

## The Red Cross as a Factor in World Peace

*The ICRC has issued a detailed report on the Round Table which it organized on 28th August 1967 at The Hague on the subject: The Red Cross as a Factor in World Peace.<sup>1</sup>*

*It is divided into two parts. The first briefly outlines the events leading up to the meeting, and the second, which is far longer and more important, is an analytical account dealing with the ideas expressed and discussions at the meeting.*

*The subjects are mentioned in the order in which they were examined by the Round Table, which is more or less that in which they were presented in the preliminary programme the ICRC sent to the persons invited.*

*In view of the increasing attention within our movement to the subjects involved, we believe the following extracts from the report will be of interest to our readers. Furthermore, a second Round Table will be convened in 1968 to study in greater detail some of the problems discussed at the first meeting, and to prepare concrete proposals to be put before the XXIst International Red Cross Conference at Istanbul in 1969.*

**General Remarks.** — As mentioned above, the meeting was not convened for theorising and philosophising on peace. Consequently, the participants, the majority of whom were National Society

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<sup>1</sup> A summary record was given in our November 1967 issue.

leaders facing concrete problems every day, above all tried to work out the practical steps the Red Cross could take to increase its contribution to peace.

Nevertheless, some speakers felt it necessary to point out the philosophical and psychological conditions under which the Red Cross makes its contribution to peace. They brought out two basic concepts upon which all Red Cross activities depend:

- its spirit of service, which it must develop and make better use of;
- respect for human dignity, which cannot be restricted to the declaration of grandiose abstract principles, since it implies full recognition of man's material needs. Indeed, the disparity between rich and poor nations is one of the primary causes of war.

The Red Cross's efforts to promote peace are, therefore, inseparable from assistance to eliminate this disparity. This was the first key idea to emerge from the Round Table discussion.

As Pandit Nehru said at the XIXth International Conference, "War begins in the minds of men". The first need is therefore to foster the spirit of peace in the world. Should not the Red Cross with its vast potential of moral strength care for these troubles of the mind, the causes of suffering, and not merely the effects?

To do this, several speakers pointed out, the Red Cross should take stock of its moral strength and having done that, be prepared to take risks, a sure sign of vitality in any organization.

Another speaker suggested that to remain vital and dynamic, the Red Cross should undergo an occasional period of self-criticism. Despite the considerable increase in membership, it should be fully aware of its limitations. This self-criticism should be kept within the movement, since otherwise it might adversely affect the existing goodwill in the general public towards the Red Cross. It would serve to remind the leaders in particular that the voluntary nature of the movement is no excuse for its avoidable shortcomings, and that a constant effort is required to counteract apathy, an excessive inclination towards compromise decisions and other similar tendencies which beset mass organizations.

**The Red Cross's contribution to peace considered as a consequence of its main activity.** — In the preliminary document submitted to the participants, the ICRC requested that a distinction be clearly made between the two types of Red Cross contributions to peace. (This was also mentioned in its report to the XXth International Red Cross Conference). The one derives from its traditional field of activity—"relief work", which includes the relief of suffering, the maintenance of health and the respect of human dignity. The other derives from activities undertaken directly in the cause of peace, which we might call "activities specifically to promote peace".

These two widely differing aspects of the Red Cross's contribution were the two main subjects of discussion.

The preliminary document asked which were the aspects of Red Cross relief work that really contributed to the spirit of peace. It also asked a number of questions about the dissemination of Red Cross and Geneva Convention principles as contributions to peace.

*The value of relief work to the spirit of peace.* — All Red Cross humanitarian work is a protest against violence. Day by day it contributes to uniting the nations and therefore indirectly to the work of peace. The participants unanimously agreed on this relatively obvious point and went on to discuss various aspects of it.

Several speakers stressed the particular importance of internationally organized relief work among the victims of armed conflicts or natural disasters as an aid to mutual understanding. It is most often this kind of Red Cross activity that meets the public eye.

While internationally organized relief work is important from the point of view we are discussing, it can also be so on the national level. The aid brought to the victims of both sides in a civil war or domestic struggle by a Red Cross, will help to reunite and pacify a nation torn by hatred and passion.

Some participants even maintained that the unexplored possibilities of relief work were so vast that before even considering activities specifically for peace—the value of which they nonetheless recognized—there still remained numerous untouched possibilities for work, which in Red Cross hands would greatly enhance its contribution to peace.

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*The value to peace of the dissemination and application of humanitarian law.* — The questions raised in the background documents on the dissemination of the Geneva Conventions stimulated a lively discussion. The majority of the participants stressed how useful to the cause of peace was the dissemination of the principles of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions.

