

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



The ICRC at 150: reflections of an Asian admirer

Tommy Koh

Prof. Tommy Koh is Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, Chairman of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, and Rector of Tembusu College at the National University of Singapore. He is co-chairman of the China-Singapore Forum, the India-Singapore Strategic Dialogue, and of the Japan-Singapore Symposium. Prof. Koh was Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York for 13 years. He has served as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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I thank the *International Review of the Red Cross* for inviting me to contribute to its special issue on the auspicious occasion of the 150th anniversary of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

I have served twice as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN). It was during my second posting (1974–1984) that I had the opportunity to work closely with the ICRC to save Cambodian lives. I have also served as an adviser to the ICRC for several years. I regard myself as an old friend and admirer of the ICRC. In this reflective essay, I will touch on its past, present, and future.

The founding principles

I recall the fact that it all started in 1863, when a group of five members from a pre-existing charity from Geneva, led by Henry Dunant, were so horrified by what had

happened on the battlefield of Solferino that they decided to do something about the fate of the wounded on the battlefields. Their simple idea of providing humanitarian relief to wounded soldiers was founded on the three principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality. The success of their initiative is an example of the power of an idea whose time has come. It is also an example of a private initiative that has changed the world. I look forward to the day when Asian visionaries will also promote initiatives that will have such a benevolent impact on the world.

ICRC's unique role and functions

I regard the ICRC as a unique and indispensable international organisation. I attach very high value to its functions, which include the following:

- (i) being the custodian and promoter of international humanitarian law (IHL);
- (ii) providing relief supplies to prisoners of war and detained civilians;
- (iii) visiting persons deprived of their liberty;
- (iv) providing relief supplies to people affected by humanitarian emergencies, caused either by man-made or natural disasters;
- (v) being present on the ground in conflict situations in order to ensure compliance with IHL;
- (vi) tracing missing persons;
- (vii) using quiet diplomacy to raise awareness of the needs of those affected by humanitarian emergencies, and to persuade decision-makers to alleviate the suffering of those so affected and to respect IHL; and
- (viii) acting as the partner of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

War will always be with us

War is inherently a cruel and destructive enterprise. However, given the nature of man, war will always be with us. According to a 2007 publication, there are 32 armed conflicts in 27 countries, affecting 2.3 billion people.¹ Because it is impossible to banish wars, we should do what we can to reduce their cruelties by promoting and strengthening IHL, which, inter alia, prescribes rules prohibiting

1 Jessica Williams (ed.), *50 Facts that Should Change the World 2.0*, The Disinformation Company, New York, 2007.

Editor's note: The Disinformation Company is a New York-based privately owned publisher, which defines itself as 'the search service of choice for individuals looking for information on current affairs, politics, strange science and "hidden information" that seldom slips through the cracks of corporate-owned media', available at: <http://disinfo.com/about/> (last visited 19 June 2013).

the use of certain weapons, such as chemical and biological weapons, and the targeting of civilians, and provides for the protection of prisoners of war, the protection of women and children.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and international humanitarian law

My colleagues and I, in the High-Level Task Force on the drafting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Charter in 2007, we agreed to include in Article 2, para (2)(j), a reference to IHL: 'ASEAN and its Member States shall [uphold] the United Nations Charter and international law, including international humanitarian law.' My impression is that, in Asia, there is insufficient knowledge, understanding, and ownership of IHL. The ICRC should consider enhancing its engagement with ASEAN to promote the better understanding of, adherence to, and ownership of IHL within ASEAN and in the wider Asian region. I note with approval the ICRC's activities with ASEAN and in Asia; for example, the annual Southeast Asia Teaching Session on IHL for government officials and academics, the national and regional moot court competitions, and the fact that, for the first time, the Pictet competition was held in an Asian country (Thailand) this year, in 2013.² We should, however, aim to raise the bar. The ICRC should work more closely with the Secretariats of ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. The ICRC should work harder to earn the trust of the governments in Asia. The ICRC should also offer its help to those governments in a way that is culturally acceptable.

