

# IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

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## THE PRESIDENT OF THE ICRC AND THE NATIONAL RED CROSS SOCIETIES AN ENLIGHTENING THREE-YEAR EPISODE

by **Eric Martin**  
Former President of the ICRC

Towards the end of my academic career, during which I was for a time Rector of the University of Geneva and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, I was invited by the ICRC in 1973 to become its President for a period which I was told would last three years. In taking up this appointment, I was to perform my duties in close co-operation with Mr. Roger Gallopin, who became President of the Executive Board. The system of having two presidents, which was introduced in 1973, was discontinued after 1976. The three-year period and the conditions attached to my function imposed a limit on what I could do and on any ambitions I might have nourished. As I had never worked with the ICRC, I had to get acquainted without delay with its tasks and its organization, its position in the world and the immediate problems which had to be solved. On the credit side I had had some experience of Red Cross work, though on a fairly small scale, as President of the Geneva Section of the Red Cross and as a member for a number of years of the Swiss Red Cross Central Committee, which meant that I knew just a little about the National Societies and their activities. Moreover, being the first member of the medical profession to become President of the ICRC, I was determined to build up again a medical division within the ICRC, to accentuate the importance of the training of its medical delegates and to organize medical logistics in support of its activities in the field.

### **The National Societies' contribution**

One of my first aims was to get in contact with the senior officials of the various National Societies. I very much enjoyed their visits to the ICRC in Geneva, as well as my visits to them.

My concern to get to know well the National Societies was derived from something which I had not forgotten, and that was the lack of interest shown by the ICRC in the Swiss Red Cross when I was on the latter's Central Committee. I had thought at the time that such disregard was regrettable and hard to understand. Having received numerous invitations from various National Societies to attend their annual general meeting or to be present on some important occasion, my travels took me to Europe, west and east, to South America and on a few occasions to African and Asian countries.

An ICRC president can learn a great deal by watching National Societies at work on their own ground, performing their specific Red Cross activities. The first thing I found was that in every country there were men and women who were very much motivated and were deeply imbued with the genuine Red Cross spirit. It is a fact that wherever one goes one will find people who put themselves wholeheartedly at the service of their neighbours; surrounded by the rampant selfishness of our world, they are the salt of the earth.

The second thing I learnt was how diverse were the activities of the National Societies. In every country they differ and are wide in range: health education, various types of health services, dispensaries, training nurses or volunteer workers, running hospitals, setting up blood transfusion services, helping old persons, and so on. The comments by Mr. Tansley and Dr. Dorolle<sup>1</sup> on this wide range of activities are not too commendatory. True, their efficiency in quantitative terms may appear inadequate according to WHO standards, but these criteria should not be unreservedly applied to them. The spirit with which Red Cross units are imbued, the importance of unpaid work, the readiness of "activists" to come forward, the quality of their commitment, the human contact, all these are assets which do not lend themselves to "quantification" by means of productivity studies. At a time when so much stress is laid on human relations and their lack is bewailed, it seems to me that very often there is nothing that can take the place of Red Cross intervention.

A third thing which struck me was how different were the National Societies: in size, in their impact on the people, and in the place they occupied within their own community. Some are omnipresent, active in every medical sphere, with branches extending to every corner of their country; others are less ambitious, in need of renewed encouragement

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<sup>1</sup> *Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross*, study directed by D. D. Tansley. Background Paper No. 4: *National Red Cross Societies and Health and Welfare*, by Dr. Pierre M. Dorolle, Geneva, 1975 (Ed.).

and perhaps restricting too much their recruitment campaigns to a certain social class; still other Societies find themselves facing real incomprehension on the part of their government and have to struggle to keep alive. The charm and value of the visits which an ICRC President makes to National Societies lies in the direct contacts that may be established not only with their leaders but also with the active members of the local branches. I have often taken part in formal sessions and have been asked to speak at those meetings, but my warmest recollections are those of pleasant informal meals, deep in the countryside in Hungary, for instance, or under a desert tent in Mauritania; or again on a farm co-operative in the USSR, or in the town hall of a Bulgarian commune. It was in such surroundings, free from officialdom and in all simplicity, that valuable contacts were established and conversations ran easily without any mental reservations.

Still a fourth impression should be mentioned: it was gratifying to see in what high esteem the ICRC was held, and which was reflected on its President. As a newcomer to the International Red Cross world, I was most cordially received wherever I went by the members of the National Societies who may not have had at all times a perfectly clear idea of the tasks of the institution whose President I was, but who knew enough to nourish sentiments of respect towards the ICRC, of which they had heard a great deal and which represented for them the ideal of the Red Cross.

