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Confronting the unthinkable: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Cuban missile crisis, October–November 1962 (Part One)

François Bugnion*

Towards a third world war?

On Sunday, 14 October 1962, two American U-2 spy planes overflying Cuba at very high altitude took photos which, in the view of American intelligence services, showed that the Soviets were installing missile launch pads on the island that could carry nuclear warheads. After having analysed the photos, the experts forecast that the Soviet missiles would become operational between 25 and 27 October.

At the crack of dawn on Tuesday, 16 October, the American National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, informed President John F. Kennedy of the presence of missile bases in Cuba. The same day, Kennedy convened a small group of advisers, the National Security Council Executive Committee. The Committee would meet in great secrecy, two or three times a day, over the following fortnight. From their very first meeting, its members agreed that all means – including massive air raids – had to be used to stop the missiles from becoming operational, at which point they would pose a direct threat to American cities. Aware, however, that airstrikes would cause losses not only among Cuban soldiers but also among the Soviet engineers and technicians installing the launch pads, Kennedy preferred to defer his decision. On 20 October, he announced to the Executive Committee that he had opted for a naval blockade of all offensive weapons deliveries to Cuba. The navy and other relevant services were immediately put on alert.

On Monday, 22 October, at the end of the day, Secretary of State Dean Rusk called the Soviet Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, to the State Department and handed him, without comment, a letter from Kennedy to Nikita Khrushchev. In that letter, Kennedy stated his determination to see the Soviet

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missiles withdrawn from Cuba. Rusk also handed over the text of a speech to the nation that the president was about to pronounce.

At 7 p.m. Washington time, in a televised speech with Churchillian overtones, Kennedy stupefied the American people and the world with the announcement that the Soviets were building missile bases in Cuba and that this was considered an intolerable threat to the entire American continent. He demanded that the Soviet weapons be removed, under United Nations supervision, and stated that he had ordered the establishment of a “strict quarantine” within an area of 500 nautical miles (800 kilometres) from the eastern tip of the island. This was in fact a form of blockade – even though the term was not used – aimed at ensuring that Cuba-bound ships did not carry nuclear warheads or bombers able to transport atomic bombs. Kennedy also declared that if a nuclear missile launched from Cuba reached any nation in the Western Hemisphere, the United States would retaliate by attacking the USSR. He called on Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles from Cuba and “move the world back from the abyss of destruction”. He concluded by recalling that “the cost of freedom is always high – and Americans have always paid it”.

“In my memory, it was the grimdest and gravest speech ever made by a head of State”, the United Nations secretary-general would later write.¹

A few hours later, the Soviet news agency TASS published a communiqué in which the Soviet Government rejected the American demands and denounced the blockade, calling it an act of piracy and a first step towards thermonuclear war. In a letter to Kennedy, Khrushchev asserted that the USSR was installing only defensive weapons in Cuba and declared that the measures announced by the president “constituted a serious threat to the peace and security of nations”. For the first and only time, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a direct confrontation over their nuclear weapons.

Both sides put their armed forces on maximum alert.² In the United States, the USSR and Cuba, reserve troops were called up and conventional forces placed on a war footing. As Soviet vessels sailed for the Caribbean, the American air force and navy prepared to intercept them. Humanity appeared to be rushing headlong towards self-destruction.

This was hardly a bolt out of a clear blue sky: since Fidel Castro and his *barbudos* had triumphantly entered Havana on 8 January 1959, the relations between the United States and Cuba had steadily worsened. Eventually on 2 July 1962, Fidel Castro’s brother, Raul Castro, Minister of Defence, signed a military cooperation agreement in Moscow between the USSR and Cuba. Two months later, on 3 September, following a visit by Che Guevara to Moscow, the USSR announced that it would step up its military aid to Cuba so as to allow the latter to cope with “the imperialist threats”. After the Americans reacted, the Kremlin proclaimed on 11 September: “Our nuclear weapons are so powerful, and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that

