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## II. GENERAL ACTIVITIES AND PERMANENT RESPONSIBILITIES

### XXth INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE RED CROSS

The XXth International Conference of the Red Cross was held in Vienna from the 2nd through the 9th October 1965. It was preceded from 25th September by meetings of various commissions and organs of the League of Red Cross Societies. It was attended by 580 representatives of 92 National Societies and 84 Governments.

Preparation for this important conference, the first to be held for eight years, set a heavy task for the ICRC, which had to prepare basic documents covering twenty-four reports totaling over 600 pages. In addition, it took an active part in other preparatory work by assisting the Austrian Red Cross to which its deputy director for General Affairs, Mr. Claude Pilloud, made frequent visits during the Summer.

Presided over with authority and tact by Dr Hans von Lauda, President of the Austrian National Society, the results of the Conference were not disappointing. In spite of the fears to which certain difficulties had given rise, it was a magnificent demonstration of Red Cross unity and universality. On numerous items of the Agenda understanding was quickly reached and the spirit of agreement which prevailed throughout the debates resulted in almost all resolutions being adopted practically unanimously.

The following extract from the speech delivered at the opening session by Mr. Samuel A. Gonard, President of the ICRC, gives a clear picture of the scope of the tasks devolving on the Conference and also the spirit in which they were approached :

“At no time in the history of mankind has there been an institution, a political or religious movement which has been able to as-

semble the representatives of such a large number of countries in one hall in support of the same ideal.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like each one of you to realize the significance of this event and its solemnity. It in fact enshrines the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, which is its *universal* character. It answers Henry Dunant's appeal, an appeal which you will remember is made " to all mankind and, in a more restricted sense, to each race, country and family, since no one can say that he is safe from the hazards of war ".

Imagine that at this very moment the attention of the peoples of the whole world is focussed on this very hall where we are sitting. Imagine that everyone is asking whether we will once again accomplish our undertaking which is one merely of adopting or improving, by common agreement, the principles limiting man's suffering and guaranteeing the respect due to him. Is it not then impermissible for us to disappoint anyone's hope and to neglect the unique chance offered to us to come closer together? The only effective way of denouncing the horrors of war is for us to agree on the work common to us all, which is a work of humanity.

Man, with whom we are concerned today who counts on our help and can only count on it, must not be deceived. By coming to Vienna we have implicitly promised to come to his aid. That is an immense and serious task. We are not too numerous to accomplish it.

The work of the Red Cross must be universal. This means above all that no people, no human being should doubt the reason for its existence. And that also means that every individual must be convinced of its *impartiality*. All of us here present have interest in admitting that there exists an institution in the world acting above political, racial or religious considerations, outside all influences and pressures and which is consequently regarded as being impartial in all places and in all circumstances. Yes, it is indeed in our interest and our chance of salvation ! And if this institution were not to exist, we would have the moral duty of creating it.

Present technical methods enable the inhabitants of the remotest countries to learn from any corner of the globe of pleasant or unfortunate events as they take place. These events extend and also determine our responsibility and never have threats of war or hopes for peace preoccupied so many men at the same time.

Everyone knows, having heard it day after day, that peace is a vulnerable and fragile edifice. Each person thinks he knows that he possesses a means of protecting and consolidating it. It is not for the Red Cross to judge means or decide between methods. It would have indeed been presumptuous on the part of its founders to wish to set up a court and believe that all peoples would submit to its judgment. However, the Red Cross has attached itself to a more immediate and consequently a more effective task : that of giving aid. We see that this is at the same time a means of fighting for peace. If all governments which are represented here have admitted, by signing the treaty, that they recognize the humanitarian principles of the Geneva Conventions and approve their application, then they have at the same time recognized the loathsome character of war.

We thus have every reason to think that our work is good and based on solid foundations. When all international organizations have been disbanded and all meetings have failed, the Red Cross remains the only living link between the peoples. This is because we believe, because we ought to believe that its action is impartial.

