

In Colombia a forgotten conflict rages on. Largely ignored by the international media, the armed struggle in this South American country will soon be entering its fifth decade. The ICRC has greatly strengthened its presence in Colombia in recent years, and now the delegation in Bogotá is its largest in Latin America.

This article seeks to outline the current challenges facing the ICRC in Colombia. What are the possibilities offered by its mandate and the limits to what it can do? Has the organization achieved any tangible results? Specific cases are used to illustrate where, how and under what conditions the ICRC can act as a mediator to help alleviate or solve problems of a humanitarian nature. This is a personal contribution and a critical analysis by an ICRC delegate who has been working on Colombia's Atlantic coast since February 1996.

The ICRC as a humanitarian mediator in the Colombian conflict

Possibilities and limits

by **Thomas Jenatsch**

*Lo más grave de todo es que hemos aprendido
a vivir con la violencia.*

Gabriel García Márquez

The dramatic episode of the 70 soldiers: their capture and release

Cartagena de Chairá, 15 June 1997: the five Russian helicopters churned up clouds of dust as they deposited their precious cargo —

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Original: German

70 soldiers of the government army who had been defeated and captured by the guerrillas nine-and-a-half months earlier. The spectacular landing in the jungle hideout gave them their first taste of freedom and marked the end of an episode in the war which had humiliated the military high command and kept the whole country in suspense. Hence the rejoicing was all the greater as the 70 soldiers, who had been presumed dead, were finally reunited with their mothers in an emotional scene, and the whole of Colombia briefly savoured the sweet illusion that peace was just around the corner. In front of international observers and countless journalists, the guerrilla commanders completed the handover of the soldiers to the ICRC with a moving ceremony. Then the soldiers boarded the helicopters again. Accompanied by an ICRC delegate and a member of the National Reconciliation Commission, they were flown to the army base at nearby Larandia, where the military leadership gave them an official reception with a brass band and laid on a buffet meal.

Transferring the 70 soldiers from guerrilla captivity into the hands of the army marked the climax of what was probably the most important humanitarian operation in Colombia involving the ICRC. The Geneva-based organization provided on-the-spot communication links and infrastructure support, accompanied the helicopters to the jungle locations for picking up the soldiers and provided initial medical assistance. It also made transport and accommodation arrangements for the soldiers' families and, in conjunction with the Colombian Red Cross and the National Reconciliation Commission, coordinated a vast operation in which nothing — apart from the weather — was left to chance. Relief and satisfaction were written on the face of head of delegation Pierre Gassmann on the evening of 15 June, as he took off his muddy boots, lit his pipe and relived the events of the day on television.

The soldiers' release in Cartagena de Chairá followed a tough nine-and-a-half month quest to achieve a rapprochement between government and guerrillas in which the ICRC was involved from the outset. Let us go back to the beginning. On 2 September 1996, three days after the guerrilla attack on the Las Delicias military base in the Amazon basin, the ICRC received confirmation by radio that 60 soldiers had survived the attack by the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC*). In their first radio communication the guerrillas described the 60 soldiers as "prisoners of war", a term which immediately provoked controversy. Under international law, prisoner-of-war status is granted only in international wars, not in internal conflicts. The FARC also promised to respect the rights of the captured government soldiers, as required by international

humanitarian law. They called on the government to form a commission, composed of national and international figures, to whom the soldiers would be handed over in the presence of the ICRC. The temporary withdrawal of the army from a "security zone" of approximately 45,000 square kilometres was a further condition.

By forwarding the radio communication, the ICRC found itself playing a pivotal role right from the start, practically without any initiative on its part. In the weeks that followed, the delegation forwarded radio and fax messages between the government and the guerrillas almost every day. The exchange soon turned into a war of communiqués, in which the two sides accused each other of seeking to delay the handover for political reasons.

Because of the army leadership's categorical refusal to demilitarize a "security zone", the Colombian government's hands were tied in the negotiations. As the weeks passed without any result, the government came under growing pressure from the public and from the soldiers' families. It finally asked the ICRC to negotiate the handover of the soldiers in its own right. The ICRC could not agree to this, however, as the humanitarian problem had long since turned into a political tug-of-war. Instead of mediating on the government's behalf, the delegation invited the parties to Geneva in order to negotiate an agreement on neutral ground. The proposal met with cautious approval in Bogotá, but was rejected by the guerrillas, who insisted on the demilitarization of a "security zone" and the formation of a "handover commission" as preconditions for direct negotiations with the government.

