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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Nothing would have given me greater pleasure, in presenting the Annual Report for 1998 of the International Committee of the Red Cross, than to have been able to confirm the predictions made at the beginning of the year by those who took an optimistic view of prospects for world affairs, in particular because of the benefits anticipated from the globalization of the economy.

As the following pages, which we have tried to keep factual and objective, demonstrate, it is hard to share that optimism, and this is something I deeply regret. The truth is that 1998, just like previous years, was marked by man's continuing inhumanity to man. Violence, massacres and armed conflicts – virtually all of them, as is the rule these days, occurring within national borders – are still causing untold suffering. And, as usual, it is countless innocent and defenceless civilians who pay the heaviest toll.

There are almost thirty more theatres of armed conflict and crisis in the world now than at the end of the Cold War. The most significant feature of these situations is their unpredictability, which is obliging the ICRC to adopt ever more flexible operational methods. I would cite the outbreak of fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the violence in Guinea-Bissau and Lesotho, and the Indonesian crisis as just a few examples. As for Kosovo, although the hostilities were foreseeable, no one expected them to assume such deadly proportions. Equally striking is the protracted and unyielding nature of these conflicts, not to mention their tendency to spread over entire regions – as for example in Central Africa.

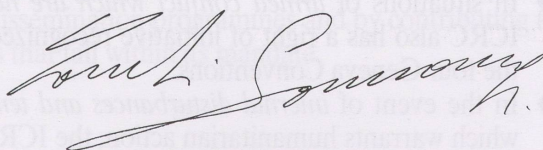
Although it is undeniably important to highlight the number and diversity of conflicts, this alone gives no adequate measure of the extent of the problems facing us. What is most disturbing is not so much the number of conflict situations as the form they take, arising as they do from all manner of irreconcilable claims, obsessions with nationalism and ethnic identity, and an upsurge in every kind of fundamentalism. The aim of belligerents is no longer simply to win the war, but very frequently to annihilate the enemy completely. What we are witnessing, consequently, is a return to a type of all-out warfare characteristic of the darkest periods of history.

Another cause of instability and fragmentation in some already fragile States is the ambition of minorities to achieve independence. As a result, in the space of ten years the number of recognized States has grown from around 140 to more than 190.

This political instability is exacerbated by economic and social problems, which foster violence and create a fertile breeding ground for illegal activities in the guise of organized crime. There is obviously a direct link between poverty and a narrowing of the margin for compromise. Without any doubt, the extreme poverty which is currently affecting whole segments of humanity – and which is increasingly associated with environmental devastation – is the greatest challenge facing the world at the end of the second millennium.

And yet there are some grounds for hope. For example, there is growing recognition that violations of humanitarian law and human rights must not go unpunished. The decision taken in Rome in 1998 to set up an International Criminal Court is an encouraging sign, as are the very large number of ratifications of the Ottawa treaty banning anti-personnel mines.

In all situations where there are human victims, the ICRC – and other organizations – constantly insist that war must not be allowed to destroy their dignity. This type of advocacy will take on special importance in 1999, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the four Geneva Conventions. To mark the occasion the ICRC has decided to give war victims a voice. May that voice be heard by those who have undertaken to comply with international humanitarian law, so that they may clearly demonstrate their resolve, whatever the circumstances, to uphold human dignity.



Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the ICRC