Two misconceptions were pointed out as being harmful to this effort. Firstly, the Red Cross's extensive action for the benefit of the military victims of conflicts (prisoners of war, the sick and wounded) sometimes gave the impression that it does not help the civilian population to such an extent. This is reflected in a play by a contemporary dramatist who makes one of his characters say:

“The Red Cross takes care of bomber pilots when they are taken prisoner, but doesn't bother about the civilians when they are bombarded.”

This false impression must be dispelled. The Red Cross not only comes to the aid of civilian populations but it has been trying for a long time to reinforce their rights to protection against the dangers of hostilities.

Secondly, and this is the vital point, several participants showed that the public all too often associated the Geneva Conventions and the principles of the Red Cross with the acceptance of war as a necessary evil. It must therefore be clearly shown in disseminating these principles and conventions that they are in no way a moral justification of war and that they never, even when applied to hostilities, imply the acceptance of violence or its inevitability. To adopt this standpoint is to follow the spirit of Henry Dunant's work.

Moreover, some speakers declared that an intelligently and consistently undertaken dissemination of them would, perhaps, in the long run, be more effective in ensuring observation of humanitarian standards than recourse to retribution and punishment after they had been violated.

It was also suggested that they should not fear to make public the difficulties and setbacks, or rather, the objectives not attained by the Red Cross for reasons beyond its control. Efforts of the Red Cross on behalf of civilians were cited as examples of this (the

“Tokyo Draft”, 1934 and the “Draft Rules”, 1956). The Red Cross should not hesitate to point out the weaknesses of humanitarian law either, as well as any loopholes in the laws of war in the conduct of hostilities, even though this aspect of law was not its immediate concern. The Red Cross should never cease applying pressure on Governments to improve existing conditions and to fill the gaps.

Beside the dissemination of the principles of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions, the application of humanitarian law also contributes to peace. Even in the worst kind of violence, it keeps alive the spirit of humanity and through its various activities (repatriation of the wounded, suspension of hostilities, exchanges of information about casualties, etc...) it maintains a more or less direct contact between the belligerents. All these things help towards the cessation of hostilities. Consequently, any serious violation of humanitarian standards represents an indirect attack on peace. The Red Cross should, therefore, react more vigorously against such violations than it has done in the past. Some suggested that the Red Cross should not be afraid of being accused of interfering in politics when it reacted in such cases. If necessary, it should not hesitate to publicise these undeniable attacks on humanitarian standards.

Finally, it was said that the National Societies could be of great assistance to the ICRC in Red Cross efforts to disseminate and apply these standards. Through their experience in relations with their Governments, they were in a good position to exert constant pressure on the relevant authorities.

*Dissemination and publicity methods.* — Better dissemination of the principles of the Red Cross and humanitarian law means better publicity. A lengthy discussion was held on information techniques and their improvement within the Red Cross, including the publicity it gives its various activities.

It was pointed out that sufficient material had to be adapted to the sector it was aimed at, and that this was particularly true in the case of developing countries. The material provided by the international organs of the Red Cross ought, in some cases, to be more lively, more “exciting”. This kind of information material is all

the more necessary in times of peace, because, except when natural disasters occur, Red Cross activities tend to remain discreetly in the background, while publicity requires headline material. Other participants thought that the organs of the Red Cross should rather undertake specialist studies of information and communications techniques, so that they could have more advanced publicity material, better adapted to the sectors to be reached and their aims.

It was recognized, however, that publicity was a delicate and complex matter, and that it could involve quite heavy expenditure for National Societies having limited budgets. Furthermore, it could give rise to numerous, embarrassing questions and even have the wrong effect, if over-employed. It is most often the quality of the action that is most effective.

The view was expressed that, while not doubting the utility of such a thorough study of information techniques, immediate action should be taken to disseminate the ideas of the Red Cross throughout the world by making the most of all existing means, however imperfect; with proper instruction, the thousands of members of these bodies would, in themselves, constitute a powerful weapon.

**General Education to promote the Spirit of Peace.** — The preliminary document declared that education in this respect was a field in which the Red Cross was best suited to offer its moral force towards mutual understanding amongst all nations (Resolutions XXII of the Centenary Congress and XI of the Vienna Conference). It raised three questions: Who was to be educated? What was to be taught? And how?

*Education limited to young people?* — The general view was that it should not be limited. The education of the younger generations is fundamental, since the intention is to make every individual as aware of the principles of the Red Cross as he is of his religion or his philosophy. Furthermore, the younger generations are less influenced by nationalistic considerations.

