

Meeting of the Council of Delegates

(Budapest, 28-30 November 1991)

The Council of Delegates held its biennial session in Budapest from 28 to 30 November 1991. More than 120 National Societies were represented. The delegations of the ICRC and the Federation were led by their respective Presidents, Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga and Mr. Mario Villarroel Lander.

I. OPENING CEREMONY

The session was opened on 28 November by *Dr. Ahmad Abu-Goura*, Chairman of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Referring to the regrettable but unavoidable decision to postpone the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Dr. Abu-Goura stated that now more than ever the Movement had to forge ahead with its humanitarian mission, at a time when millions of people were suffering from the lethal effects of violence, poverty and hunger, terrible weapons continued to be manufactured and used, and over thirty armed conflicts were still raging in different parts of the world.

In conclusion, Dr. Abu-Goura expressed the hope that in this threatening environment the Movement could rely on the support of young people to perpetuate the principles and ideals of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in favour of peace.

Following the solemn reading of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent by a representative of the host National Society, the Council of Delegates elected as its Chairman *Mr. Rezso Sztuchlik*, President of the Executive Committee and Secretary General of the Hungarian Red Cross. He referred to the difficult challenge faced by the Movement in the late twentieth century to improve and develop humanitarian work in a world increasingly dominated by politics.

The President of the ICRC, *Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga*, then delivered the address that appears below.

"The Council of Delegates is a unique forum where all the components of our Movement can listen to one another, exchange ideas and seek common ground when opinions differ. It takes on an even greater importance today, since our meeting follows on an extremely regrettable decision that the Standing Commission was compelled to take. As you all know, I am referring to the fact that the International Conference is being postponed, at a time when humanitarian needs throughout the world are overwhelming. This most unfortunate event is the result of a political battle of wills which took place at the expense of the world's largest apolitical organization — our own. Indeed, the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is so far the only apolitical forum in which those dedicated to the humanitarian cause can engage in a broad dialogue with the representatives of governments the world over.

But although this event — or should I say non-event — is disappointing, the ICRC, for its part, refuses to jump to any negative conclusions for the medium and long term. The ICRC is still confident that the States are committed to supporting its efforts and humanitarian activities in behalf of the victims of armed conflicts, as they undertook to do in becoming party to the Geneva Conventions. The ICRC also wishes to express its gratitude to all the governments that over the past few weeks have spared no effort in seeking ways to enable the Conference to take place, thereby demonstrating their firm dedication to the Red Cross and Red Crescent cause.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is alive and well. Millions of men and women — be they volunteers, first-aiders, leaders, staff or delegates of National Societies and of the Movement's international components — are doing remarkable work in pursuing their common goal, namely, to prevent and alleviate the suffering of fellow human beings and protect human life, health and dignity. We are here, in the Council of Delegates, to talk about our activities in a society undergoing profound political and economic change which is a source of considerable hope in many parts of the world, especially in countries where we can see growing respect for the rights of the individual and a loosening of State control. But the hope that many regions of the globe are moving towards a more humane society is overshadowed by the fact that human suffering in all its forms remains universal, that it is often caused by man himself, and that the means to alleviate it are pitifully inadequate.

Disregard for rules which should help prevent or lessen suffering caused by violence is so widespread that concern for the problem has become almost commonplace. This Council of Delegates provides us with a prime opportunity to convey to the governments — and hence to the international community

following our deliberations — any suggestions and proposals we formulate together during our discussions.

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I am happy that this joint effort, which will involve giving serious thought to a number of issues, exchanging views and acting on our conclusions, is being conducted here in Budapest, under your guidance, Mr. Chairman. The ICRC greatly appreciates the hospitality and enthusiasm with which the Hungarian Red Cross and the Hungarian authorities have organized this meeting within the extremely short time at their disposal. We regret that the Conference cannot take place as planned, all the more so because the warmth with which we were received should have shown and confirmed to the governments, too, that the Hungarian Red Cross and the Hungarian people have always been devoted to the Red Cross and Red Crescent cause.

Let us not forget that as a result of the political division of the Hungarian nation in the last century, Hungarians fought on both sides in the war between Austrian forces and those of France and Italy, the battle of Solferino being a particularly cruel episode. The desire to heal that wound explains in part the great success of Henry Dunant's idea in Hungary and the fact that by the end of the century the Hungarian Red Cross had become — and has remained — one of the most active and dedicated National Societies in Europe.