In addition to holding talks with the Bogotá government and FARC representatives in Mexico, the delegates sought direct contact with the southern faction of the rebel army, which was holding the soldiers. On the Caguán river, one of the main arteries through the guerrilla-controlled southern territories, the ICRC organized medical assistance for the civilian population, with "river brigades" bringing aid to many small villages. But the delegates' hopes of gaining access to the rebels and the 60 captured soldiers were dashed. With hindsight, it would have been virtually impossible for logistical reasons as well to arrange a visit to the soldiers in the jungle, as the FARC had divided them into small groups and dispersed them over a vast area.

After months of deadlock there was finally a glimmer of a solution in May. The government negotiator had managed, with the help of Monseñor Castro, the bishop of Caguán, to establish contact with the rebel leaders. And suddenly things started moving very quickly. On

20 May President Samper proclaimed the demilitarization of the security zone demanded by the guerrillas. The next day, head of delegation Pierre Gassmann, negotiator José Noé Ríos and representatives of the National Reconciliation Commission, composed of prominent clerics and political leaders, were invited to a working breakfast with the President. It was decided to divide up the work: Noé Ríos was to remove the final political obstacles, the National Reconciliation Commission was to set up the “handover commission” with the international observers, and the ICRC was to take care of all logistical requirements (transportation by helicopter, on-the-spot infrastructures, security, etc.).

The handover was scheduled to take place on 15 June in Cartagena de Chairá, a small market town in the sparsely populated Caguán region. The government put five Russian transport helicopters plus their crews at the disposal of the ICRC. The operation was complicated because, in addition to the 60 soldiers scattered over southern Colombia, 10 marines captured by the FARC in January were to be picked up from the north. The FARC demanded that the helicopters carrying the soldiers should also take an armed guerrilla escort to the collection point. It was therefore impossible for the delegation to let the helicopters fly under the red cross emblem. In order to ensure maximum security nevertheless, the President rapidly passed a decree guaranteeing the helicopters absolute immunity over Colombian territory — with or without the red cross emblem. Thanks to ideal flying conditions and the ability of all parties to improvise, the operation finally went like clockwork, and the soldiers were handed over to the army leadership as planned on 15 June.

To sum up, the ICRC’s contribution towards resolving this problem can be divided into three phases. In the weeks immediately following the capture of the soldiers, the delegation acted as a communication link between the government and the guerrillas. In the longer second phase, the delegates attempted to gain direct access to the soldiers for humanitarian purposes. The removal of the political obstacles marked the start of the third phase, in which the ICRC could concentrate on the actual handover, lending its services as a mediator and providing logistical expertise to help ensure that the process went smoothly.

Wanted: neutral intermediaries!

In Cartagena de Chairá the ICRC proved to be a reliable and neutral intermediary regarding humanitarian issues in an armed conflict. It silenced those who had voiced serious doubts over its impartiality in

the wake of the violent episode that had led to the liberation of the hostages in Lima. The ICRC and the international observers were warmly applauded by the Colombian media for their role in the soldiers' release. Many commentators added soberly that the Colombian people alone could no longer control the civil war that had been tearing their country apart for close to forty years. The general tone of the media has been echoed by leading Colombian sociologists such as Juan Gabriel Tokatlian and Alfredo Molano. Many intellectuals believe that, in view of the internal stalemate, only collective pressure from foreign governments and international institutions can curb the runaway conflict or at least make it slightly less horrific. A similar view is held by the National Reconciliation Commission, which has close links with the Church. In a policy paper it asserts that, to achieve peace in Colombia, it is essential that civil society prevail on international organizations to pave the way for dialogue, set up mediation mechanisms and monitor observance of agreements.

With the longest-running armed conflict in Latin America, the greatest number of abductions and the highest murder rate in the world, Colombia seems irredeemably trapped in a complex web of violence. At a loss what to do, it has turned to the international institutions, hoping that if the latter were more in evidence, the long cycle of violence might come to an end or things might at least change for the better. And the appeal made outside the country has already been answered in part. On 1 April 1997 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights opened an office in Bogotá for an initial period of 18 months. A team of six experts regularly publishes reports and position papers on the human rights situation in the country. The ICRC too has strengthened its presence in Colombia. Its delegation now has 44 delegates and 110 Colombian employees, divided between headquarters in Bogotá and 11 local offices.

