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INTRODUCTION

by Dr. Eric Martin
President of the ICRC

Even a hasty study of this report, if it is to be useful and shed light on the work of the ICRC in 1973, calls for some general comments.

Last year, the ICRC was active on four continents: it carried out heavy tasks and shouldered its treaty responsibilities in several operational spheres. The reader will learn of the results achieved and the difficulties encountered. In a highly politicized world, the seed of humanitarian law sometimes sprouts with difficulty. In some cases, the ICRC has observed that belligerents have failed to comply with their obligations or delayed doing so.

Yet the results of humanitarian action have unmistakably been worthwhile. The international community asks the ICRC to fulfil an ever larger number of tasks that it will entrust to no one else. Governments, National Red Cross Societies, the United Nations and other institutions understand the nature of its mission, its impartiality, its political and ideological neutrality. They place in it a deep trust which is a powerful encouragement to pursue the course it has mapped out.

There has been some public criticism of the attitude of the ICRC, regarded as unduly timid in condemning breaches of humanitarian law. A perusal of the ICRC's annual reports is enough to dispel any misunderstanding. Public protest is no means of aiding conflict victims, and the aim is to act effectively. For the ICRC discretion is a guarantee of effectiveness. It is hard to realize what efforts of persuasion and what numerous approaches are made to the governments concerned to ensure that the Conventions are fully applied. A fact that is often overlooked is that the ICRC has no means at its disposal other than reason, the integrity of its principles, and independence. It can use no constraint. Its sole power lies in its moral authority. Even in a world which only too often recognizes force alone, that power is singularly effective.

Geneva, April 1974.

