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FOREWORD

As each New Year dawns, leaders of nations are wont to exchange their wishes for peace and prosperity. Yet as the year draws to its close, with previous conflicts still rife and new outbreaks of war and tension in other parts of the world, it is all too clear each time how few of these wishes have been fulfilled. The year 1980 was no exception to this unhappy rule. The ICRC Annual Report, which is to some extent a gauge of the shifting balance of war and peace in the world, is indicative in this respect.

The ICRC's task in 1980 has been a particularly heavy and complex one, due to the continued deterioration in international affairs. The recrudescing clashes in Africa, Asia and Latin America have compelled the ICRC to intervene on many more occasions, calling for a substantial increase both in personnel and in financial and logistic resources. At the same time international humanitarian law, which has been accepted as binding by virtually all States, has all too often been disregarded by its most fervent champions—in lip service—around the conference tables. Thus, non-recognition of belligerency has been used as a pretext by certain States to evade their treaty obligations. Others have barricaded themselves behind their sacrosanct “national sovereignty” to deprive their own citizens of the minimal protection offered by the Geneva Conventions in the case of civil war.

These attitudes, so incompatible with the spirit of the Red Cross, are unfortunately tending to become more widespread. They not only affect the action of the ICRC and the fate of the victims it is striving to succour and protect. They are also evidence of the inability of the Community of Nations to enforce its self-imposed legal code of behaviour.

Born in the heart of nineteenth century Europe, the Red Cross has survived the upheavals which, in the space of only a few decades, have changed the geopolitical map of the world. Today it has become a universal movement embracing some 230 million members in 126 countries. This expansion, which has continued steadily for more than a century since its foundation, is due to the fact that the Red Cross defends values which are common to all civilizations, all races and all nations; namely, respect for the human being in all circumstances.

Even in the most critical moments, the ICRC never despairs of advancing the cause of humanity. Its delegates never cease in their endeavours to start a dialogue, to resume negotiations, to increase their contacts in the four corners of the world to bring protection and assistance to the victims of conflicts. All these efforts may take weeks or even months before the first encouraging sign, the first glimmer of hope appears. How often we have believed that a breakthrough was going to be achieved at last, only to be swiftly disillusioned.

I therefore advise the reader to approach the present document with this reality in mind. An annual report can never be exhaustive. It only gives a general outline of what the ICRC has done in 1980. The sober recital of facts and figures can never convey for example the amount of devotion and courage shown by hundreds of anonymous workers, both at ICRC headquarters in Geneva and out in the field. Some have lost their lives, others have endangered their health in the service of the Red Cross. I should like to express my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of them.

Alexandre Hay
President of the ICRC