The ICRC began its work in Colombia in 1969 with prison visits, and in 1980 a permanent delegation was established in Bogotá. The actual fieldwork, however, did not begin until 1991, when local offices were opened in Bucaramanga and Villavicencio. With the most recent expansion in 1996 and 1997, the delegation virtually doubled its staff, and its budget for 1998 will be 13 million US dollars. Working conditions are good, since Colombia has remained politically and economically one of the most stable countries in Latin America, in spite of the conflict. Unlike in other theatres of war, the ICRC is unconditionally accepted by the population and respected by all parties to the conflict. The red cross on a white background is a powerful symbol in Catholic

Colombia: the emblem is not simply the reversal of the Swiss flag, but also represents basic Christian values and the ultimate source of hope. Even the adjective “international” is significant: the Colombians utter the word reverently, generally equating it with a sound reputation and virtual omnipotence. The high degree of credibility gained from operations to assist victims of conflict is without doubt the ICRC’s trump card. The Colombians’ high — or even too high — expectations of the ICRC contrast with the predominantly negative image they have of their own institutions, reputed more for their oratory than for their actions.

Through its work all over the country, the ICRC has an intimate knowledge of the conflict. Can it diminish the horror of this war? What are the possibilities offered by its mandate and, conversely, the limits to what it can do? Has it achieved any tangible results? The following section aims to illustrate the ICRC’s role as a mediator in the conflict and to describe its action in Colombia.

Who is behind the violence and the conflict in Colombia?

The ICRC is operating in an extremely complex environment. The situation cannot be described as a single conflict; it involves a tangled web of players and forms of violence, which includes petty and organized crime, with the cocaine mafia and groups of blackmailers; contract killings (*sicariato*); political conflicts involving the army, police, paramilitaries and guerrillas; incidents connected with legally recognized private rural security forces (CONVIVIR); and “social cleansing” to eliminate beggars, thieves and other marginal elements.

The question that inevitably arises is what social issues created such a potential for violence. The grossly unequal distribution of wealth is certainly one potent factor, but this still fails to explain why the degree of violence is so much greater in Colombia than, for example, in Brazil or Bolivia, where there are comparable social disparities. Peculiar to the situation in Colombia is the explosive mixture of social, political, cultural and historical factors of violence, which have spiralled out of control. Violence is deeply ingrained in the collective memory as a result of the countless civil wars and uprisings that have marked the history of Colombia since independence. The macho cult of confrontation inherited from the Spaniards and the lack of a culture of consensus, coupled with the unresolved issue of the distribution of wealth, form the socio-cultural basis of violence in Colombia. The democratic system, which should have created a balance, is to a large extent a failure.

It suffers from a series of widespread evils, such as vote-buying, favouritism and institutionalized corruption, which seriously undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of the political class. In view of the State's inability to resolve social conflicts through institutional channels, it is hardly surprising that the latent tension erupts in either spontaneous or organized forms of violence. Virtual impunity for violent crime merely fans the flames: there is no deterrent for violence and the failure of the State legal apparatus encourages people to take the law into their own hands. Every unexpiated murder leaves a trail of resentment and cries out to be avenged.

The cocaine trade also contributes to the spiral of violence. Attempts at repression by the State and internal disputes over distribution in this illegal but lucrative business have led to the formation of powerful private armies, which eliminate anything that might be bad for business. The drug trade indirectly fuels the violence through its enormous corrupting influence, which further undermines the fragile State institutions and accentuates social injustice.

Finally, violence is kindled by the political conflict. The fact that the conflict has been dragging on for years and the large number of victims among the civilian population have exhausted society's capacity for outrage and have left people fatally resigned. Violence seems to be accepted as a normal everyday phenomenon in Colombia.