In this respect, the Junior Red Cross Movement is particularly important, and the Red Cross should give it every support. However, as several speakers pointed out, education for peace should go beyond this framework to reach all the young people of a country.

Some speakers declared that there were certain age groups particularly suited to education; the second phase, for example, when the adolescent begins to take notice of the world around him. It is important that the young man, entering the army or even leaving school, should not lose his education in peace.

Several other speakers stressed the fact that youth education, though profoundly effective, was a long term task. It was important, therefore, not to neglect medium, or even short term adult education in peace, even though this was a more difficult task, since the present world situation and the dangers threatening demanded swift action.

Adult education, as several speakers pointed out, should reach all levels of society. The Red Cross should help Governments the better to understand what it stands for and should endeavour to remind them of their obligation to seek peaceful solutions to their disputes.

(See the proposal of one participant to set up joint Red Cross Committees between warring nations and to offer Governments, through the ICRC, advice on how to settle their disputes by peaceful means).

*Contents.* — The Principles of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions should be the principle elements of education for peace. The application of the seven Red Cross principles must inevitably contribute to creating an international climate of mutual understanding. The principle of humanity is probably the one most capable of promoting this spirit, since it is based on interests and values common to all men. The Governments and National Societies at the XXth Conference clearly stressed this when they adopted resolution VIII.

It would even be worthwhile to go further, in the spirit of Vienna resolution XI (International Civic Education), and inform public opinion of the rules of international law designed to maintain peace, include in education for peace the principles of the United Nations Charter—non-recourse to violence, the obligation to seek peaceful settlements of international disputes, the problem of disarmament, and also the United Nations resolutions (General Assembly and Security Council) on the settlement of conflicts—in

fact, to spread the obligation for States to maintain peace in international relations.

Some suggested going even further: need for technical assistance had been mentioned; the Red Cross should also encourage the view that human society cannot, without great danger, tolerate the present economic disparity between nations and that peace means not merely mutual respect and tolerance but also material responsibility for our fellow men.

It would also not be without value to include in this education documents showing all the horrors of modern warfare, as adults tend to forget and youth has not experienced it.

*Methods.* — Many participants asked that this education be placed in the school curricula of all countries and suggested that the Red Cross establish basic programmes.

Another solution would be to entrust this task to mobile Red Cross staff visiting each school. One participant proposed setting up a fund to train such personnel for the developing countries.

Periodically organized international seminars and permanent training and meeting centres throughout the world were also suggested.

Competitions on the Red Cross had been organized in the past for the young with excellent results; similar ones on the Red Cross contribution to peace might also be envisaged.

In the same way, extensions to the Junior programmes and exchanges of views at all levels might be included in this education for peace. Exchanges of monitors, handbooks, documents and other material useful to the spirit of peace were also proposed as well as practical joint projects to develop the spirit of friendship and universality.

The need was stressed for closer League and ICRC contacts with youth and student movements, in order to spread the ideals of the Red Cross and those of mutual understanding and at the same time to gain better knowledge of the needs of the young. Representatives of the ICRC or the League would attend such meetings.

Since UNESCO is working on similar lines, it would be advisable to have a better knowledge of their programmes.

Finally, the leaders and members of the Red Cross, following a basic tenet of education, must live up to the principles they themselves proclaim. Through their achievements and example, they can contribute to education to promote the spirit of peace.

*Supplementary Notes.* — The League publication “Junior at Work” (edited in 1959, but periodically updated) and the quarterly review brought out by the League entitled “Youth”, which often contains relevant articles, are to be consulted on the extensive activities of the Junior Red Cross in this field. They deal, in particular, with measures to develop item 3 of the Juniors’ programme (international friendship and understanding) such as exchanges of albums of school correspondence, international exchanges of groups of Juniors, the organization of international study centres, etc...

At the “Rendez-vous 67” organized at Ottawa from August 14 to 19, 1967, by the Canadian Red Cross, one of the days was dedicated to the subject “Youth and international understanding”.<sup>1</sup>

Resolution XI of the Vienna Conference concerning civic education and international understanding was mentioned at the last Council of Delegates at The Hague, in September 1967. In answer to one delegate’s question, the ICRC reported that it had transmitted the Resolution to all the Governments, but that they had not, as far as was known, followed it up in the manner suggested. The Resolution called for a universal cultural convention for the civic education of the rising generations. This problem more directly concerns UNESCO, with which the ICRC and the League maintained close connections in the subjects of mutual concern.

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<sup>1</sup> See *International Review*, November, 1967.