

ADDRESS BY FEDERAL COUNCILLOR FLAVIO COTTI

Your Excellencies,

Mr. President of the International Committee of the Red Cross,

Mr. President of the *Conseil d'Etat*,

Madam President of the *Grand Conseil*,

Mr. Mayor,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Switzerland welcomes you this morning with mixed sentiments — delight, and at the same time grave concern.

It is of course with immense pleasure that we note the widespread attention our appeal has received from the international community, and the universal nature of the assembly of government representatives here today in response to Switzerland's invitation.

However the invitation itself is prompted by a feeling of anguish. For although war should long ago have been abolished as a way of solving disputes, the reality confronting us is one in which antagonists in an ever greater number of countries and regions resort to violence. These armed conflicts take various forms. In many cases the conditions which breed them are however the same: poverty, ignorance, hatred, under-development. But the most striking thing about most of these armed conflicts today is their inhumanity, amounting to a total absence of human compassion.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have only to take an honest look within our own souls. And we shall realize that human nature — while being capable of the noblest thoughts, the most generous impulses and the loftiest sentiments — is every day prey to temptations of conformity, egotism, and to hatred of others. Inscrutable human nature, torn by contradictions. "*What fantastic creature is this Man? Such a novelty, such a monster, so chaotic, such a contradiction, a true marvel!*" (*Blaise Pascal*). If we are gathered here today, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because we still have faith in our ability to resolve those contradictions, might I even say to get the better of human nature, by joining the forces of reason — which on this Earth Man alone possesses — and of human emotions, which at times inspire us to outdo ourselves.

It was an emotional response that made our illustrious fellow countryman, Henry Dunant, tremble — and act! — over 130 years ago. I am sure we all feel similar emotions in viewing the horrendous

images paraded before us every evening, in scenes from every corner of our tortured planet.

Both reason and emotion compelled Dunant to take a moral stand, articulated in a few simple and clear principles which require no erudite explanation. Today we are moved by an ethical necessity, the inspiration of which is equally elevated. For the task now confronting our own generation of statesmen, political leaders, and indeed all men of good will, is the urgent need to stand fast against the forces of barbarity.

What is at stake is no less than the preservation of civilization itself, and of human dignity. Human life is an absolute value, and a mystery in which we all share, despite our differences and despite any frontiers which might divide us. We who gather here today do solemnly pledge to defend that value!

That is why we have come to Geneva, to state our conviction loud and clear. Such is the message which the Swiss government has asked me to transmit to the nations of the world. For beyond all legitimate differences of opinion, and the inevitability of certain conflicts of interest, there are fundamental values to which our government shall ever remain committed, such as human rights, the spirit of openness and solidarity, and the most apt and fundamental of all — respect for the basic principles of rule by law. How many other values must the Swiss government mention? We are today to recall the most simple and elementary value of all: the sense of our common humanity, which should never be allowed to abandon us even when all the other values which should rule our behaviour have, alas, been forgotten.

Let us take as symbolic the fact that, long before the beginning of the era of international cooperation that we know today, in all its ramifications and with its specialist organizations, humanity joined together in 1864 to create the first Geneva Convention, which thus became the fundamental Charter, and of which Switzerland is customarily regarded as the custodian.

It is in this spirit that the uniquely indispensable institution we know as the International Committee of the Red Cross operates. Entrusted with the duty of seeing that the Geneva Convention is respected, the ICRC has demonstrated its dedication and great determination, and has distinguished itself in this task. I salute it for the very direct and real service it renders, quite simply, to the whole of humanity. With the help of its own experience, its autonomy, and its great diplomacy, the ICRC has managed to play a leading and independent role in ministering to the regrettably large number of demands made on its good offices, tirelessly performed. I would like to include

in this tribute the President of the ICRC, Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, a man of action as well as of conviction, who is very often the last bulwark of the dispossessed and the hopeless.

The Committee is a privileged and respectful partner in the community of nations. Neutral and impartial, it refuses to compromise in its defence of the persecuted, of the oppressed, and of those left with no other protection. Its code of behaviour is contained in the Conventions and their Additional Protocols. The ICRC is also the very faithful partner of the international organizations, whether intergovernmental or not. Foremost among these, I would like to cite the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, represented here today by their International Federation and its President, Mr. Villarroel Lander.