Allow me to mention briefly two events connected with the Red Cross in this country, which illustrate Hungary's pioneering role in promoting the humanitarian ideal and which, I am sure, augur well for the Council's work, since they are of topical importance even today. Hungary, together with Belgium, was the first country to enact special rules providing for the protection of the red cross emblem and preventing its misuse. And it was in Hungary that in 1919 the ICRC first visited political detainees, thereby extending its humanitarian work to a category of victims that is very much exposed to suffering, isolation and arbitrary treatment. Since then, the ICRC has been called upon to provide protection and assistance in Hungary within the context of other dramatic events: this is something we have not forgotten.

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We have a full agenda before us and many of the items will undoubtedly lead to discussions on relations between the Red Cross and Red Crescent and the States. Before we proceed, allow me to extend my warmest greetings and

the best wishes of the ICRC to all the National Societies that are taking part in the Council for the first time and also to those National Societies whose former recognition has been confirmed.

In my opinion, the desire of governments and of our Movement to give greater consideration to the problems involved in humanitarian action is well founded. The discussions on international coordination that are now under way in various fora are indeed necessary and important. However, such consideration must proceed in an atmosphere of serenity, so that every argument can be properly weighed. Care must be taken in particular to ensure that the difficulties encountered in international assistance do not prompt States to monopolize the issue, with the danger of politicization that this would entail.

Enthusiasm should not be curbed, but more effectively channelled. Humanitarian work must not become the prerogative of bureaucrats, however well-intentioned they may be.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, for its part, recognizes the importance of increased cooperation and supports recent efforts in this direction. At the same time, it considers that it is vital for the Red Cross, particularly in situations of armed conflict, to retain complete independence in carrying out its work.

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The issue of international coordination requires an overall view of the problems to be solved. This brings me to a concept that is of particular concern to me, that of solidarity.

No one can remain indifferent to the sight of a starving child or a person mutilated by a mine. Such tragedies, wherever they occur, must not be accepted as inevitable.

The first and indeed legitimate reaction to this suffering is usually to blame the soldiers who indiscriminately destroy crops or lay mines. But what about the authorities who allow this to happen? Or the people who sell weapons without worrying about how they will be used? What about the failure of the media to report on certain conflicts because interest in them has waned? Or the complacency of governments towards violations of humanitarian law? What about the wealthy nations that cannot be bothered about the poor ones?

Current efforts to promote the implementation of international humanitarian law, which recognizes the right to assistance of all those who are deprived of goods essential to their survival, are certainly to be commended, and the focus of renewed discussions on removing obstacles to relief opera-

tions is fully justified. However, we must also ensure that these humanitarian endeavours are supported by public opinion and governments. Indifference also claims lives and must be denounced.

While there is a limit to the problems with which one can deal, and while it is important to empathize with the suffering of those closest to oneself, an institution like the International Committee of the Red Cross is duty bound to stress that there are no good or bad victims, only men, women and children who are in distress and deserve impartial attention and compassion.

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I have highlighted solidarity first and foremost because it is a key component of the philosophy of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and because it embraces the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality and universality. But should not solidarity also play a prominent role in international politics?

I have already mentioned that in our society violence is rife, but it is far from being the only scourge. Many of you here could bear more eloquent witness to the ills afflicting modern society, the fight against which is our Movement's raison d'être.

Is it not our duty to help bring about a universal awareness of the fact that the general interest surpasses individual concerns? Indeed, we must do everything in our power to avoid an impasse in which, for fear of the poor, the rich become impervious to their despair. This is why we must champion the cause of solidarity.

I have no desire to plunge the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement into a lengthy political debate. To assist the victims of war regardless of its causes constitutes the very essence of humanitarian law; this approach remains a basic condition of successful humanitarian action.

Nevertheless those broader issues must be raised because humanitarian action, for which there is an ever-increasing demand, will no longer be able to meet expectations unless we deal with the root causes of the suffering it seeks to alleviate.

How can we expect young, uneducated and often hungry combatants who face a bleak future and are devoid of hope to understand and spontaneously comply with humanitarian rules? Let us not forget that some of our delegates have paid for their humanitarian commitment with their health and in some cases even with their lives. Others have been subjected to the terrible ordeal of abduction. No institution has the right to disregard the safety of those who serve it!

Humanitarian action cannot compensate for political shortcomings. We must not fall prey to the illusion that it is possible, in the long term, to control the effects without tackling the causes. This is the message we must — all of us together — convey to the governments. They must heed that message, even if they are not present in this room to hear us voice our concerns.

And what about us in the Movement? As regards the ICRC, I would like to tell you that we are aware, both in Geneva and in our 52 delegations throughout the world, that greater imagination and energy are needed if we are to further enhance our efficiency and absolute impartiality. We must also do our best — together with many of you here today — to strengthen the less developed National Societies.

