A note from the Editor

It was a hundred years ago, on 29 July 1899, that a solemn ceremony was held in The Hague to close the First International Peace Conference. Summoned at the initiative of Czar Nicholas II, the plenipotentiaries of the leading European States and of China, the United States, Japan, Mexico, Persia and Siam had been given the task "of seeking the most effective means of ensuring to all peoples the benefits of a real and lasting peace, and, above all, of limiting the progressive development of existing armaments" (in the words of the Russian memorandum). The Conference was a dismal failure. At that point in history the mistrust between a number of the principal powers was such that, for example, the Conference was unable to adopt a single disarmament measure. Only the constitution of the Permanent Court of Arbitration allowed those to save face who had wished to set up an institution to ensure the peaceful settlement of differences between States.

On the other hand, the 1899 Conference was a resounding success in an area initially considered by the meeting's promoters as secondary: adapting international humanitarian law to modern warfare. The texts adopted in The Hague – in particular the Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, with its annexed Regulations – codified and developed the law in force. But the Hague Conference also marked the beginning of a process aimed at developing the law of armed conflict, today more commonly known as international humanitarian law. This process has lasted throughout the 20th century. Several of the contributions to this issue of the Review demonstrate the wide scope of the decisions taken in The Hague a hundred years ago.

The circumstances were different indeed 50 years later when another diplomatic conference, this time convened in Geneva at the invitation of the Swiss government, adopted the four Conventions of 12 August 1949 for the protection of war victims. As Jean Pictet recalled in an article of which several excerpts

are published in this issue of the Review, the States had just emerged from a horrific war in which the protection furnished by international law to the victims of the hostilities had proved painfully inadequate. There was considerable catching up to do and this took the form of negotiations for a treaty to protect the civilian population. Innovation was also needed. The resulting Geneva Conventions of 1949 today constitute the fundamental law for the protection of the victims of armed conflict and the conduct of hostilities in wartime. They are supplemented by the two Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977, by several international treaties dealing with precise subjects and by a background of important customary rules.

Is it possible to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Conventions? This question was asked by the author of an article that appeared in the previous issue of the Review, and it is a particularly important question at a time when a number of wars are taking human lives and destroying that on which life depends. In none of the texts published in the present issue does the author either celebrate victory or endeavour to prove defeat. What they do instead is to study specific aspects of international humanitarian law and difficulties in implementing it, both means of strengthening the foundation for greater respect for the law.

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