

*HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES*

**STRENGTHENING THE COORDINATION OF  
EMERGENCY HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE**

*Address by Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga*

*President of the ICRC at the  
United Nations General Assembly*

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The year 1994 will be remembered as one of unspeakable suffering, during which entire populations were threatened, starved, terrorized, massacred and forced into senseless exile. It will also be remembered for having revealed the full extent to which the massive trade in conventional weapons of all kinds and their indiscriminate and unscrupulous use were responsible for this widespread suffering.

While the events in Rwanda certainly provide the most striking illustration of this situation, other conflicts such as those in Liberia, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, to mention but a few, must not be forgotten. Today, more than ever before, the International Committee of the Red Cross is involved in all aspects of emergency humanitarian protection and assistance. Allow me therefore to take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts based on the day-to-day experience of our delegates.

**The strengthening of humanitarian coordination and  
the role of the ICRC**

What can be said at present about the process of strengthening the coordination of humanitarian assistance? First of all, this process remains indispensable, especially in view of the magnitude of existing needs and the growing number of humanitarian players.

There has been undeniable progress in terms of openness and exchange of information. While this is a welcome first step it should not give rise to complacency, for compiling information does not in itself make for better coordination.

Fortunately, emergency situations often trigger common-sense reflexes which naturally lead, especially in the field, to tangible and complementary efforts to avoid wasting energy.

However, much still remains to be done before true coordination can be said to have taken the place of cohabitation, and this will be a lengthy process if excessive centralization and bureaucracy are to be avoided. Simply adopting a resolution will not solve the problems overnight.

Competition among various agencies and organizations, the tendency of certain States to engage in undisciplined bilateral action, the lack of professionalism shown by some new NGOs — whose good will is not in doubt — all these constitute obstacles that must be overcome.

Above all, better coordination should allow more efficient planning of humanitarian action in terms of time and place. The concentration of humanitarian agencies in a few theaters of operation, while other situations are neglected, and their simultaneous withdrawal without any provision having been made for the transition to development programs are so many examples of poor coordination and unsatisfactory planning. Yet it is totally unacceptable that the victims should be forgotten or abandoned!

The International Committee of the Red Cross, working as it does in constantly evolving conflict situations, is open to the idea of coordination but intent on preserving its independence, which it considers highly constructive. While it firmly believes in openness, combined with tangible and flexible cooperation adapted day by day to conditions in the field, it takes its decisions independently — and is financed independently — so as to preserve, in all circumstances, its treaty-based role as a neutral humanitarian intermediary and also to maintain the speed and effectiveness of its operational activities. This independence is a fundamental working asset which it places at the service of all victims, while adopting a spirit of complementarity and solidarity in regard to the sharing of responsibilities with its humanitarian partners in the field.

## **The fundamental value of humanitarian work**

Our discussion here, which centers on our humanitarian responsibilities, gives me an opportunity to share with you my concern about the

frequent use of the term “humanitarian” in a sense too far removed from its original meaning, which is closely tied to the prevention and alleviation of suffering.

The pressure exerted on governments by the media has created a political demand for high-profile action. Such action can lead governments to lose sight of broader needs and to avoid or postpone necessary political or even military decisions. Yet humanitarian action is no substitute for these decisions.

This prompts me once again to call for a clearer definition of the respective aims and mandates of all the players on the international scene.

### **The relationship between humanitarian and military action**

Recent experience, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia, has enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanitarian and military action. While military or police intervention may prove necessary for the deployment of humanitarian operations, the two forms of activity should on no account be confused. Specific aims promote greater efficiency. Indeed, the parties to a conflict must be able to perceive the neutral and impartial character of humanitarian action if it is to be accepted. Wherever this is not the case, victims suffer all the more and humanitarian workers run a high risk of being taken as targets, in particular when a peace-keeping mandate is being replaced by a mandate to impose law and order. This is why I firmly advocate a clear distinction between military and humanitarian action, without, however, ruling out the possibility of continuous dialogue to ensure harmonious complementarity.