Every one of us must make sure that the tone of our discussions and the spirit of cooperation shown during our proceedings give hope to all those who are following this Council of Delegates around the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we can no longer allow cynicism and indifference to human suffering to take the upper hand. I urge you all, once this gathering is over on Saturday, to go from being delegates to the Council to being delegates of the Council, to take this humanitarian spirit back to your respective countries and thus give fresh impetus to the humanitarian mobilization which my predecessor, the late Alexandre Hay, launched in 1985. We shall promote the resolutions we adopt and the new opportunities we create. As men and women members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, we will do our utmost to reach and help those of our fellow human beings who are suffering and, as citizens, insist that international humanitarian law be fully respected.

I would like to conclude by saying that it is the Movement in its entirety that must demand that humanity receive renewed and fuller attention from the powers that be; we must make sure of this, for what is foremost in our minds — and always will be — is per humanitatem ad pacem”.

Mr. Mario Villarroel Lander, President of the Federation, referred to the challenges facing the Movement in a world undergoing profound and disquieting change. He drew attention to the growing number of vulnerable groups in the world, especially in developing countries. The causes were manifold: the population explosion, the deterioration of the environment, economic recession, food shortages and disease, all phenomena conducive to social unrest and violence.

Mr. Villarroel felt that it was the Movement's duty to render people at risk less vulnerable and to take action to reverse the degrading tendency to treat the population of developing countries as outsiders, that is, it must “fight for social justice among men and among nations. Underdevelopment is a scandal; it is quite incompat-

ible with the social, scientific and technological development of modern man”.

After depicting the wretched conditions in which people were living in various parts of the world and describing recent activities carried out by the Federation to help refugees, displaced persons and the victims of natural and technological disasters, Mr. Villarroel expressed his satisfaction at the progress made by the Federation in building up its presence throughout the world and increasing the efficiency of its relief operations. He appealed for better coordination between the Movement and non-governmental organizations in general, especially in the context of assistance operations. In that connection, he was glad to note the steps that had been taken to strengthen cooperation between the ICRC and the Federation, such as the meeting in Yverdon-les-Bains (Switzerland) last September between the members of the ICRC Assembly and those of the Federation's Executive Council. During the meeting it was decided to set in motion a dynamic process to shape the future of the Movement — now a more pressing issue than ever.

President Villarroel then stressed the importance of preventive measures, which called for a strengthening of the operational capacity of the National Societies and improved cooperation between them the better to meet common challenges. The Federation's Strategic Workplan for the Nineties dealt with this. In conclusion, he expressed the conviction that the Movement could do much to ensure that community development was perceived not as a phenomenon imposed from outside but as a process intended to maximize local capabilities by means of strong and efficient National Societies. “To attain that objective, we must show even greater solidarity within the Federation and the Movement”, he said.

The opening addresses were followed by the presentation ceremony for the Henry Dunant Medal, awarded as a tribute to people who have rendered outstanding services to the Movement or whose commitment to the Red Cross and Red Crescent has cost them their lives. The medals were presented by Dr. Ahmad Abu-Goura, Chairman of the Standing Commission (*see box*).

Henry Dunant Medal

Twelve people were awarded the Henry Dunant Medal, seven of them posthumously.

They are the following:

- **Dr. János Hantos**, President of the National Executive Committee of the Hungarian Red Cross from 1977 to 1990, member of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent since 1981.
- **G. Baron Kraijenhoff**, President of the Netherlands Red Cross from 1966 to 1986, Vice-President of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from 1973 to 1985.
- **Mrs. Kamar Kazoon Choura**, Vice-President of the Syrian Red Crescent and member since its founding in 1946.
- **Carlos-Alberto Vera Martínez**, M.D., member of the Paraguayan Red Cross since 1946.
- **Mr. William Cassis**, Director of Administration and Personnel at the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for 25 years.

Posthumously:

- **Mr. Alexandre Hay**, ICRC President from 1976 to 1987, later Chairman of the Commission on the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Peace.
- **Mr. Peter Altwegg**, ICRC delegate, who died in tragic circumstances on 6 October 1990 while on mission in Somalia.
- **Mr. Walter Berweger**, ICRC delegate, killed in an ambush in the Philippines on 19 January 1990.
- **Mr. Mohammad Osman**, employee of the ICRC orthopaedic centre in Kabul (Afghanistan) since 1987, killed in a rocket attack on 16 August 1990, while on duty.
- **Mr. Abdul Qayum Faqir Yar**, employee of the ICRC's Tracing Agency in Afghanistan, killed on 1 September 1990, while carrying out his duties.
- **Mr. Juanito Patong**, working for the joint ICRC/Philippine National Red Cross operation, killed in the same incident as Walter Berweger.
- **Mr. Graeme Whyte**, CBE, former President, Honorary President and Treasurer of the New Zealand Red Cross.