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FOREWORD

All through 1989 the winds that blew over the planet were full of threat and promise. Conflicts died down. At times peace broke out. Crowds clamouring for a better life cheered the advent of a new society.

Other people had less reason to cheer, no cause for such explosions of joy. In grim contrast, they were struggling to survive, oppressed by hardship so endlessly repetitive that it had become their normal background.

In these last years of the twentieth century, the International Committee of the Red Cross is most in its element among these peoples beyond the pale. Demands upon it have grown steadily, in scale and in number, on every continent. So gigantic are its tasks that they cover every dimension of man's inhumanity to man.

To a great extent the ICRC had of course expected these increased commitments, but its experience of the last few years had hardly prepared it to achieve so much in so many places at a time.

This is encouraging in terms of numbers of persons protected and assisted, family messages exchanged, relief operations conducted with no more than normal setbacks, medical care for countless conflict victims, both civilian and military, and prison doors opening on frightened lonely prisoners. But the ICRC's notable successes in accomplishing its humanitarian aims require similarly more strenuous commitment by the international community. Yet 1989 showed all too plainly how hard it is to obtain humanitarian concessions beyond the limits self-imposed by States, to transform ingrained habits or quicken the pulse of officialdom.

We regret this. It is our duty to say so, even though some donors have encouraged us by their prompt and generous response to appalling needs. We must never forget the lesson of history, which is that the ICRC does not choose which victims it is going to help. Donors who enable it to come to the aid of all of them in their hour of need are showing a sense of responsibility that rejects the isolationism common in trade and politics but intolerable in humanitarian aid. Victims can't wait.

That two ICRC delegates were kidnapped in Lebanon during devoted service there is eloquent testimony to the context of extreme tension in which the ICRC has to work. ICRC delegates and their colleagues in National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and all the employees of the ICRC at its 48 delegations all over the world, are often exposed to confused and perilous situations. Some have been killed or wounded in the active service of the ICRC.

In 1989, when the international community joined the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in celebrating the 125th anniversary of the original Geneva Convention, it was more than ever necessary to insist that the humanitarian undertakings solemnly entered into by 166 States should be duly respected, and above all to stress that humanitarian action must at all times prevail over barbarity. That is what the ICRC tries to do. Day in, day out. Always.

Cornelio SOMMARUGA
President of the ICRC