The ICRC also is in constant dialogue with the United Nations and with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in the preparation of concerted efforts on behalf of victims everywhere. Each in its own sphere acts with unstinting commitment to relieve the suffering of the victims.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the values to which I referred are already amply enshrined in the law. But solemn and binding though it be, international humanitarian law belongs alas to that category of legislation to which the world pays the least attention, and which all too often plays no part whatsoever in the military campaigns currently proliferating throughout the world. It is not laws then which are wanting, but rather the application of those laws. And it is indeed for that very reason that the Federal Council has brought you together today.

We are all aware that there is a compelling need for us to react. We cannot just turn our faces away from so many horrors. And in any case, sooner or later they must pose a threat to our own security.

We do possess a proven instrument, adaptable to the technological and political changes which armed conflicts of all kinds can undergo.

The time has come for us to vigorously reaffirm that commitment, which is binding on all of us as responsible States, to respect international humanitarian law and to see that it is respected.

Such is the purpose of the Swiss government in convening this meeting.

It may well be that such a worthy assembly of international dignitaries, gathering for a few hours to agree on a text — albeit of the highest intellectual, moral and political order — may seem derisory and lacking all common measure with the terrible realities of the fields of battle, where the fighting continues unabated and attempts are being made to bring succour. There will of course be those who find it easy

to criticize the governments thus gathered in the comfortable surroundings of Geneva, ready to mouth words which regrettably bear little relation to certain harsh realities. But, Ladies and Gentlemen, to return for a moment to the subject of human nature, is this not such as to require the occasional firm and unequivocal call to order, and to respect for those very values for which it stands? Can anyone deny that we must, from time to time, pause to reflect, to remind and compel ourselves to respect our engagements, and to renew our commitments?

Our subject here is the need to act and to effectively put into practice those legal principles whose validity we shall in the coming days solemnly reaffirm.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, my dear colleagues,

This Conference and the Final Declaration which will be submitted to it can make sense only if they result in a reawakening. For that is what is needed if the ideas we defend here, and the projects dear to us, are to become reality.

In view of the nature of this Conference, the urgency with which such fearsome and on-going tragedies invest it, and the problems likely to arise, I feel it is imperative that we all try hard to forget as far as is humanly possible the disputes and political differences which separate many among us. I entreat you wholeheartedly to make this special effort for tolerance, so that we may immediately enter into a common spirit of human solidarity, and be truly united in adopting the Final Declaration. For my part, as Chairman of the Conference, I shall do my utmost to see that this spirit of tolerance remains unbroken during the time we spend together in Geneva. I respect all differences of opinion, and the at times diverging interests which sovereign powers are legitimately called upon to defend. But, in view of the importance of the task ahead, I ask you again to lay these differences aside. I appeal to you for a voluntary truce. Let us excel in moderation, to help a Conference which is itself unique to succeed, so that our common objective in being here may gain in clarity and strength and receive our full and exclusive attention. I am fully aware of the exceptional nature of the request I am making, for — I repeat — I am not ignorant of the importance of their divergent views to those concerned, nor of the different priorities of each.

Before we can defend it effectively, however, we must first make sure that the foundations of our international society are solid. In fact,

they have been undermined. War and its attendant horrors are eroding the entire structure of international cooperation, which, with much difficulty and many setbacks, it has taken us 100 years to put in place.

The most urgent task before us then is to reinforce those foundations on which all human societies stand before we can entertain any thoughts about a reign of peace and justice. Having failed to eradicate the scourge of war, we the peoples of this planet wish first of all to shelter and protect the innocent and despairing victims of war. Thereafter, hopefully, it will be easier to eliminate war itself, and to set out again on the road to Utopia.

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**ADDRESS BY MR. CORNELIO SOMMARUGA,
PRESIDENT OF THE ICRC**

Special Rapporteur

Mr. Federal Councillor,
Mr. President of the *Conseil d'Etat*,
Madam President of the *Grand Conseil*,
Mr. Mayor,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

For how long must war victims cry out for help before they are heard? Given the magnitude of the tragedies we are witnessing today, the initiative taken by the Swiss government to convene this Conference was a measure that was urgent and necessary to reinvest international humanitarian law with its full authority.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is not unaware of the difficulties faced by States wishing to create a more peaceful international order that is also more respectful of fundamental humanitarian values. In this context, I trust that the report submitted by the ICRC will provide useful guidance for your deliberations.

The report focuses on the plight of victims. It speaks out against the violence, horror and savagery that are unleashed when the basic principles of humanity are rejected. And it proposes measures to remedy the situation.