The ICRC delegation is focusing its efforts on the humanitarian problems caused by the political conflict. As the latter accounts for just 15% of the total number of victims of violence, it may appear to be a marginal phenomenon. But the statistics are deceptive, because they fail to highlight the connection between political violence and ordinary criminal activity. The political conflict in many ways acts as a spur to petty criminal violence. First, many people fleeing the violence in rural areas end up in the slums on the edge of the big cities, where, unemployed and without social support, they often turn to crime out of sheer necessity. Second, the armed conflict has boosted weapons imports, caused an ever-increasing section of the population to take up arms and trivialized the use of guns. Third, the re-integration of battle-weary guerrillas, soldiers or paramilitaries into civilian life is extremely difficult. Anyone who has earned his living with a gun is hardly likely to go back to working the land with a machete instead. Many *reinsertados* commit individual crimes or join one of the armed groups. So if account is taken of all the acts of violence which are carried out as a reaction to or under cover of political violence, or with its backing or using it

as a pretext, the figures for violence arising from the political conflict are much higher than first appears. Many experts therefore regard the long-drawn-out civil war as the main cause of violence in Colombia, because it has undermined State institutions, wrecked society's capacity for integration, and armed and radicalized individuals.

The roots of the war go back to the period of *violencia* of the late 1940s and 1950s. The bloody internal feud between conservatives and liberals ended in the mid-1950s with a political compromise. But the liberal self-defence groups with a strong peasant following did not disarm completely and, turning to socio-revolutionary ideology, founded the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (*FARC*) in 1964. Influenced by the Cuban revolution, further armed opposition groups sprang up in the mid-1960s, including the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN*). Peace initiatives taken by the Colombian government in the 1980s met with only partial success; some groups, including the "19 April Movement" (M-19), laid down their weapons and formed a democratic party. However, anyone who had expected the guerrillas to become extinct with the end of the Cold War was disappointed. This epoch-making event hardly affected the armed opposition groups: having their own financial resources, they were able to exist without foreign aid. Since the end of the 1980s the guerrillas have almost doubled their military strength, with a force of nearly 15,000 men today. Ultimately the growth of the guerrillas can be put down to the failure of the democratic left. Instead of being integrated into the democratic system, left-wing parties such as the *Unión Patriótica* were persecuted by the traditional power elite. Even widespread poverty, mass unemployment in rural areas and the mountainous terrain of Colombia all work to the advantage of the guerrillas, and the government forces are hard pressed to cope with their lightning strikes.

In order to curb the rise of the guerrillas, the traditional landowner class, now with their backs to the wall, formed bands of armed mercenaries. These illegal "paramilitaries" have dealt severe blows to the guerrillas' social base, often in conjunction with the army or at least with its connivance. Various local groups have recently combined to form larger, supra-regional groups known as *autodefensas campesinas* (rural self-defence groups). They are attempting to shed the image of death squads under external control and pass themselves off as independent political-military organizations with their own command structures. The *autodefensas* pillory social injustice, corruption and the ineffectiveness of the political class as the real cause of the war. Surprisingly, their rhetoric hardly differs in this respect from that of the guerrillas, their

arch-enemies. Both organizations have similar styles of warfare, in that they avoid direct confrontation as far as possible and inflict violence on civilians who are suspected of collaborating with the enemy. For this reason people speak of a *guerra sucia* (dirty war) in Colombia.

In this civil war there is no clear territorial divide between the opposing camps. It is a patchwork of many different small-scale conflicts with strong regional roots. Political motives often fade into the background. Private interests and grudges, on the other hand, have become the main driving force behind the violence. It has been said that Colombia may be on the way to becoming a feudal State, in which anyone can form his own army. Private armies of this kind are funded by an ingenious system of taxation. Both the guerrilla organizations and the *autodefensas* charge "protection fees" in the areas they control. The majority of the population therefore regard them as parasites conducting a war at society's expense which most people are weary of and consider pointless. On top of this, most of the victims are civilians. Usually their only escape is to flee to neighbouring villages or to the big cities, where they languish in the slums. In the last ten years, the violence in this conflict has uprooted about a million people from their homes.

How and where can the ICRC act as mediator?

As shown by this brief description of the many forms of conflict in Colombia, there is no shortage of situations where humanitarian action is needed. In close cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross, the ICRC is running a programme to assist conflict victims. The displaced receive food and other essential items, people under threat are helped to leave the danger zone, and civilians injured in the fighting are given medical care. The emphasis, however, is on non-material assistance, such as prison visits, dissemination of international humanitarian law¹ and representations on behalf of conflict victims. The next section will take a closer look at the ICRC's role as a mediator between the opposing factions.

