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Autor: Kellenberger, Jakob / Ribi, Rolf
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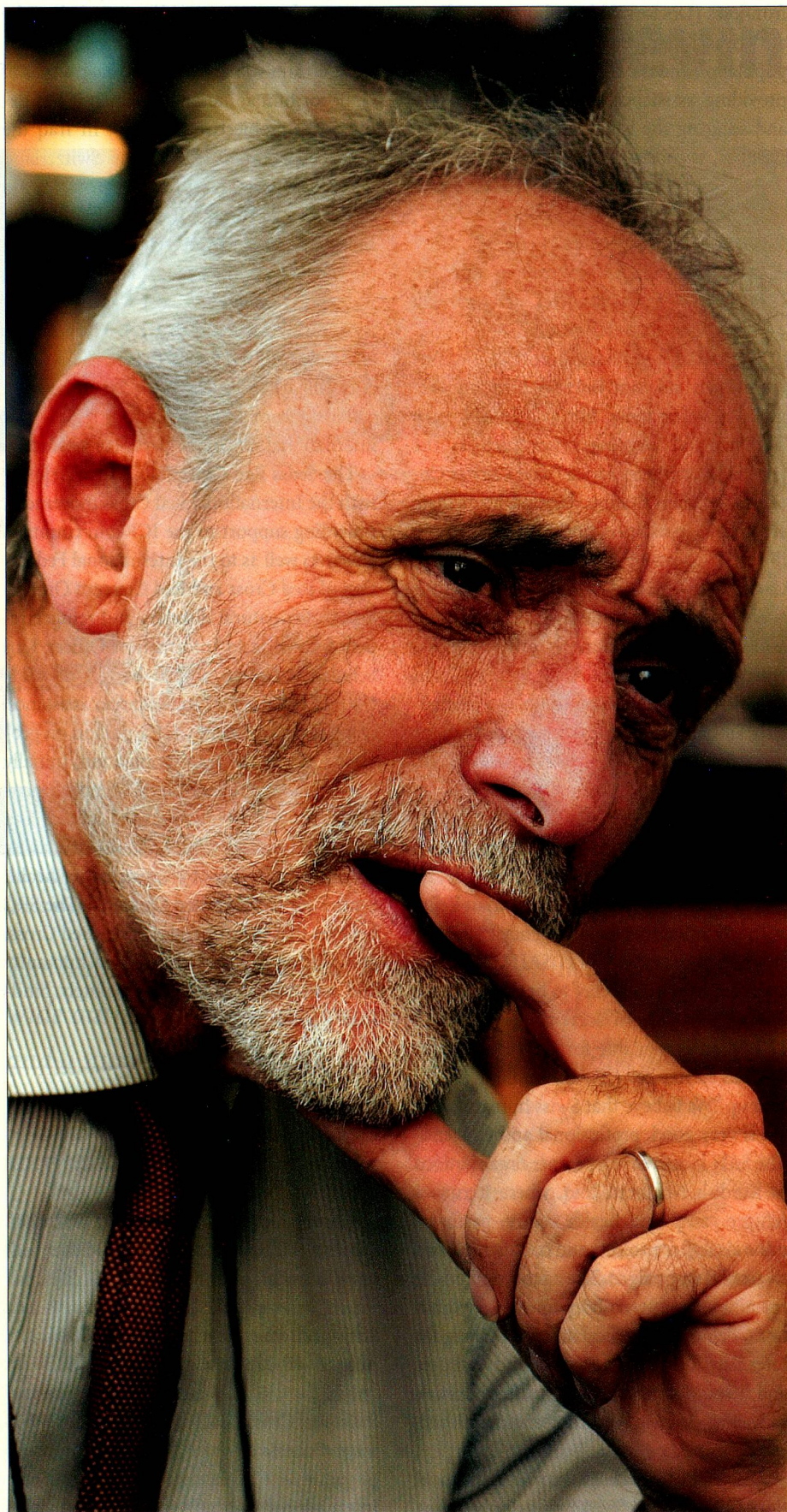
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Patrick Lüthy

Red Cross

At various locations around the world international law is disregarded and human dignity is being downtrodden. But for ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger, complacency is not an option.

SWISS REVIEW: Jakob Kellenberger: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been in the headlines almost every day due to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Does that please you as the President of an otherwise relatively publicity-shy institution?

JAKOB KELLENBERGER: I do not derive any particular pleasure from seeing the ICRC in the headlines, because mostly this is a bad sign for the world. I would rather have attention drawn to us by something other than war or conflict. It would be good if politicians and the public paid a little more sustained attention to conflicts throughout the world.

The ICRC aims to act as a neutral, independent and trustworthy institution. It must be difficult for you to decide between silence and speaking out in times of war and crisis.

You need to distinguish between speaking in public and talking in confidence with the conflicting parties. In confidential discussions with conflicting parties, the ICRC speaks out against any violation of international humanitarian rights or unacceptable conditions in prisons it has visited. We are more reticent when it comes to public announcements, because the acceptance and hence ability of the organisation to gain access to victims of armed conflict, wherever they are, depends on the trust placed in the ICRC in cases of conflict.

Is it correct that the President of the ICRC can talk to the leaders of virtually every country in the world?

