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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

I should like to use this message to recall a few particularly significant events that occurred in 1999, a year during which my predecessor, Cornelio Sommaruga, was in office.

On 12 August, the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, a dozen prominent figures from all over the world joined the ICRC in launching a solemn appeal urging better respect for international humanitarian law. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was among the organization's many distinguished guests from the political, social and humanitarian spheres on that occasion.

Later in the year, from 1 to 6 November, the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent brought together the States party to the Geneva Conventions, all the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and a large number of observers in Geneva. Various commitments were made for the years to come: the participants adopted a Declaration and a Plan of Action intended to mark out the humanitarian agenda for the twenty-first century. The ICRC for its part pledged to devote special attention to making women less vulnerable in time of armed conflict.

At the Conference the ICRC also presented the results of the large-scale survey it had carried out among some 20,000 people affected by war around the world. Thorough analysis of the findings of this ambitious project should lead to better understanding of the reasons why international humanitarian law, although widely known, is still so frequently violated, and this enhanced understanding should enable the ICRC to develop more effective strategies for improving compliance with the law.

In 1999 it became clear that almost all the parameters within which we had become accustomed to working during the Cold War period had changed, with sometimes momentous effects. One disquieting development is the growing difficulty of distinguishing between war and criminal activity, and between combatants and civilians. In such circumstances protection of the civilian population is more crucial than ever. But good intentions bring another danger: that of leading potential victims to believe that they will enjoy effective protection when in fact this cannot be assured. At the same time, the safety of humanitarian personnel remains a major concern. During the year under review, violence again claimed a number of victims among the staff of organizations working in the field.

The international community took a strong line on humanitarian issues, the degree of its mobilization varying widely from one context to another. This eagerness to become involved in humanitarian operations was marred by serious ambiguities, giving rise to fears, in particular, that humanitarian action was being politicized. The notion of "intervention on humanitarian grounds" has resurfaced, combining a political pursuit – intervention – with an activity which quite rightly seeks to remain apart from politics – humanitarian endeavour.

The conflicts in the Balkans, East Timor and Chechnya in 1999 were, in different ways, milestones for the humanitarian community. Each of these situations was unprecedented for the organizations working in the field, and the international response was quite different in each case. Such developments will have profound implications for the ICRC's thinking and practice in the future. But these three major

conflicts, with all the media coverage they attracted, must not make us forget that Angola has again been plunged into violence, that Afghanistan is enduring its twentieth year of fighting, and that Colombia is still struggling to find a way out of civil war.

Our world, which is now home to six billion individuals, appears to be full of promise yet heavy with threat. The events of 1999 prove that this is no time to give ground. Never in modern times have the services of the ICRC been in such demand. A score of wars and about forty situations that could flare up into open conflict at any time – that is the context in which we work. To cope with the situation, the ICRC has had not only to mobilize more and more personnel and resources and rely more heavily on its partnership with the other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but also to strengthen its management capacity, consolidate the tools it has acquired in recent years, and intensify its dialogue with other humanitarian players and with States and international organizations. Not to mention economic circles, whose power and influence over world affairs is increasing, and which humanitarian agencies can no longer afford to ignore. The ICRC's dialogue with economic players is still in its infancy, but will certainly develop in the future.


Finally, the ICRC put all its weight behind public awareness campaigns, whether to promote a ban on anti-personnel mines or the establishment of the International Criminal Court, or to curb the proliferation of light weapons. With regard to the last of these, an ICRC study showed that light weapons are frequently involved in violations of international humanitarian law. It cannot be said often enough: prevention is better than cure. While humanitarian organizations have only a modest role to play in conflict prevention, States, international and regional organizations and business circles can exert decisive influence in this area. Should they fail to do so, the humanitarian agencies will be increasingly called upon to heal the wounds.

In view of developments in the past year, it is essential to determine more precisely the roles that all the different entities concerned (States, international organizations, the military, economic circles, humanitarian agencies) will have to play in humanitarian action in the future. For the problems are not merely a matter of coordination, nor can they be incorporated in a common agenda.

I trust that the present report will not simply serve as the record of an eventful year but will also contribute to reflection on the place of humanitarian action in situations of war and other forms of violence at the dawn of a new century.



Jakob Kellenberger
President of the ICRC

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