### **The relationship between humanitarian action and justice**

The setting up of international tribunals to try those accused of massive violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights law committed in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda has raised hopes for an end to the reign of impunity. The ICRC fully supports the establishment of an international criminal tribunal. Justice is a crucial factor in restoring confidence among the population of a divided nation and hence in enabling displaced people and refugees to return to their homes.

It is complementary to, yet distinct from humanitarian action. It is not up to humanitarian agencies to act as judges, and even less as prosecutors, as this would make it impossible for them to gain access to the victims. The situation in Rwanda today, where the work of observers sent by the High Commissioner for Human Rights constitutes one step in the judicial process, will serve as a testing ground for this complementarity.

## **Relationship between humanitarian work and political action**

No crisis can be solved without political action. Without it emergency humanitarian aid can do no more than temporarily alleviate the acute symptoms of an endemic, if not incurable, disease.

Is it not obvious that the breakdown of State structures, massive violations of humanitarian law and human rights by governments or factions, and in some cases the complete disappearance of the very principle of humanity, are caused by lack of attention and action on the part of the international community in finding solutions either before or at the outset of an emergency situation?

The humanitarian agencies expect political leaders, States, the United Nations and regional organizations to make their task easier, without actually doing the work that has been entrusted to them. Urgent attention needs to be given to situations that are reaching deadlock while continuing to cause dreadful suffering — as in Afghanistan, Liberia and Somalia, for example.

I am convinced that all the humanitarian agencies wish to join me in inviting political leaders to take greater account of humanitarian criteria when taking decisions to impose economic and financial sanctions. Perhaps we should give special thought here to the grave effects on public health when water purification and pumping installations are paralyzed. Is it not incongruous to impose debilitating sanctions with one hand while with the other bringing in humanitarian aid to restore supplies vital to the population's survival?

In this connection I should like to emphasize the ICRC's profound concern about the disastrous consequences for the population, and children in particular, when water supply systems are damaged, contaminated or even destroyed. This is an increasingly widespread phenomenon and a growing cause for concern in today's armed conflicts.

## **Relationship between humanitarian action and development**

The humanitarian agencies cannot hope to achieve optimum efficiency solely by clarifying their respective mandates. They must also carefully orchestrate the conduct of different types of activity over time. This, I believe, is one of the greatest challenges facing us in a rapidly changing environment.

The sole purpose of emergency humanitarian action is to save lives. Emergency operations should not last longer than is absolutely necessary and should include rehabilitation work. With this goal in mind the ICRC frequently gives conflict victims the means they need to make their own way back to self-sufficiency, by providing them with agricultural tools, fishing tackle, seed and veterinary assistance.

The continuum of emergency action, rehabilitation and development requires flawless management, the more so since responsibility for such work lies with different organizations with different mandates and different budgets. That is why proper planning over time is so important, both from the conceptual and decision-making standpoints and in terms of human, material and financial resources. All these efforts are indispensable for building peace.

## **Respect for international humanitarian law**

As President of the International Committee of the Red Cross I could hardly conclude this statement without restating the basic postulate that international humanitarian law must be respected in all circumstances. In its Declaration of 1 September 1993, the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims reaffirmed the need to make the implementation of international humanitarian law more effective. An open-ended intergovernmental group of experts responsible for seeking practical means of promoting full respect for this law and the application of its rules is due to meet in Geneva from 23 January 1995. The group will submit a report to the States and to the next International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which will be held in Geneva in December 1995. This Conference is the only forum that provides an opportunity for dialogue between the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, their International Federation, the ICRC and the 185 States party to the Geneva Conventions. Ensuring that practical steps are taken to fulfil the obligation

to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian law is an absolute priority and will be the principal goal of the Geneva Conference. This gathering will leave no room for political debate and will provide an excellent opportunity to find answers to purely humanitarian problems, which bring us face to face with our ethical responsibilities. I hope that the debate will be both serene and constructive; indeed, I feel that this is more necessary than ever if the international community is to succeed in taking effective action to relieve the unspeakable suffering endured by countless people worldwide.

The challenge that lies before us all is to humanize political action rather than politicize humanitarian endeavour.

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