

26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

IN GENEVA, FROM 4 TO 7 DECEMBER 1995

THE 26th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT:

MYTH AND REALITY

The long awaited 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has taken on a virtually mythical dimension within our Movement. It has on occasion been compared to the soldier in the famous book by Dino Buzzati (*Le désert des Tartares*) stationed in a fort waiting for the Tartars, beset by a mixture of hope and apprehension.

Let us take a closer look at both prospects.

I. HOPES PLACED IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

1. Joining forces to help vulnerable people

The extraordinary technical advances and soaring population growth that have characterized our century have made two things very clear: first, mankind has not succeeded in managing these developments for the benefit of humanity as a whole; and second, there are more and more people living in abject poverty, who are in some way vulnerable or excluded from mainstream society, and all of these need assistance and compassion.

The basic mission of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to assist these vulnerable people, particularly in times of armed conflict and the aftermath of such events, is therefore as vital today as ever.

The greatest hope placed in the Conference is closely bound up with this situation and the primary duty of the Conference itself: to renew, or

rather to relaunch and promote, dialogue between the States and our Movement in order to determine how concerted efforts can best be made to improve the lot of this vast mass of people who lack basic necessities and for whom life is one long vale of tears. We can and we must do more. We can and we must work together more effectively. The Conference represents an opportunity to discuss these matters and to open up new possibilities.

2. Attenuating and preventing crises

Nowadays the international community gives the impression of lurching from one crisis to another as it struggles, with inadequate resources, to patch up ever-widening gaps. Whole nations watch helpless as these crises and their consequences, from which no one is totally safe, run their course. The sad result is that people withdraw into a shell, preferring to ignore what is beyond their ability to control. Compassion is directed toward the short-term, the shocking situations shown in the media, precisely because these situations are shocking and there is a need to feel that one is doing something. Yet all this is to the detriment of those who no longer make the headlines — the forgotten victims — and of long-term planning.

Thus one aim of the Conference is to take up this discussion in more wide-ranging terms, examining what can be done to attenuate the effects of, and if possible prevent, such crises.

(a) Attenuating the effects of crises

More than anything else, there must be increased respect for international humanitarian law during armed conflicts if crises are to be contained.

The meeting of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts, open to every State, which was convened by the Swiss Government in response to a request made in 1993 by the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims, examined this subject in depth. The expert's recommendations will be submitted for approval to the 26th Conference. Some experts would have preferred that the recommendations be more forceful, understandably in as much as certain of today's problems call for an energetic response from the international community.

These recommendations, which lay stress on preventive action and measures to be taken at national level in peacetime (adoption of national

legislation; increased efforts to spread knowledge of humanitarian law, particularly among the armed forces; the setting-up of interministerial commissions, etc.) could nevertheless bring about an appreciable improvement in the situation *provided that they are taken seriously and followed up by tangible action*. The ICRC, especially, in view of its traditional and statutory role in this field, and also the National Societies and the Federation figure prominently in the recommendations. It is essential that they all measure up to the trust placed in them, that they reaffirm their readiness to respond and take advantage of every opportunity that arises. But another — and perhaps the main — challenge is to encourage States to invest energy and resources in these preventive measures. Although they may not be spectacular, if they are taken seriously they are capable of improving the lot of war victims to a considerable degree.¹

Improved management and greater understanding of humanitarian action should also contribute to alleviating crises; hence the idea of continuing to give thought to the victims' right to humanitarian assistance and the ethical rules to be observed by the humanitarian organizations providing emergency humanitarian aid. In this connection, the code of conduct drawn up by the Federation in conjunction with the ICRC and various non-governmental organizations is to be submitted to the Conference for study, together with the question of security conditions for humanitarian action.

(b) Crisis prevention

Crisis prevention is a much broader field in that it addresses the deep-rooted causes of crises, such as poverty and underdevelopment, uncontrolled population growth, organized crime and corruption.

