real world and not in *utopia*. This is not to say that there is no room for idealism—since without idealism there would be no Red Cross—but idealism with its eyes wide open, basing its action on a lucid appreciation of the reality. That is the way to retain credibility with regard to peace too.

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Another factor which I think deserves careful thought is the *direct contribution of the Red Cross to peace*.

I am not thinking here so much of the resolutions, nor of the condemnations to which some people attach so much importance, since I shall deal with them later on; I am thinking rather of the direct interventions by the Red Cross in conflict situations, with a view to a cease-fire or other forms of truce, or even with the aim of contributing to a peaceful solution of the conflicts.

I would like to refer here to the famous resolution XXI of the Istanbul Conference known as the “Bargatzky resolution” from the name of its sponsor, the former President of the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany. As you all know, this resolution applies in the case of armed conflict or a threat to peace; it states that in such situ-

ations, or in other cases of necessity, the ICRC may invite representatives of the National Societies of the countries concerned to meet the ICRC, together or separately, to examine the humanitarian problems involved and the possibilities of making a contribution to the cessation of hostilities. On a number of occasions—the last quite recently—the ICRC has invoked this resolution and invited National Societies from countries in conflict to have talks. Results have been variable, often modest but sometimes favourable.

However, success is not a precondition for perseverance, and we very much hope that the present Conference will provide—for some of us at least—the opportunity for a dialogue and for a real demonstration that the resolutions of the Red Cross have their own positive dynamism, a force which is in fact that of peace. In this hall there are representatives of National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies whose governments are in open or latent conflict. We know each other well and have done so for a long time; you know that the ICRC's invitation is a standing one, and I should like to confirm this once again today. If you think that this is the time and place for a dialogue of this type, I can assure you of our earnest desire to achieve results; nothing would give the President of the ICRC greater satisfaction than to place himself and the Institution at the service of peace, seeking with you the means of achieving peace in the conflicts in which you and your compatriots are embroiled. Perhaps the "spirit of Aaland" will generate a fruitful dialogue. That is my dearest wish. That is the appeal I am making.

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The question of the good offices of the ICRC, especially with regard to its offer of mediation in conflict situations, is often raised. Certain people would like the ICRC to make use of the confidence which it enjoys with the parties to the conflict to offer them the opportunity of negotiating under its aegis political arrangements leading to peace.

A distinction has to be made in this connection between good offices exercised for the solution of political problems and those intended to solve humanitarian problems. The line of demarcation is not always easy to draw, because there are humanitarian aspects to the solution of political problems, and the solution of humanitarian problems may produce positive effects of a political nature.

When considering the good offices of the ICRC with a view to avoiding or putting an end to hostilities, it is hardly conceivable that the ICRC would spontaneously offer its services as mediator.

For political negotiations to succeed, the mediator will in general require more than his good faith and the respect which he enjoys, in the humanitarian field, from the opposing parties: he will in most cases need to have substantial material and political resources in order to bring pressure to bear on the parties in conflict or to guarantee them compliance with any agreements they may conclude.

The ICRC clearly does not possess resources of this type. In addition, it cannot incur the risk of having its offer interpreted by one or other of the parties in conflict as the adoption of a stance in favour of the opposing party. This might compromise the ICRC's humanitarian action, which in general the ICRC alone can carry out.

It is impossible to overlook the fact that the majority of agreements resulting in a political solution of international or domestic disputes, such as the redrawing of borders, demilitarized zones, division of power between political, social or ethnic groups, or guarantees of free elections, all these are hardly suitable subjects for mediation by the ICRC.

In any case, the ICRC would be concerned above all with carrying on its humanitarian action in favour of all victims of the conflict. This is the type of action from which it derives its high degree of credibility; this is its mandate, and it cannot risk doing anything to compromise the humanitarian task in which—as history has shown—it is all too often the only institution capable of achieving positive results.

If, nevertheless, the Committee were to be invited by all the parties to a dispute to help achieve a political solution—and this is a role which the parties would not be prepared to entrust to anyone else—the ICRC would tackle the problem with the realistic optimism which it has shown in such cases in the past.

Good offices aimed at seeking solutions to humanitarian problems, or even truces or cease-fires, are a completely different matter. Everyone is familiar with the availability of the ICRC, the measures it has taken in this field, and also the results of its neutral mediation. It would certainly be wrong to minimize the importance for peace of agreements negotiated by the ICRC, for example in connection with the repatriation of prisoners and the evacuation of casualties or of large groups of civilians. This is very readily apparent from the high importance accorded to the solution of humanitarian problems in any effort to achieve peace. At this point I shall repeat that any mark of respect for a fallen enemy is a moment of peace in the turmoil of battle and a step towards peace. All our experience shows this to be so.

