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The Twentieth International Red Cross Conference in Retrospect

(By Hans Haug)

The following is condensed from an article which an official of the Swiss Red Cross Society wrote for the Neue Zurcher Zeitung, reporting the proceedings and resolutions of the 20th International Red Cross Conference held in Vienna from October 2-9 last, which he attended.

(PART I)

The 20th International Red Cross Conference held at the Hofburg in Vienna from October 2 to 9 last was marked by two features in particular: the trend to universality and the will to cooperation. Today 108 states adhere to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 on the Protection of the Victims of War, and 106 national Societies of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun belong to the world organization called the International Red Cross. Most of these states and organizations had sent delegates to Vienna; among the big powers only the People's Republic of China was not represented by either a government or Red Cross delegate. The absence of this important country from a conference dedicated to humanitarian questions exclusively was generally and deeply deplored. Those few delegations that tried to make the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross responsible for this departure from the rule of universality, because in addition to the People's Republic of China (Peking) it had also invited the Republic of China (Taiwan), did so out of a failure to comprehend the bases from which the Red Cross proceeds. According to the statutes of the International Red Cross, every state signatory of the Geneva Conventions is entitled to participate in the Red Cross Conferences. This right to participate cannot be denied or suspended for political reasons. It has its roots in the idea of the Red Cross, which demands not only a spirit of reconciliation and peace, but also the indispensable effectiveness of the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross activities. It is not the Standing Commission, therefore, that has excluded the "biggest people of the earth" from the Red Cross Conference, but the Government of this people did it itself as a result of its lack of comprehension for the nature of the function of the Red Cross.

Otherwise the will to cooperation appeared stronger at the Conference in Vienna than at the preceding Conferences in New Delhi (1957), Toronto (1952) and Stockholm (1948). In Vienna one received the impression that collaboration between East and

West has become easier. With but a few exceptions the statutory rule according to which the Conference is not to concern itself with political questions, nor serve as a forum for political controversies, was faithfully observed.

Red Cross Principles Recalled

In Resolution No. VIII the Conference reaffirmed and redefined the principles laid down in 1961 by the International Red Cross Council of Delegates regarding "humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality," and decided that these fundamental principles "shall be solemnly read at the opening of every International Conference of the Red Cross."

More strongly even than at previous conferences the wish was expressed that the Red Cross contribute to the peaceful settlement of conflicts and the consolidation of the foundations of peace. In a unanimously adopted resolution the (all-Swiss) International Committee of the Red Cross in particular was "encouraged to undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the states concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end."* The Governments and the Red Cross organizations were called upon to take care that the Geneva Conventions are strictly observed. The Conference also postulated the conclusion of "a universal cultural convention, in which they would undertake to initiate appropriate action to ensure the civic education of the younger generations" to teach them mutual respect and solidarity.

Two sets of questions were given particular attention by the conference: the publicizing and application of the 1949 Geneva Conventions for the Protection of the Victims of War, and the creation of new rules in international law to supplement those already existing, with the aim of increasing the protection of the civilian population against the effects of warfare.

In a number of resolutions referring to the first set of questions the Conference called on the Governments and Red Cross Societies "to give the widest possible dissemination, both in time

* On this particular resolution, however, Hans Bachmann, a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, writing in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung after the Vienna Conference which he attended, expressed some misgivings regarding a possible misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the essential nature and function of the International Committee, which is not the conciliation or mediation of international conflicts, but the supervision of the application of the Geneva Conventions in the event of armed conflict.

of peace and war, to the texts of the Geneva Conventions," since knowledge of the Conventions is the most important precondition of their application. The Conference furthermore recommended the conclusion of suitable Conventions by which troops made available to and by the United Nations observe the Red Cross rules and regulations faithfully and in their turn benefit from the protection given by these rules. Finally the Conference expressed the urgent desire that aid be extended also to the victims of civil wars and internal disturbances, especially in view of the frequency of such disturbances.

With regard to an increased protection of the civilian population in time of war two problems in particular were considered: that of the general protection of civilian populations against so-called indiscriminate warfare, and the problem of the protection to be given to civilian organizations mobilized for aid to civilian populations.

At the Red Cross Conference of 1957 held in New Delhi the International Committee had made the courageous attempt to get new rules adopted that would limit military operations to military aims and prohibit the use of weapons with uncontrollable effects. This attempt failed insofar as the project approved in principle in New Delhi and submitted to the Governments in 1958 was not followed up in any way. At the Vienna Conference opinion was unanimous that at present the project has no chance of being adopted by any considerable number of states, but that its underlying humanitarian demands should not for that reason be abandoned. In a carefully prepared and unanimously adopted resolution some important elements of the project of the New Delhi Conference were taken up and the Governments, the International Committee and the national Red Cross Societies were urged to pursue by all possible means the aim of a restriction of warfare and of the protection of civilians, in these words, "that the right of the parties to a conflict to adopt means of injuring the enemy is not unlimited; that it is prohibited to launch attacks against the civilian populations as such; that distinction must be made at all times between persons taking part in the hostilities and members of the civilian population, to the effect that the latter be spared as much as possible; that the general principles of the laws of war apply to nuclear and similar weapons." And finally the Conference calls on all states not yet signatory of the Geneva Protocol of 1925 to adhere to this Protocol, which prohibits the use of asphyxiating or poisonous gases as well as of all similar liquids, materials or devices, and bacteriological methods of warfare. At present only 44 states are bound by the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

(To be concluded)