Our Movement must not overreach itself when attempting to help solve these problems. We do, however, have much to offer, in particular the network of National Societies and the Fundamental Principles.

A network of National Societies covering the entire world (the principle of universality), ready to work for the most vulnerable groups (principle of humanity), without any form of discrimination (principle of impartiality), and without becoming involved in political disputes (prin-

¹ The previous issue of the *Review* (No. 304, January-February 1995, pp. 4-38) gives a detailed account of the meeting of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts and its recommendations.

ciple of neutrality) is precisely what is required to respond to the very real needs of those whose wretched existence is a natural breeding-ground for tension, crises and war.

The mission and role of National Societies vis-à-vis the most vulnerable elements of the population, such as refugees, street children and AIDS sufferers, should be reaffirmed and redefined. The International Conference will also present a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the value of this network, and to enhance cooperation between National Societies and governments. The latter must be made to understand the advantages of supporting the National Societies without encroaching on their independence, without seeking to use them for political purposes, and therefore without undermining their credibility among those they are meant to help.

The Conference will also provide an opportunity for our Movement to give evidence of the energy with which it is pursuing its own as yet unaccomplished mission of developing all National Societies. While promoting the network of National Societies as an essential tool for aiding the most vulnerable, and hence for preventing crises, our Movement must also demonstrate its willingness to promote internal solidarity among its members and to revitalize those National Societies — too numerous alas — which still rest on a shaky foundation.

3. Mobilizing the public

The public at large must understand and support our Movement's work. This understanding is vital since most National Societies depend on voluntary service and private contributions. But it is also necessary because a National Society's public image is a major consideration for its country's government when called on to support its work. A sort of dynamism must thus be developed between efficient action to aid the most vulnerable, public approval of this action, and government support.

The Conference itself is not a driving force; it could even have a negative effect because of the dim view taken by the public of such large and costly gatherings whose impact is hard to assess.

The subject-matter dealt with should serve to draw attention in every country to the tragic fate of victims, and to the action taken by our Movement to help them. It is therefore felt important to discuss specific problems relating to the protection of the civilian population during armed conflicts, abuses committed against women, the suffering endured by

thousands of children, the crucial problem of water shortages and starvation, closely linked to population movements, and the scandalous proliferation of anti-personnel mines. The Conference also offers an opportunity to bear witness, to explain, to arouse compassion, and to encourage rejection of the unacceptable.

II. APPREHENSION CONCERNING THE CONFERENCE

1. Disputes over participation

The stormy and widely publicized debates in 1986 and which led to the expulsion of the South African government delegation have not been forgotten by many National Societies that bore the full brunt of the negative impact of these events on public opinion.

Nor has the crisis resulting from the last-minute indefinite postponement of the Conference due to be held in Budapest in 1991 — because of failure to agree on the form of Palestine's participation — been forgotten by governments, some of whose top-level representatives had travelled to Budapest for no purpose.

Neither the National Societies nor governments would countenance the recurrence of such events, which could cast fundamental doubts on the very *raison d'être* of the Conference.

Even though there is no sure way of guarding against such politically motivated incidents, the threat of which hangs over any assembly bringing together the States, all possible measures must be taken to avoid them. Potential problems are being pinpointed and an increasingly detailed dialogue is under way with governments through a group of ambassadors designated by the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, as well as with States and other directly concerned groups. As things now stand, no problem appears insoluble, but the difficulties must not be underestimated nor must we fail to investigate every issue thoroughly.

2. Political dispute during the Conference

There is a great temptation, especially among States and other groups involved in political or military disputes, to use the International Conference as a forum for expounding their viewpoints and criticizing their adversaries.

Neither the Conference's terms of reference nor its short time-span allow for such confrontations which, given the right of reply, could quickly poison the atmosphere or even call into question all the results achieved. Such squabbles would inevitably have an adverse effect on the spirit of consensus needed for adopting resolutions on the issues discussed.

