

DR. AHMED ABU-GOURA STEPS DOWN AS CHAIRMAN OF THE STANDING COMMISSION OF THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT

After more than forty years of service with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Dr. Ahmed Abu-Goura has decided to retire from his official functions. Dr. Abu-Goura is certainly not severing his links with our Movement, as he told me when I visited him at his residence in the Jordan Valley. He is still ready to share his wealth of experience with his friends and colleagues in the Jordan National Red Crescent Society and in various bodies of the Movement. He feels, however, that owing to his age and health it is time to give up his official functions. Although we regret his departure, we must of course respect his decision.

It therefore seems fitting to recall the milestones in the career of this eminent member of our Movement.

Dr. Abu-Goura, who is married and father of five children, has pursued a threefold career, first as a doctor, then as a politician and, lastly, as a leading figure in the Movement.

He qualified as a doctor at the University of Damascus in 1943, after which he specialized in radiology at the University of London (1950-51) and in radiotherapy at Harvard University (1956).

In 1951 he was appointed Director of the Radiology Department of the Ministry of Health in Amman.

He joined the Ministry of Health in 1965, and his political career culminated in his appointment as Minister of Labour and Social Welfare in 1968.

Turning now to his work with the Movement, Dr. Abu Goura was appointed Secretary General of the Jordan National Red Crescent Society in 1952 and became its President in 1964. He was elected a member of the Standing Commission in 1977, became its Chairman in 1981, and was re-elected in 1986.

Dr. Abu-Goura's long period of service to the Movement was marked by four major developments: the growth of the Jordan Red Crescent; the promotion of humanitarian law; the forging of closer ties between the Movement and the Arab world; and the consolidation and strengthening of the Movement's unity.

The Jordan Red Crescent's forty-five years of existence have coincided with a particularly turbulent period in history and, under the guidance of Dr. Abu-Goura, its structure and activities have developed to a remarkable degree.

In 1948, the very year when the then Transjordanian Red Crescent was created (it was renamed in 1968), war broke out in the Middle East. Despite its limited resources, the National Society displayed courage and dynamism in bringing help to military and civilian casualties of the conflict.

Among other things it set up the Red Crescent hospital, to which an out-patient unit was later added, mainly to cope with the massive influx of refugees into Amman.

The Six-Day war, the internal disturbances of 1970, the October war of 1973 and, lastly, the Gulf war were all watersheds in the history of the region and represented major humanitarian challenges for the Jordan Red Crescent.

Under the authority of Dr. Abu-Goura, the National Society rose to these challenges and did a tremendous amount of work, while at the same time building up its own capacity.

Dr. Abu-Goura was also closely associated with the international activities undertaken by the ICRC and the Federation during these periods. The long history of this cooperation was not without the tensions that are inevitable under such circumstances. The end result, however, was always a constructive solution which enabled the Movement to undertake extensive and productive humanitarian action.

Today, the Jordan Red Crescent runs two major hospitals and a number of clinics, dispensaries and nurseries. It has a blood bank, provides training for medical personnel, and runs health education courses and immunization programmes. It plays an active role in spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law and the principles of the Movement by means of its different branches and sections, including flourishing women's and youth sections.

In short, the very difficult period traversed by the Jordan Red Crescent under the leadership of Dr. Abu-Goura, far from weakening it, created an impetus which spurred its development.

As regards international humanitarian law, Dr. Abu-Goura was very closely associated with the work which gave this law its present form. In particular, he was actively involved in the Diplomatic Conference of 1974-1977, which drew up and adopted the 1977 Additional Protocols, in preparatory meetings held within the Movement, and in informal meetings organized by the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law between sessions of the Diplomatic Conference. He followed closely the work of the San Remo Institute as a longstanding member of its Executive Board. Furthermore, he repeatedly voiced his concern about violations of humanitarian law

and reminded governments of their duty in that regard, especially in statements made in his capacity as Chairman of the Standing Commission. Dr. Abu-Goura has always linked his concern with respect for international humanitarian law to the even more fundamental goal of world peace. He made significant contributions to the World Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences on Peace held in Belgrade in 1975, then in Aaland/Stockholm in 1984. He missed no opportunity to express his alarm over the arms race and to reiterate his conviction that world peace would one day be achieved. Speaking at the 25th International Conference of the Red Cross, he stated: "I add my voice to the voice of millions of people aspiring to peace", and went on to say: "I do have faith in our noble shared message of peace and humanity".

Dr. Abu-Goura undeniably played an important role in the advancement of the Movement in the Arab world. He was listened to with respect at meetings of the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies, and initiated regional dissemination seminars aimed at developing and spreading knowledge of the Movement's activities and principles in the region.

Another of his concerns was to obtain full recognition, on an equal footing with the red cross, for the red crescent emblem used by most National Societies in Islamic countries. The addition of the term "Red Crescent" to the name of the League (now the International Federation) and to that of the International Conference was the culmination of his efforts, and this he viewed as more significant than the symbol itself.

Indeed, Dr. Abu-Goura has always taken great interest in the issue of the Movement's emblems and recently had the following to say on the subject, so crucial to the unity of the Movement: "Unlike the cross, the crescent is not a religious symbol. It is used to identify Muslims, not to symbolize Islam in places of prayer. The Koran contains a single verse on the crescent: 'They ask thee concerning the New Moons. Say: they are but signs to mark fixed periods of time in (the affairs of) men, and for Pilgrimage.' However, it has so often been used to identify Muslims that it has come to be known as a symbol of Islam, placed on minarets for example. Yet it is not a symbol of prayer. As far as our Movement is concerned, the two emblems have nothing to do with religion, even though they are perceived by the public as having religious significance".

Dr. Abu-Goura underlined that, despite his attachment to the red cross and red crescent emblems, it would be worthwhile once again to seek a solution in the form of "a single emblem, devoid of any religious, racial or political connotation whatsoever".

He went on to say that this issue should be linked to the aspiration to make the Movement "an organization that is harmonious, coherent and neutral

in all its activities". To undertake a new study on the Movement's emblem would be "to work together for the future of the Movement".

This leads us to the final aspect of Dr. Abu-Goura's activities in the service of the Movement, that is, his ceaseless efforts to safeguard its unity. Having had the privilege of working with him for many years in the Standing Commission, I can attest to the fact that as the Commission's Chairman, Dr. Abu-Goura strove constantly to promote harmony within the Movement and to restore dialogue when tensions emerged. He also initiated the informal meetings of the "three Presidents" (ICRC, Federation and Standing Commission), at first with Mr. Hay and Mr. de la Mata, and then with Mr. Sommaruga and Mr. Villarroel-Lander.

For all these reasons, we take this opportunity, on behalf of the ICRC and I can safely say of the Movement as a whole, to pay tribute and express our gratitude to Dr. Abu-Goura, an outstanding figure in our Movement.

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