Tribute to ICRC delegates

ICRC delegates are present, on the ground, in almost all the conflict situations in the world. Some of the conflict situations are highly dangerous. As a result, some brave and dedicated men and women have lost their lives in the line of duty.

I would like to refer to a case where no ICRC lives were lost, but many Cambodian lives saved. In 1979, the world was shocked by the sight of hundreds of thousands of starving, sick, and dying Cambodians arriving at the Thai-Cambodian border. The UN and ICRC sprang into action. In a joint operation, co-led by the ICRC and UNICEF, with the legendary Sir Robert Jackson, acting as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, the Cambodian refugees were given

2 See ICRC, 'Malaysia: South-East and East Asia teaching session on IHL', available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2012/malaysia-ihl-interview-2012-07-17.htm> (last visited 19 June 2013), and ICRC, 'International Humanitarian Law Moot Court competitions 2012, National and South Asian rounds', available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/event/2012/ihl-event-2012-07-25.htm> (last visited 19 June 2013). For a short presentation of the Jean Pictet competition, see <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57jmgf.htm> (last visited 19 June 2013).

shelter and safety, food and medical care, both along the border and in special camps built on Thai territory. I visited one such camp, at Khao I Dang, and was immensely impressed by what I saw. What was accomplished on the ground would not have been possible but for the skilful diplomacy of three ICRC delegates at the UN, namely, Jean-Pierre Hocke, Jacques Moreillon, and Michel Veuthey. Although many years have passed since those critical years when we worked closely at the UN to save the Cambodians, I wish to remember their contributions and pay them my respect. The success of the ICRC is due, in no small part, to the excellence of its people.

The Singapore Red Cross Society

I wish to conclude by mentioning the Singapore Red Cross Society. The National Societies and the ICRC have common origins, and the ICRC delegation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, has been very supportive of the Singapore Red Cross Society. The National Society plays an active role inside Singapore. However, equally important is the role it plays in responding to appeals for help by sister Societies. The Singapore Red Cross Society is trusted both by the government and the public. It has a proud record of responding promptly, generously, and competently to appeals for help. The following examples illustrate this record.

The Indian Ocean tsunami

In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the Singapore Red Cross Society received an outpouring of support, both in cash and in kind. The Society also coordinated the activities of many non-governmental organisations that rushed in to help. The money contributed by the public was used to rebuild infrastructure and housing, to build an orphanage, and to supply the people with an easy-to-use device to turn polluted water into safe drinking water in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

Myanmar, China, and Japan

The Singapore Red Cross Society also responded promptly and effectively to assist the victims of the 2008 earthquakes in Sichuan and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. In the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, there was also an outpouring of public support for Japan. The Singapore Red Cross Society has used the money raised to build community facilities in three of the affected areas. I am happy to observe that the Singapore Red Cross Society has become extremely active and, in response to humanitarian crisis situations, especially those in Asia, has stepped up to the plate to help raise funds and emergency supplies for the victims.

The promotion of IHL

The Singapore Red Cross Society also plays an active role in promoting IHL. For example, it regularly organises IHL debate series and assists our law students who participate in the Jean Pictet IHL competition and in the Hong Kong Red Cross IHL moot competition. The Society also works with the Ministry of Defence in the dissemination of IHL to members of our armed forces.

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, I am confident that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will continue to be relevant in the future – a future full of new challenges and new opportunities. The new media and social media are examples of new opportunities. One of the challenges for the ICRC will be to keep up-to-date with developments in the field of armed conflict, such as the complicated role of non-state actors, revolutionary developments in defence technology, and paradigm shifts in global geopolitics.

In an increasingly globalised world, the ICRC should also reflect on how it can become a more globalised organisation. In some parts of Asia, the ICRC is viewed as a white man's organisation. Given the unhappy colonial history of these countries, this perception is an impediment to ICRC's acceptance and effectiveness. The ICRC should reflect deeply on what it can do to shed this image. Certain things, however, should not change. The ICRC's core principle of neutrality must not change. It is the basis on which trust is built. In conflict situations, trust is a rare and precious asset.

Happy Anniversary!