

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
50th SESSION

**SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE MEETING
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
ON THE OCCASION OF
THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

**Statement by Mr Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the International Committee of the Red Cross**

(New York, 22 October 1995)

The fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations was celebrated at a special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly, held in New York from 21 to 25 October 1995.

Following addresses by the President of the Assembly and the United Nations Secretary-General, some 160 heads of State and government leaders, as well as the heads of international and regional organizations, took the floor to highlight the problems faced by the UN and discuss ways to remedy its shortcomings. They reaffirmed that the organization is still essential to the international community but that reforms are needed, and stressed that more funds must be made available to it.

The first day of the meeting ended with a statement by the President of the ICRC, Mr Cornelio Sommaruga, the text of which the Review has reproduced below:

“The celebration of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations is an event full of symbolism which invites us all to reflect upon world events, past and future. The International Committee of the Red Cross is therefore

especially pleased to take part in this celebration, which provides it with the opportunity to reaffirm its faith in humanity by paying tribute to an institution that was created in the image of mankind: imperfect, unique and irreplaceable.

Although the respective nature and goals of the United Nations and of the ICRC are completely different, the two institutions nevertheless spring from the same humanist philosophy. For the founders of the United Nations in 1945, as for the ICRC in 1864 and again in 1949, the aim was to cast out the demons of war in the aftermath of a devastating and deadly conflict by striving to define and express in tangible form universal values capable of bringing all peoples together.

The Charter of the United Nations and the 1949 Geneva Conventions for the protection of war victims, which were adopted almost simultaneously and by the same States as a reaction to the Second World War, have today unquestionably become part of humanity's common heritage. The men and women who drafted the two instruments demonstrated not only their noble ideals and generosity but also a high degree of lucidity, for they were quite aware that war could not be banned altogether. The two initiatives were thus intentionally quite separate and have remained so.

Over the past 50 years, while membership of the international community has grown considerably, the validity of these universal instruments has never been contested. It is remarkable to note that new States have endorsed the spirit of Geneva just as readily as that of San Francisco, and have indeed strengthened it by approving further treaties.

Thus the Additional Protocols of 1977 came into being to expand upon and supplement the Geneva Conventions and to deal in particular with conflicts generated by the decolonization process and with the proliferation of internal armed conflicts.

The very term "international community" would have remained a merely abstract concept had the United Nations not given it substance by bringing its members together right here in the General Assembly, and this is not the least of the organization's merits.

While basic human values are now the subject of universal consensus, ensuring respect for them remains a daily challenge. Fortunately, we have so far been spared a Third World War, yet more than 120 conflicts have claimed 22 million lives throughout the world since 1945, and continue to cause untold suffering. The lip-service paid to human dignity today is matched only by the contempt in which it is held. Faced with this paradox,

the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose humanitarian activities have taken on vast proportions, wishes to speak out here on behalf of the countless victims claimed by armed conflicts, whether spotlighted by the media or forgotten by the outside world.

Do we not all bear some burden of responsibility for this situation? Is it not true that States have a political responsibility in these matters, and that institutions and individuals also have a part to play?

If lives are to be saved in situations of extreme emergency, humanitarian action must be taken rapidly and independently of any considerations other than its immediate aim, which is to bring assistance and protection. While this type of response is indispensable, it has its limitations. The only effective way to prevent such emergencies is to strike at the root cause of the evil. The United Nations has steadfastly endeavoured to do just that, by creating the conditions necessary for the exercise of basic human rights, whether economic, political, social or cultural, and whether in the fields of environmental protection, development or disarmament, to mention only the most important. However, political action still remains a key factor in preventing crises and here States bear the primary responsibility. It is likewise up to States, acting either individually or jointly through the United Nations, to ensure respect for the rules of international humanitarian law, in particular those of the Geneva Conventions. It is also essential for the United Nations to move towards the establishment of a permanent international criminal tribunal.

But a spirit of tolerance and solidarity, respect for minorities and indeed respect for one's fellow human beings in general also depend largely on the attitude of individuals. The growing efforts made by civil society to spur government action and to take part in major international debates can therefore be seen as a beacon of hope. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, ever faithful to its Fundamental Principles, is thoroughly committed to this process.

Extraordinary developments in the field of communications and increasing interdependency have turned our planet into a close-knit universe, prompting greater cooperation but at the same time heightening tension. Indeed, the proliferation of crises and their deadly and destabilizing effects have confronted us with an unprecedented challenge.

In the name of the universal values embodied by the United Nations, whose anniversary we are celebrating today, and mindful of its Charter, which begins with the words "We the peoples..." and thereby places us squarely before our responsibilities, we must, as a matter of urgency,

reject the inevitability of a backward slide. Therefore, let us all form a united front to defeat intolerance and demand respect, at every opportunity, for human dignity.”