### **The ICRC President's message**

While my first aim was to get to know the National Societies and establish personal ties with their leaders, I also had a keen desire to show them the character and activity of the ICRC, to set before them the problems which were daily raised, the successes with which it could be credited and the failures which it could not avoid. I had to explain why the ICRC did not more often make public its protests in the newspapers and state openly its stand whenever the Geneva Conventions were violated. I had to stress its duty to do nothing which would prevent its reaching those in need. Although seldom referred to in official statements and in the press, the representations and protests which we addressed to governments were constant, vehement and persuasive.

I told them that those who had not worked at the headquarters of the ICRC could not have the slightest idea of the importance of its work throughout the world and the reality of the ICRC's presence in all the

regions of the globe where political tension was high and conflicts threatened to break out; they could never imagine the extent and gravity of the problems and the urgency of the decisions that had to be taken. When an unforeseeable crisis suddenly erupted and the ICRC had to despatch some of its staff to the scene, the time in which obstacles had to be overcome was always terribly short. That was why the ICRC was devoting special attention to the recruitment and training of delegates. I also stressed the fact that the exclusively Swiss membership of the ICRC was justified by the urgency of the decisions to be taken, the unity of the doctrine to be kept up and the setting aside of any political considerations.

Wherever there are conflicts or threats of conflicts, the ICRC's delegates are there, watchful and active, in contact with ICRC headquarters but also, at times, alone and obliged to take important decisions on their own. Tremendous responsibilities rest on their shoulders. If mistakes are committed, the conditions in which they work must be taken into account.

The ICRC works to ensure the observance of the humanitarian conventions, but at the same time its action is developing in spheres where its right of initiative has to be invoked, in particular where assistance to political detainees is concerned. I believe that this aspect of the ICRC's task will continue to grow but, here, the Committee very often has to overcome the resistance of States and governments, which do not accept what they consider an encroachment upon their national sovereignty, even by a humanitarian organization.

I have often had to explain how and under what conditions certain decisions of the ICRC, which were at times criticized, were reached. I have tried to dispel misunderstandings and justify the stand of the ICRC which, since it is in the service of the victims, cannot allow itself to be swayed by political considerations.

It is often difficult to get this kind of talk understood by leaders of National Societies, who are full of goodwill, but who despite their attempt to show impartiality, are involved in an action and cannot free themselves completely from a political assessment of the situation.

I also believe it was very necessary to show that the ICRC was not a kind of workshop where impracticable legal texts were formulated; that it was composed of men who, on the basis of their experience in the field, sought to apply their knowledge for the benefit of the victims of conflicts. The dramatic circumstances in which decisions had to be taken often accounted sufficiently for any errors which might have been made.

### **The responsibility of National Societies**

The President of the ICRC also has to advise the National Societies where their responsibilities lie in the event of war or internal strife and on the co-operation which should be established between ICRC delegates and National Societies. On many occasions, the National Societies' contributions to a joint action constituted a substantial aid for the ICRC, which would have been unable to fulfil its task without their support. It is necessary to express here the gratitude of the ICRC towards the National Societies which have come forward every time an appeal was launched.

When the President of the ICRC turns to the National Societies, he must assume the mantle of the advocate of humanitarian law. His cause, which anyway is not easy to plead, sometimes finds little favour among National Societies whose interests lie in practical activities. But the ICRC is the champion of the Geneva Conventions; often a thankless task. The Conventions will remain a dead letter if they are not well known to the authorities and the members of the armed forces, and if the Red Cross Societies themselves do not know what the Conventions require them to do.

### **The ICRC and the League**

In my relations with the National Societies, I had the privilege to be on very friendly terms with Mr. Henrik Beer, Secretary General of the League, and with the League's senior officials. Throughout my term in office I made a point of keeping in close contact with the League and its Chairman and to brush away any small difficulties that might arise. It is simply out of the question that, to the National Societies, the ICRC and League representatives should appear not to be perfectly united in their common action, and in their equal respect for the Red Cross ideal.

Three years constitute a very short term for a new President of the ICRC, but it is long enough for him to realize the loftiness of the Red Cross idea and to appreciate the vast amount of goodwill of all those working for that idea throughout the world.

**Eric MARTIN**  
Former President of the ICRC

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