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FOREWORD

The profound upheavals that changed the face of the world in 1991 once again focused the attention of both States and individuals on the question of rights. But whose rights are to prevail? Those of military commanders or those of political strategists? Those of the mighty or those of the weak?

The foremost concern of the International Committee of the Red Cross is to defend the right of victims to protection and assistance. This is the very basis of our work, the expression of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's fundamental and central principle of humanity.

Both the ICRC's field operations and its activities in diplomatic circles in 1991 highlighted the vital importance of international humanitarian law in today's world. Whether scorned or respected, acknowledged or wilfully ignored, the law had an undeniable influence on the many conflicts that raged during the year.

The Gulf war and the fighting in Yugoslavia, to mention only two of the year's major crises, gave sharper definition to the scope and limitations of international humanitarian law. In both situations, the right of non-combatants and of people no longer bearing arms to receive assistance was largely subordinated to the parties' strategic interest in seeing the law applied, or to the immediate or potential advantage they felt they could gain by engaging in dialogue through a humanitarian intermediary.

The ICRC, whose work on the world's battlefields over the past 129 years has given it unparalleled experience of the behaviour of fighting forces, both defeated and victorious, again steadfastly endeavoured to convince belligerents of the need to maintain basic humanitarian standards. It also repeatedly urged the States party to the Geneva Conventions — now virtually every country in the world — to ensure universal application of the provisions of international humanitarian law and to fulfil their international commitments.

In this regard the postponement of the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which was to have taken place in Budapest at the end of the year, constitutes a hiatus in the multilateral dialogue which the ICRC must maintain with the States party to the Geneva Conventions if it is fully to discharge the mandate they conferred on it. This discordant note must be rectified and discussions resumed at appropriate levels on a whole range of humanitarian issues, particularly the development of international humanitarian law. Time is of the essence, since research is underway in several

countries to produce new weapons capable of inflicting superfluous injury, a development which is a source of major concern to the ICRC and those close to the institution.

There were nevertheless some unexpectedly encouraging developments in 1991, such as the easing of tension in Central America and Angola and the prospect of a lasting political settlement for the Khmers, many of whom have been living in exile for as long as twelve years. Yet if the millions of men and women in these regions are to enjoy the minimum standard of living to which every human being is entitled, the promise of peace must become a reality.

The ICRC can only regret that yet another year has passed without bringing any solution to grave humanitarian problems in other parts of the world. This is the case in the territories occupied by Israel, in the Western Sahara and in East Timor, for example. Then there are all the African countries which, year after year, become increasingly dependent on the humanitarian agencies that strive to make up for the population's lack of access to the barest means of survival. Here Liberia, Sudan and Somalia come to mind. At the same time the international community has had to cope with a sudden surge in humanitarian needs created by the break-up of countries in Eastern and Central Europe. Yet the problems in Europe, however pressing and close they are to the traditional donor communities, must not be allowed to eclipse the most urgent humanitarian priorities, those of the African continent.

Against this extremely complex backdrop the International Committee of the Red Cross, a neutral intermediary in the midst of conflict, has reaffirmed its independence — so vital to its effectiveness — while at the same time strengthening its ties with the community of States and the United Nations system. Wherever coordination is called for, the ICRC welcomes close consultation with all the humanitarian organizations that work by its side and, in that spirit, encourages constructive exchange and dialogue in the service of the humanitarian cause.



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