

**Address at the memorial service held at
St Peter's Cathedral, Geneva
20 December 1996**

**Fernanda Calado — Ingeborg Foss — Nancy Malloy —
Gunnhild Myklebust —
Sheryl Thayer — Hans Elkerbout**

There were six of them. Six individuals who with their skills, their hands and their hearts brought shelter, care, comfort and a smile to the wounded of the conflict in Chechnya. They came from Norway, Spain, Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand, all under the banner of the Red Cross. They worked in the ICRC hospital at Novye Atagi. And they are no longer with us. A seventh lies wounded by the bullet which was intended to kill him. The grief of those who witnessed that carnage is felt by us all.

After the shock, the revulsion, the questions, there remains the suffering. Our suffering. The suffering that comes with the loss of loved ones, people who should never have had to die. Not so soon. Not like that. The suffering of their families, of their colleagues and friends, of everyone in the Red Cross and Red Crescent, of all those who surround us in our daily lives. "Even the Red Cross!", they exclaim. Yes, even the Red Cross! The emblem which safeguards humanity in distress, the sign of life and hope, the sign which should protect.

The suffering we feel is also mixed with anger. This was murder - brutal, cruel, implacable, cold-blooded murder. After such a deed, can we still believe in human dignity, the dignity of each and every human being? Should we see man as he is or as we would like him to be? And then, there is the doubt. This piercing doubt. How far should we go in our humanitarian mission? In our medical mission? Where does commitment begin and where does it end? At what point should we give up, and at what price for those we help?

At this cruel time, when we are gathered here to honour the memory of those who are gone, to share our pain and that of their families, let us forget for a moment where we are now. Let us forget the comfort, the security and the joyful approach of Christmas in a city adorned with lights.

Let us imagine instead that we are somewhere in Chechnya. The snow-covered mountains of the Caucasus look down on the plain. The inhabitants of Grozny, the people in the villages and hamlets are trying to rebuild their homes from the rubble, to care for their wounded, to piece together the shattered fragments of their lives. So many shattered lives, Chechen and Russian alike. But everything is lacking. The water mains are damaged, the pumps are out of order, the sewers are overflowing. Disease lies in wait. Medicine is in short supply, expensive or unobtainable. Most of the medical infrastructure is in ruins.

Many cannot afford what little food is available. The old, the most vulnerable go to the Red Cross canteens for a hot meal, then carefully wrap up the piece of bread that will be their dinner.

Families are split up. Many people who fled are afraid to return. Many who remained are afraid to stay.

Children step on mines and are blown to pieces.

Our six colleagues lost their lives although they had come to a hospital to bring the breath of life. Like all ICRC delegates, they believed in a humanitarian ideal. An ideal which means reaching out to our fellow human beings.

A delegate's life brims with enthusiasm. At difficult moments, it is also filled with fear and, beyond fear, with a certain fatalistic acceptance. But not acceptance of crime.

A delegate's life is a fabric woven from courage, from intense joy when humanitarian action brings comfort, from acute pain when what has been done is undone. It is a life of work, of abnegation, of self-control, a life filled sometimes with tension but sometimes too with laughter, friendship and mutual help. It is life as part of a team. For many, it is LIFE in the true sense. Though it may be lived amidst ruins and amongst people at the extremes of deprivation, it is also lived at the heart of the solidarity which unites them.

For us at the ICRC, the death of these six delegates has affected thousands of other lives — those of all our local staff and expatriates from Switzerland and the National Societies, and those of all the victims of the Chechen conflict who are now paying the price of these murders. Yet, far

from leaving us disheartened, this tragic loss must unite us in rejecting the intolerable, the insupportable. It must unite us behind the ICRC to make the institution even stronger in serving the victims of conflict.

This loss must also induce us to reflect. Life cannot simply resume tomorrow as though nothing had happened. There was a time before Novye Atagi and there is a time after. What the future holds we know not, but surely it must be different. The limits of horror have been breached. If we are to be the wiser for this ordeal, we must learn some lessons from it. It is not only the ICRC that has been called into question, but the provision of humanitarian aid anywhere in the world.

The loss we feel here at the ICRC is not ours alone. It is yours, too. It is shared by all of you who are present here today: representatives of States and of humanitarian organizations, journalists, colleagues and friends. Not only because you are here to mourn with us but because, unless you react to it, this loss will deal a severe blow to an ideal shared by all humanity.

React? Yes, but how? By expressing, as we are doing here, your sorrow and your indignation. Humanitarian volunteers are finding themselves more and more often in the firing line. What is this world coming to if, in certain countries, neither the Red Cross nor the Red Crescent can offer their services? If they are reduced to the role of onlookers, standing helplessly by as the evils of conflict continue in secure isolation. What is the world coming to if so many fine words and commitments remain so often without effect? A world in which the silence and inactivity of those capable of taking political action to put an end to violations of humanitarian international law can be so closely akin to compromise. In which the situation is so chaotic that the ICRC can no longer identify or find those who deal in violence in order to establish a dialogue with them. In which humanitarian workers are becoming pawns in the game of politics. In which hopes of peace can be crushed by cowardice.

Let us not delude ourselves. This world is our world. You owe it to our colleagues of Novye Atagi and to all the other humanitarian workers who have lost their lives, you owe it to them — and to yourselves — to react. Again and again and again. To make sure that our world is not the world that will be inherited by our children.

What conclusions can we draw? Words are not enough. Perhaps there is no conclusion. Let our thoughts turn to the families of our colleagues who have died in Chechnya and in Burundi, to our teams of delegates all over the world, and particularly those in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,

who carry on their task even as they grieve. Let our thoughts turn to the civilians of Chechnya — both Russian and Chechen — who have suffered so much; to the wounded and especially those at the Novye Atagi hospital whom we have been forced to leave behind; to the prisoners; to those who are sick, hungry, cold and afraid.

Marion Harroff-Tavel
former Deputy Delegate General
for Eastern Europe and Central Asia