Indeed: in my experience to date, it has always been possible to see the head of state in any country with problems where the ICRC aims to provide assistance.

Jakob Kellenberger (58) has been President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for three and a half years. Before this he was a secretary of state at the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and between 1994 and 1998 was in charge of bilateral negotiations with the EU. The Swiss from Appenzell is regarded as a tenacious, patient negotiator.

will not give up

Are there any state leaders or groups with whom you would refuse to speak?

No. If the ICRC is to exercise its mandate everywhere and help people throughout the world, it must be prepared to talk to all those involved in the conflict, whatever one's opinion of these leaders. Ultimately we gain access only if the conflicting parties agree to this.

In the three years you have served as ICRC President, is there any event that sticks in your memory?

There are lots of them. The most important thing in my view is to see that people's real situation has improved as a result of a negotiation or discussion. A recent example is the hundreds of prisoners of war and civilians who remained incarcerated after the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Last August, following my intervention and discussions with both national leaders, all prisoners of war were allowed to return home. It's moments like these that are important for me. But lots of ICRC employees contribute to such an end result.

In your work you are confronted with need and poverty, conflict and war. How can you come to terms with such situations?

I'm not the only one who has to handle such experiences. There are 10,000 or more ICRC field workers who also have to come to terms with such suffering. For them it's even more difficult. Naturally some events strike us as extremely sad. The priority for ICRC employees and myself is on the people we want to assist. One cannot help but be dismayed when one sees conflicts and wars continuing without any resolution in sight. And one cannot help but feel sad when one sees how international humanitarian rights are violated in many areas. This is why we strive to obtain a commitment from countries to better respect these rights. There is no alternative – we must simply keep these efforts going. Complacency is not an option for an organisation like the ICRC.

Is international humanitarian law observed better or worse nowadays than formerly?

Difficult to say. Humanitarian rights are certainly respected too little nowadays, but that was also the case in previous times. If these rights were better observed, the humanitari-

an consequences of war would be less severe. Another problem is the fact that nowadays there are lots of civil wars the nature of which is often highly complex. Often we have problems gaining access to the conflicting parties. Promoting international humanitarian rights in civil wars is a very hard task.

According to the ICRC structure, the 19-member committee is the supervising organ. Why is its current composition exclusively Swiss?

I can see why you asked me this, because the ICRC is a very international organisation. The reasons why the supervising organ is composed only of Swiss are mainly historical. Mono-nationality facilitates rapid decision-making, since this is not impeded by disputes of a national nature or political discussions as to a fair distribution of seats.

How is the ICRC perceived by the world at large – as a Swiss institution, a Western institution, or a neutral humanitarian institution? Gaining recognition as a neutral organisation independent of country, creed or culture, was a huge challenge for the ICRC. Personally speaking, I feel we are perceived as such. But it is not enough to be independent, neutral and non-partisan. We must also be seen to be such.

What is the difference between the ICRC's humanitarian work and the humanitarian activities of the UN?

The UN operates its own humanitarian agencies such as the UNHCR for refugees, UNICEF for children or the World Food Programme, which do valuable work as do hundreds of other agencies. One of the special characteristics about the ICRC is its absolute independence. The ICRC is often regarded as more independent than UN agencies.

Switzerland is the third-largest contributor to the ICRC. You have already mentioned that this share should be larger.

The ICRC is grateful for Switzerland's contribution last year of CHF 88 million; that is a substantial sum which will primarily benefit the head office. But it is a fact that other important donor countries such as the USA, the UK and the Netherlands, have significantly increased their contributions over the

last ten years, while the Swiss share has practically stagnated at between 10 and 12 per cent. Added to this, the ICRC is not exactly economically insignificant for Switzerland. The salaries and social benefits paid out in Switzerland, coupled with purchases made from Swiss companies, amount to at least three times the annual Swiss contribution. An increase in Switzerland's contribution for field operations would certainly be justified.

America and Britain, the coalition partners in the war in Iraq, are the most important donors to the ICRC. Is there any pressure from these countries on how the ICRC uses its funds?

No, there is no pressure. I would even go as far as to say that these two countries do more than just contribute large sums of money. They leave it up to the ICRC to decide on where much of their funds should be used. These states respect the independence of the ICRC.

Who should finance humanitarian aid in Iraq and who should provide assistance to the people in the country itself?

We feel it is important for the ICRC and other humanitarian activities to be given sufficient latitude to perform independent, exclusively humanitarian actions. But the occupying powers have a clear responsibility towards the population in occupied areas. As such they, too, will undoubtedly offer humanitarian aid.

What do you see as the ICRC's task after the war has ended?

After the war our task will be relatively clear, as dictated by our mandate. Our protective actions will cover visiting prisoners of war and detained civilians as well as reuniting families. The ICRC will also perform other tasks related to the Fourth Geneva Convention. Another important task is to ensure water supplies and restore hospitals and sanitary installations. Here the ICRC can draw on years of experience in Iraq. In the event of large numbers of internally displaced persons the ICRC will be responsible for providing these people with assistance and care.

Interview: Rolf Ribi

This interview was held at the headquarters of the ICRC in Geneva in April 2003.

Translated from German.