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Introduction

Founded in 1863, the ICRC has constantly pursued its original aim: to protect and assist the victims of armed conflicts.

This devotion to its original objective implies for the ICRC a perpetual re-assessment of its function, for although it is true that suffering is ever with us, the nature of conflicts and the categories of the victims caused by them are continually changing.

Those victims were, first, the wounded of armed forces in the field, to whom were later added the shipwrecked, the prisoners of war and the civilian population, those unfortunately easy targets of contemporary conflicts: women, children, aged persons, killed, maimed or orphaned by indiscriminate bombing; populations displaced, tortured, even wiped out by persons in authority exercising abusively the power in their hands.

As a consequence of the changed nature of conflicts, the ICRC's concern is now directed not only to international conflicts, but also to the ever-more numerous and deadly non-international conflicts and to internal disturbances and tension. In addition, the increasingly ideological character of conflicts, guerrilla techniques, weapons of mass destruction and the shift of focus of modern conflicts to the Third World have raised new problems for humanitarian action. Falling upon people living in very unstable conditions, such conflicts brutally upset the equilibrium and very quickly make it indispensable for essential goods, in particular food and medicaments, to be provided to ensure the survival of the people.

In order to respond as well as possible to those challenges, the ICRC must unceasingly re-assess and refine its methods. Assistance campaigns—very often, an essential concomitant to protection—demand advanced expertise in the fields of medicine, nutrition and logistics (telecommunications, transport, relief management, etc.). Since the ICRC is active in situations where food could become a weapon of economic warfare, it has laid down for itself very strict procedures for checking all relief

distributions, at the same time permitting it to meet the quite legitimate demands of governments and other donors to be accurately informed of the manner in which the funds they have entrusted to the ICRC have been utilized.

Furthermore, the ICRC is fully conscious that its strength lies in its delegates—young men and women, mostly—whom it despatches to its theatres of operations, in the prisons, refugee camps, bombed cities; it, therefore, devotes the time and energy necessary to their selection and training.

While it is first and foremost through direct action that the ICRC seeks to achieve the aim it set itself originally, it is aware that such action must go hand in hand with a continual process of reflection.

This process is first of all internal. Being unceasingly the object of entreaties in a variety of spheres—Red Cross and disarmament, capture of hostages, death penalty, etc.—unceasingly confronted with unfamiliar situations, the ICRC's policies must be coherent and predictable. Its credibility and the confidence placed in it are at stake.

The process of reflection must be pursued within the whole of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, which today contains some 135 National Societies. This movement draws its strength from its unity, which must be maintained throughout the world beyond each country's borders, in the respect of the seven fundamental principles it has adopted: humanity—impartiality—neutrality—independence—voluntary service—unity—universality. In the mounting chaos around us, it is by its firm adherence to those principles that the movement will find it possible to carry out universally its humanitarian activities.

The reflection generated by action has urged the ICRC, throughout its history, to encourage governments to enact legislation in the field of international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts, in order to tackle efficiently the practical problems encountered in the field. The latest achievement in this domain was the adoption in 1977 of the Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions.

While the reflection leading to legislation is a never-ending process, the ICRC, during this present period, is laying greater stress, first, on the strict observance, by all parties engaged in armed conflict, of the rules in force and on the efforts that should be exercised to that end by the whole international community and second, on the formal adoption, by the States, of the 1977 Protocols (over two-thirds of the States, including some of the Great Powers, are not yet bound by those instruments); and lastly, on the dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law among a very great variety of circles, and in particular among the armed forces: this is a duty which the States must not neglect, otherwise, the undertakings which they have assumed in the realm of the law of war will remain a dead letter.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that ICRC devotion to its original aim constitutes also a limit which it has knowingly set to its humanitarian activity: that is not because it is insensitive to the suffering of victims of drought, floods or other disasters; it is rather because the ICRC considers that efficacy demands a distribution of duties and that its special function as a neutral intermediary can be most useful in the already huge domain of conflicts.

As a private and independent institution, the ICRC has been entrusted by the international community with well-defined functions: in particular, the Geneva Conventions have bestowed upon it the right to visit prisoners of war and civilian internees in an international armed conflict and have granted it the possibility to propose its services for other humanitarian tasks in both international and non-international armed conflicts. The ICRC's right to put forward such a proposal—or, as it is often called, the right of initiative—is also laid down in the Statutes of the International Red Cross, and is the basis for ICRC action in situations of internal trouble or internal tension.

Nevertheless, the ICRC is conscious that its entire action is founded upon the confidence which people have in it and that such confidence can be gained only by its absolute devotion to its own principles, by its steadfast adherence to the standards it has fixed for itself, and by its constantly renewed capacity to be moved by, and to refuse to accept as inevitable, the sufferings of all human beings. It is also aware that it is engaged in a struggle that cannot be overcome definitively: there can never be enough relief done for conflict victims or sufficient contributions made toward the establishment of a lasting peace.

It is with these firm convictions that the ICRC presents the report of its activities in 1984.