Under the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has a mandate to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law among the parties to the

¹ On dissemination work in Colombia, see Roland Bigler, "Disseminating international humanitarian law in Colombia", *JRRC*, No. 319, July-August 1997, pp. 421-432.

conflict and to monitor respect for that law. It therefore not only distributes emergency aid but also draws attention to the limits on means and methods of warfare which are enshrined in international law. Hence the ICRC can offer its services in humanitarian emergencies. This includes assuming the role of neutral intermediary, with the aim of bridging the communication gap, drawing the parties closer to each other, proposing non-violent alternatives for settling conflicts and dispelling misunderstandings. The task of humanitarian facilitator and mediator is a crucial part of a delegate's work in the field. Let us take three examples:

— *Displaced persons*: During 1996 about 180,000 Colombians fled the hostilities.² Most displaced persons move to another region or department, only a small minority can afford to go abroad. Particularly at risk are villages situated between the fronts or in regions where the balance of power shifts between the parties. What really triggers the exodus in each case are murders, massacres and threats against civilians. The ICRC cannot stop the population taking flight, but it can do a lot to help the displaced return home, thereby contributing at least temporarily towards easing the situation. The delegates strive to obtain guarantees from the relevant groups for the safety of the returnees. It is usually a laborious process: as the leaders operate underground, they are often hard to locate and have little interest in solving problems of a humanitarian nature. Their promises are not always sincere and are treated with mistrust by the displaced. In order to come across as serious mediators, the delegates need to have a sound knowledge of the social background to the conflict, plenty of stamina and a fine sense of diplomacy. Above all, they have to gain the confidence of the parties involved and work hard to explain what the ICRC is and what it tries to achieve.

In Bajo Grande, a village on the Atlantic coast, an entire year passed between the flight of the inhabitants and their collective return. In a process plagued by setbacks, the ICRC finally obtained an undertaking from the adversaries — guerrillas and paramilitaries — to observe a number of ground rules and to refrain from military operations near the village in future. A key role in the resettlement was played by the parish priest and the *personero*³. Encouraged by the ICRC's efforts at

² The figures are taken from a UNICEF study, quoted in *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, 14 March 1997. According to the study, some 900,000 Colombians have fled the violence since 1985.

³ Every Colombian village community has a *personero*, a lawyer with functions comparable to those of an ombudsman, who supervises the administration, receives civil complaints from the population and forwards them to the relevant authorities.

mediation, they plucked up the courage to break the local authorities' fearful silence and to muster public support for those who wished to return home. Tangible backing from the State in the form of reconstruction aid, together with safety guarantees from the parties concerned and the ICRC's permanent presence in the region, created a climate of détente which enabled 150 families to return to their village. The Bajo Grande case is a classic example of the fact that ICRC action is effective only when delegates can count on local support. Networking between the ICRC and civil institutions is therefore of crucial importance. The latter include the Colombian Red Cross, which cooperates closely with the delegates in giving humanitarian assistance to the displaced.

— *Threats to and abductions of civilians*: every year the ICRC delegation receives thousands of visits and phone calls from people who wish to report a threat from a party to the conflict or even the abduction of a family member. As it is not always clear who is behind such acts, delegates must seek to establish a dialogue with the parties in conflict in order to check the facts, obtain safety guarantees and protest against breaches of the law. Spectacular successes are rare, but thanks to its contacts with all sides the ICRC can act as a sort of referee by drawing attention to excesses, presenting the situation from the victims' point of view and gaining certain humanitarian concessions. When the factions involved consent to visits to abducted persons, release captives, provide information on the whereabouts of a missing person or hand over mortal remains, such actions are often more realistically construed as signs of goodwill towards the ICRC than as conscious steps to respect humanitarian obligations. For the victims, on the other hand, such gestures can be an absolute lifeline.