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We are now engaged in a “planetary Solferino”, and the presence of the ICRC in about sixty countries of the world bears depressing witness to this fact. For every member of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, all the victims of the current Solferino represent a personal challenge, especially those far too numerous victims to whom we have no access.

We feel solidarity with the victims of all conflicts, just as we feel solidarity with the members of National Societies and the ICRC delegates who bring them assistance and protection. Like Henry Dunant, we should know that we must act and look ahead into the future.

It is a spirit of peace which our humanitarian action brings into battle, in the name of the movement as a whole, a spirit which prepares the way for and facilitates the return to a genuine peace. This has been the spirit of the Red Cross since its first day.

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In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about what the Red Cross is entitled to demand from others, in particular governments.

I think perhaps a certain modesty is called for here. The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement is certainly a considerable moral force, which should not be disregarded. But that force has to be used in a convincing manner, especially within the framework of the International Red Cross Conference. Condemnations from governments which themselves violate the principles of humanity are hardly credible. This applies also to appeals for disarmament by States which are far from setting an example themselves. If the Red Cross wishes to be listened to when expressing views on such questions, it must speak for itself and not as the spokesman of some limited interest; only then will it be heeded.

The movement is only too well aware of the increasing need for disarmament. We must therefore step up the pressure on governments to reach agreement on this matter, especially with regard to weapons of mass destruction. If, however, the movement wishes to exert an influence towards peace, it cannot take sides and it cannot play the part—even to a slight extent—of accuser, since it would thereby lose all the moral force deriving from its unity. The Red Cross movement has to work in depth and over the long term, rather than at sensational immediate results.

If appeals are to be addressed to governments, a first step should be to call on them to ratify the humanitarian Conventions, which are the creation of the Red Cross.

Let all States ratify the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions. Let them adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Prohibition of Certain Conventional Weapons and its Protocols, which resulted from the Conferences held at Lucerne and Lugano under the auspices of the ICRC. Let them refine and update these texts. The ICRC is ready to help in any way it can.

If, therefore, the Red Cross is to make an appeal, its main one should be for respect for the Geneva Conventions. How can governments be expected to live in peace if, not merely content with making war, they do not even honour the humanitarian rules intended to lessen its horrors? Or, again, if they deny the evidence of a conflict to prevent their behaviour appearing as a clear violation of the humanitarian commitments which they have entered into? It is primarily to the States who are at war that the ICRC's appeal is launched today, urging them to lay the foundations of peace even while they are at war, by respecting the rules of humanitarian law. We ask all States to work towards the incorporation of humanitarian criteria into their political decisions.

How many governments are there which have still not understood that, in the long term, humanitarian problems are remorseless in their effects on those who ignore them? Only too often, States allow situations to drag on which are quite unacceptable from the humanitarian point of view—especially in regard to refugees and displaced persons. Such States only look on the actions of humanitarian organizations as a useful alibi for their own political inaction. They are too ready to give the impression that the mere presence of the Red Cross is a remedy for the problem, and they delude themselves that they are thereby released from the obligation to find a long-term solution. Alternatively, they might even use the presence of the Red Cross as a pretext for doing nothing to solve the problem at all. It is true, though, that humanitarian action alone cannot solve anything and cannot even claim to provide definitive solutions to the fundamental problems which are at the source of conflicts, since the problems are political and thus outside the humanitarian terms of reference.

Nevertheless, this humanitarian action, if properly understood and “intelligently used” by governments, may allow them a breathing space in which to seek—in a spirit of peace and conciliation—political solutions which will themselves eradicate the humanitarian problems. That is the sort of common sense which the Red Cross should appeal to in governments. It is to be hoped that common sense will bring home to them the advantages—both in the short term and in the long term—not

only of treating the victims of conflicts properly but also of refraining from using them for political purposes.

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Since we are talking about common sense, we should start by suggesting that the States settle their disputes peacefully, using the mechanisms provided for that purpose by the United Nations Charter. We should also ask them to agree on across-the-board supervised disarmament. This is something we shall always support—with all our 230 million voices, with all the conviction of our peaceful and universal movement.

What we in the Red Cross have to show the world first is what we demand of ourselves before we declare what we demand of others. We have to give an example of the unique force of the Red Cross, which is in its ability to speak with a single voice, its own voice, on its own contribution to peace. We have to show how the humanitarian action of the men and women in the movement can save thousands of lives every day.

It is through our personal commitment in the fight against disease and underdevelopment, through our ceaseless struggle for the dignity of man, for respect for the rules of humanity and through the gesture intended to help, protect and save, repeated a thousand times every day and over the whole planet, that the Red Cross remains the world's most forceful movement for the humanitarian ideal of peace.

It is from this action that we draw our moral force, it is on this action that we all agree, and it is by this action, above all, that the Red Cross contributes and will continue to contribute to peace.

Alexandre HAY