The International Committee of the Red Cross in whose name I have the honour of speaking here, expects this Conference to fulfil the hopes of all those who have placed their confidence in our institution and that it will reaffirm its determination, everywhere and completely, to accomplish the humanitarian mission with which it has been entrusted."

The most significant results were undoubtedly achieved in the field of humanitarian law, a subject dealt with by one of the three Conference Commissions. Implementation and dissemination of the Geneva Conventions, as at previous conferences, drew a great deal of attention. The belief of the community of nations in the authority of the fundamental humanitarian treaties, and the need to ensure their application in all circumstances was never more strongly evident.

The Conference appealed to all nations to ensure the widest possible instruction in the Geneva Conventions among their Armed Forces, including those made available to the United Nations. The appeal also urged Governments to take appropriate measures to repress violations of the Conventions, particularly by completing legislation to this effect.

Another major field was the protection of civilian populations against the dangers of modern warfare. The Conference encouraged studies by the ICRC in three directions : legal protection of the population against indiscriminate warfare, the status of civil defence personnel, and improvement of the consideration due to civilian medical and nursing personnel. It was recommended that the ICRC call together one or several important conferences of experts in the near future.

There was much work done by a General Commission as well as by the Health, Social Welfare and Junior Red Cross Commission.

The Conference formally adopted the Declaration of Red Cross Principles which will hereafter be solemnly read at the opening of each conference. The world Red Cross movement thus possesses a doctrine acceptable to all peoples.

Like previous conferences, the XXth was called upon to discuss the topic : " The Red Cross as a factor of world peace ". Despite opinions which, at the beginning, appeared divergent, agreement was finally reached on a text in which the Conference " urges all Governments to settle their international differences by peaceful means in the spirit of international law ", and " encourages the International Committee of the Red Cross to undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations Organization and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, all efforts which might contribute to the prevention or settlement of armed conflicts ".

Other subjects dealt with included relief actions, radiocommunications, the creation of the Henry Dunant Institute, the reuniting of families, preventive medicine, blood-donation and nursing care.

The Conference also elected the five members of the Standing Commission who join the four *ex-officio* representatives of the ICRC and the League.<sup>1</sup>

Finally the Conference decided to hold its next meeting in Turkey. The XXIst International Conference of the Red Cross will therefore be held in Istanbul in 1969.

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<sup>1</sup> Those appointed for a period of four years are : General Collins, President of the American Red Cross ; Mr von Lauda, President of the Austrian Red Cross ; the Countess of Limerick, Vice-Chairman of the British Red Cross ; Professor Miterev, President of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR ; Doctor Newman-Morris, President of the Australian Red Cross. During its constitutive meeting, the Commission elected the Countess of Limerick as its Chairman.

On the various subjects discussed, the Conference adopted forty resolutions ; these have been published in booklet form by the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies. One in particular of these resolutions is of special importance ; it is one which henceforth is known as the “ Vienna Declaration ”.

Indeed, the Conference, concerned at the great danger threatening humanity due to the development of weapons and methods of warfare and considering “ indiscriminate warfare a threat to the future of civilization ”, set forth in its XXVIIIth Resolution the following principles which it urged all governments and authorities involved in conflicts to respect :

- The right of the parties to a conflict to adopt means of injuring the enemy is not unlimited ;
- it is forbidden to launch attacks against the civilian population as such ;
- distinction must be made at all times between persons taking part in the hostilities and members of the civilian population to the effect that the latter be spared as much as possible ;
- the general principles of the law of war apply to nuclear and similar weapons.

The text of this resolution, which the Conference wished to keep general in scope, is today the only example of a body of principles proclaimed by an assembly attended by government delegates and relating to the protection of populations against hostilities. The “ Vienna Declaration ” ought therefore to remind everybody that only the observance of the principles it postulates can, in extreme circumstances, safeguard at least the very minimum of humanity and civilization, and thereby contribute to the return of peace.

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANITARIAN LAW**

As the preceding pages have shown, the XXth International Conference of the Red Cross was of particular importance for the ICRC and its activities in the field of humanitarian law. However, apart from this Conference, the ICRC's Legal Department has