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Foreword

For an institution, one hundred and twenty-five years is a respectable age, but it is a mere instant in terms of human history.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which this year and for the next eighteen months celebrates the birth of an ideal, is only too conscious of the paradoxes it embodies. Yet its strength lies precisely in its apparent contradictions: the diversity of its components, yet their unanimous identification with the Red Cross and Red Crescent principles; the coexistence of fledgling and veteran National Societies, the latter seasoned by the tragedies of our century; the variety of its operational settings, ranging from conflict zones to lands of asylum.

Although in the course of its development, the Movement has had to adjust some of its aims, it has never betrayed its fundamental nature. It has steadfastly endeavoured to remain true to its principles in circumstances that jeopardized its impartiality or neutrality.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, faced with situations of extreme tension sometimes fuelled by ancestral hatred, has constantly had to steer a middle course. In 1987, as in previous years, the institution's main challenge was to carry forward its work, while at the same time developing new means of resolving not only protracted, but ever more numerous conflicts.

To control its expansion, prompted by the growing number of areas requiring its intervention, the ICRC must not only draw on its experience, but also and to an equal extent be able to devise and adopt new approaches, and take necessary risks. In so doing, its sole constraint and concern should be the well-being of those whom it is its mandate to assist and protect throughout the world: the victims or potential victims of conflicts.

Over the decades, the international community has created a legal framework — international humanitarian law — conferring on the ICRC a universal mandate for action. Along with its obligations under that law, the institution has at its disposal an invaluable tool enabling it to act outside of the scope of the Conventions when required for strictly humanitarian purposes. This is its right of initiative, exercised both by the institution itself and by its delegates in the field or its "negotiators" in the ministries.

As the institution's President for the past eight months, I have had the opportunity of both witnessing and participating in the uni-

que task of helping people whose fate rests in the hands of their fellow men. While this activity is deeply rewarding, it carries with it a heavy burden of responsibility. One must never lose sight of the fact that, although many have been helped, others continue to be deliberately deprived of humanitarian aid by their governments or by opposition groups.

It is undeniable that the active and practical contribution to peace made by the Movement's every component was impeded on several occasions in 1987, and that the days and months lost can never be restored to those who awaited our help in vain.

I have nonetheless acquired the firm conviction, based on my experience within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and on outside testimonies, that the humanitarian cause is gaining ascendancy. Cohesion among the Movement's components, mutual support in troubled times, and faithful adherence to the fundamental principles are drawing us ever closer to a more humane world. The ICRC will continue to dedicate itself to this cause with perseverance, thoroughness and humility.

Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the ICRC

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cornelio Sommaruga', with a long, sweeping underline.



(Photo: ICRC/B. Plantier)

6 May, 1987: Transfer of powers between Mr. Alexandre Hay, outgoing President, and Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the ICRC.