"Leave your knives in the cloakroom": the famous words of General de Gaulle are entirely applicable to the International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which are not intended to settle specific disputes, or even to discuss them at length.

Hence the importance of convincing all the participants in the Conference to make proper use of it as a forum for debate and for promoting humanitarian action and the protection of the world's most vulnerable people, and not as a sounding board for political causes. This message should be made clear as preparations for the Conference get under way.

Clear and firm control over the discussions at the Conference can also help avert this type of occurrence.

3. An abundance of material

Many participants are understandably and legitimately concerned with making the most of the long-awaited opportunity to discuss the topics they hold dear. However, as with a family coming together after a long separation, there is so much to be said that confusion could result. Therefore a selective approach must be taken.

The large number of participants and the short time available impose strict limits on how the Conference will be run.

The Standing Commission has decided to divide the basic work of the Conference into two commissions that will sit simultaneously. Some people would have preferred to have more of them so that more topics could be discussed, but this would mean that many delegations would not be represented on every commission. Consequently those delegations might, at the final plenary session, call into question the work done by the commissions. Moreover, some delegations are not even in a position to take part in two commissions at the same time. It is important that this problem be at least partially solved through regional cooperation and through in-depth dialogue during the preparatory phase.

The Standing Commission has also decided to set a limit of two items of substance per commission so that every delegation wishing to give an opinion will have time to do so. This is another unavoidable constraint that necessitates the setting of certain priorities.

The subject-matter selected so far is rich and abundant, reflecting the breadth of the topics to be discussed.²

Participants may also make additional suggestions, though everyone should take due account of the constraints referred to above.

Detailed prior negotiations with all participants will moreover be indispensable so that agreement can be reached in principle on decisions expected to be taken by the Conference on these major topics. This should also enable participants to focus their presentations — which should be brief — on the points they believe to be essential.

So many subjects to cover, so many people and so little time — each participant must take it upon himself or herself to strike a balance between these three parameters, which are immutable.

CONCLUSIONS

The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent should give rise to neither apprehensions nor illusions, but must be prepared meticulously so that it can meet the objectives expected of it in an orderly fashion.

The effort to help war victims and the most vulnerable people in our world is a long-term task which will not be completed in our time. Thus we must not ask of the Conference more than it can give.

What we can expect it to do is to highlight intolerable situations and acts, to identify appropriate short- and long-term measures for improving

² The Standing Commission has so far selected four items of substance, namely:

- International humanitarian law: from law to action — Report on the follow-up to the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims;
- Protection of civilian populations in time of war;
- Principles and response in international humanitarian assistance and protection;
- Strengthening the capacity to assist and protect the most vulnerable.

Further details on the topics to be discussed under the above headings are now being prepared and will be presented at the meeting of the Standing Commission on 1 and 2 May 1995. The *Review* will of course keep readers up to date in this regard.

the lot of vulnerable people in such situations, and to make a firm commitment to provide the means necessary to implement these measures.

The Conference must therefore become a mobilizing force for all peoples, at the same time giving them an opportunity to express their solidarity with those who suffer and their wish to agree on specific commitments concerning areas where progress seems possible.

To meet both those objectives, the Conference must be shielded against political or partisan disputes, and governments must do everything in their power to help through their preparations for the event and by their attitude during its proceedings.

The success of the Conference, however, will depend most of all on the attitude of all the components of our Movement.

They are the ones who must mobilize the public at large and the governments of every country worldwide by using the Conference to defend those whom they seek to help, and by creating support and approval for their action.

They are also the ones who must imbue the Conference with the spirit of our Movement, making it a special event that stands apart from run-of-the-mill diplomatic meetings.

Our Movement will meet this challenge if it presents a united front, not by masking its diversity but rather by making the strength of its complementarity evident. It will thus be able to approach the Conference with confidence, viewing it as a constructive and forward-looking event for every participant.

If our Movement goes about its preparations in this frame of mind it will, together with the governments, contribute to the success of this meeting in which so much hope has been placed.

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