As regards abductions of civilians, the ICRC strives to ensure that at least some of the victims' fundamental rights are respected: personal safety, humane treatment, medical care, written correspondence with the family. Where conditions permit, ICRC delegates hold talks without witnesses with the persons abducted. Visits from delegates are intended primarily to give the victims psychological support, by enabling them to speak freely with someone from the outside, to receive Red Cross messages from their relatives or to send such messages themselves. In many cases delegates are involved in the release, bringing the abducted person safely out of the danger area and taking him back home. It should be stressed that under no circumstances does the ICRC bargain with the kidnappers. The ICRC must not become an accomplice to a deed which is contrary to international law.

— *Unrest in prisons*: Since 1969 ICRC delegates have been conducting prison visits and have been seeking to improve conditions for the detainees. Persons held in connection with political events are registered for their own safety and subsequent changes in their circumstances are monitored by the ICRC, which is well acquainted with the conditions through visiting all regional and national prisons at least once every six months. Its knowledge and experience are particularly important if unrest occurs in a prison, as is often the case in Colombia. In such situations delegates are often brought in as mediators. Their presence is usually requested by both sides: the detainees regard the ICRC as a guarantor for a non-violent solution to the conflict; the authorities expect that, with ICRC delegates present, the situation will soon be restored to normal. Indeed, there have been many cases where delegates were quick to arrive on the scene, thereby preventing the tension from escalating, and were able to offer their services to negotiate a peaceful solution to the problem.

What does it take for mediation in humanitarian matters to be successful? The following criteria are worth mentioning:

1. Mediation by the ICRC has a good chance of success where the crisis is limited in both time and space, and the players are clearly identifiable. If, on the other hand, the conflict is influenced by supra-regional centres of power, if it is a long-standing crisis or if it is impossible clearly to establish who are those responsible, then the mediator's task is tremendously difficult.
2. Timing is a decisive factor when it comes to successful mediation. If the ICRC is on the spot immediately after a crisis breaks out, its capacity to influence the outcome is infinitely greater than when it becomes involved at a later stage in the process. Being present from the outset makes it easier for the ICRC to win the confidence of the parties and lay down some ground rules. The release of the 70 soldiers was a case in point: the ICRC's success was the culmination of *nine-and-a-half months of constant mediation, in which the delegation was involved right from the start.*
3. Successful mediation requires perseverance and a sound knowledge of the situation. A reasonable amount of pragmatism and flexibility are also important. As mediators in a conflict, delegates leave behind the rarefied atmosphere of treaties and a theoretical approach and become a part of the crisis scenario themselves, albeit in an

independent and neutral position. Reaching a consensus in an often tense and rapidly changing situation is frequently a matter of plain common sense.

4. The ICRC can rarely solve humanitarian problems on its own. It remains one player among others in a complicated scenario involving a variety of main and supporting roles. Apart from the parties to the conflict, there are the civil authorities, the Church, various private institutions and the media: civil society, in other words. Without its support the ICRC can do little. It gains such backing primarily through systematic dialogue and efforts to spread information, while also taking account of the attempts to initiate a public debate, which it seeks to nurture as far as possible. Gabriel García Márquez himself underlined the crucial importance of education and information work in Colombia: "The history of Colombia is a series of violent episodes. The violence in Colombia dates back so far and goes so deep that it is only by completely changing the way we educate our children that we can achieve something: legal and administrative measures alone will never be enough."⁴
5. Mediation is a long and complex process which poses a challenge to ICRC delegates, who like to work independently and get things done at breakneck speed. Cooperation with institutions in Colombia is seldom easy, because of differences in working resources, methods and motivation, and it demands a great deal of time and energy. But the ICRC's work goes deeper if it involves civil authorities and private institutions in the search for solutions to humanitarian issues. Joint ICRC/Colombian Red Cross projects for raising awareness of international humanitarian law and assisting people displaced by the violence are examples of such cooperation.

Can the ICRC "humanize" the effects of the conflict?

Finally, the question is whether the success of the ICRC's humanitarian work in individual cases at regional level has a favourable impact on the course of the conflict in Colombia. Can the presence of the ICRC make the civil war less horrific?

At first the answer would appear to be "no". In the last few years the political conflict has spread considerably, with a corresponding

⁴ ICRC translation

increase in violations of international humanitarian law, and the number of civilians killed or displaced has risen. Progress in the humanitarian field has been hampered by the continuing erosion of the social fabric caused by the civil war. The dividing line between political conflict and criminal activity has become blurred. The violence has long since gained a momentum of its own, making political control difficult. For many unemployed young people it has now become an alternative source of income.

In practice ICRC action encounters many obstacles which limit progress on humanitarian issues. Through years of persistent activity and presence in the major conflict zones, however, the organization has still been able to give a boost to the country in a number of spheres, three of which deserve particular mention:

— *Bringing discussion about human rights and international humanitarian law into the open:* Until a few years ago, merely talking about human rights was still dangerous in Colombia. International humanitarian law had subversive connotations, and any reference to it was virtually stifled by the political and military leadership. Through their systematic efforts to inform all those concerned, ICRC delegates have helped to dispel such prejudice. Public debate on international humanitarian law is now much freer and arouses keen interest at all levels of society. A symptom of this climate of détente was Colombia's ratification of Protocol II additional to the Geneva Conventions in August 1995. The provisions of international humanitarian law increasingly form part of the instruction given to adherents of armed groups. The fact remains, however, that a particular party will often claim its rights under international law vis-à-vis the opposition but will rarely acknowledge its own obligations.

— *Bolstering of civil society:* The ICRC has become an important source of moral support especially for civilians living in remote regions, who can do little to protect themselves against armed groups. Not that it always has to seek the role of mediator or make long speeches on international humanitarian law: just listening and sincerely trying to understand a region's problems is often balm on a gaping wound, making the victims feel that they have not been completely forgotten by the rest of the world. Although the delegates themselves can do very little to meet the victims' material needs, they can use their wide range of contacts to help bridge the gap between the victims and State institutions. When the delegation is able to mobilize public resources for

those in need and involve the State in humanitarian action, the ICRC not only combats the symptoms of the conflict but also strengthens the fabric of civil society.

Decades of *violencia* have severely hampered the development of civil society. Both the illegal armed groups and the army feel obliged to demonstrate their legitimacy again and again in a conflict which most Colombians consider senseless. Here the dividing line between civilian population and armed groups is intentionally blurred. With individual civilians being branded as enemies, blacklisted and killed, it is understandable that people are afraid to protest against acts of violence, denounce social abuses and side with conflict victims. Through their regular presence in conflict zones ICRC delegates help to ease the population's often exaggerated fears. As their immunity is respected by all sides, they are able to condemn violence against civilians, and their presence in many situations serves as a protective shield. Representatives of the authorities, *personeros*, human rights groups and the media feel encouraged, with the delegates there, to break the silence, take initiatives, organize seminars or pay attention to the plight of the displaced.

— *Contributing to a culture of consensus:* By acting as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC has managed to solve many problems of a humanitarian nature. Its successes include defusing the tension before the eventual release of the 70 soldiers, negotiating to restore calm after prison unrest and resettling displaced persons. Such activities are discussed in the street, commented on by the media and form the starting point for ever-recurring discussions about the conflict and the possibility of peace. Thus, a few days after the handover of the soldiers, the Colombian government announced a fresh peace initiative, appointed a special envoy for exploratory talks with the armed opposition and gave the go-ahead for regional peace forums and partial agreements aimed at “humanizing” the conflict. Through its mediation work in Colombia the ICRC is promoting underdeveloped values such as consensus thinking and tolerance. Every peaceful solution to a conflict is a victory for consensus over confrontation. Successes in mediation clearly demonstrate that it is possible to break out of the spiral of violence.

In Colombia the ICRC faces a dual challenge. It is confronted not only with an armed conflict but also with a culture of violence which claims more than 25,000 lives each year. The short term offers no prospect of a solution to what will soon be a forty-year conflict, and the ICRC has accepted that it faces many years of work ahead. Therefore

it cannot be content merely to instruct armed groups in international humanitarian law and to provide conflict victims with material and moral support. As the largest international organization working in Colombia, the ICRC also has to shoulder responsibility for civil society. Apart from ensuring emergency management of humanitarian crises, ICRC delegates can provide a longer-term stimulus if they extend their information work to include civil decision-making bodies, coordinate their activity with private and State institutions, and venture to bring the question of the social roots of violence into the open. This is anything but a surrender of the ICRC's independence and neutrality; rather, it is a matter of using these principles to support constructive initiatives for the development of Colombian society.