1 U Thant, *View from the UN*, Doubleday & Co, New York, 1978, p. 155.

2 For the first – and only – time in history, American strategic forces were placed on the highest peace-time level of alert. This meant that nuclear missiles were launch-ready, and that a specific number of strategic bombers carrying nuclear or thermonuclear bombs were kept permanently in the air. Polaris nuclear-armed submarines dived to their assigned positions deep in the oceans.

there is no need to search for sites for them outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union.” A smokescreen for the preparations being made in Cuba, the declaration reflects the tone of the threats being made by both sides. The United States reacted on 13 September, warning the Soviet Union not to install offensive weapons in Cuba. The next day, Kennedy asked Congress for the necessary powers to call up, if needed, 150,000 reserve troops. The stand-off between the United States and Cuba henceforth played out alongside a power struggle between the United States and the USSR. Never had the world appeared so close to the third world war everyone dreaded but for which the superpowers were constantly preparing.

The quarantine took effect on Wednesday, 24 October 1962 at 10 a.m. EST. The same day, U Thant, acting United Nations secretary-general, read the Security Council the appeal he had just addressed to Kennedy and Khrushchev asking them to agree to a two- or three-week moratorium during which the USSR would refrain from establishing any missiles or bombers in Cuba, under international supervision, and the United States would lift the quarantine.

The world held its breath during those days, when the slightest incident would have sufficed to push humanity over the brink into a final conflagration. On 25 October, U Thant renewed his appeal for a moratorium. The United States representative on the Security Council, Adlai Stevenson, commented on the aerial photos showing the presence of Soviet missile bases in Cuba, which led to verbal sparring between him and the Soviet representative, Ambassador Valerian Zorin, of a harshness rarely seen.

On Friday, 26 October, a Soviet representative unofficially asked whether the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba if the Soviets withdrew their missiles. Radio Moscow, for its part, proposed the simultaneous withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey and Soviet missiles from Cuba.

Kennedy responded that the United States would undertake not to invade Cuba and would lift the quarantine if the missile bases were dismantled under effective international supervision.

On Saturday, 27 October, an American U-2 spy plane entered – apparently accidentally – Soviet airspace, notching the temperature up a few more degrees. The same day, another U-2 spy plane was destroyed above Cuba, causing the pilot’s death. American intelligence services announced that a Soviet oil tanker was getting ready to force the blockade and that the Soviet diplomats stationed in Washington and New York had started shredding their files in anticipation of war. Clearly, the slightest misstep by the political authorities on either side would lead the situation to spiral out of control and end in a nuclear confrontation.

On Sunday, 28 October, Khrushchev finally announced that the USSR agreed to dismantle the bases and to withdraw its offensive weapons from Cuba, under international supervision. Kennedy called his declaration an “important contribution to peace”. The next day, however, he ordered American ships to stay in position so as to ensure compliance with the quarantine. U Thant then asked the Americans to lift the quarantine, but this they refused to do so long as the missiles had not in fact been withdrawn from Cuba under international supervision.³

3 Keesing’s Contemporary Archives, 1962, pp. 19057–19071; *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Document Reader*, revised edition, edited by Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, The New Press, New York, 1998; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Fawcett Publications, Green-

The question now was how the dismantling of the Soviet missile bases in Cuba was to be supervised, a question that would be at the heart of the diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. The consent of the Cuban authorities had to be obtained – no easy task given, as was subsequently revealed, that the Soviets had not consulted them before deciding to withdraw the missiles. U Thant visited Havana from 30 to 31 October and tried to convince Castro to agree to the presence of United Nations inspectors – in vain. Castro was opposed to the presence of any international inspectors in Cuba, asserting that the sole purpose of on-site verification was to humiliate the Cuban Government and people. He opposed any inspection of ships in Cuban ports, but said that if the Soviets agreed to inspection on the high seas, that was their business. On 31 October, the secretary-general returned empty-handed to New York with his entire delegation, including the military advisers who had gone along to examine the inspection terms and conditions with the Cuban authorities.⁴

A key component of the agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union was thus in question. On 31 October, U Thant reported on his mission to the members of the Security Council, and, on 1 November, Washington announced that the quarantine, which had been lifted during the secretary-general's mission, had been restored and that American spy planes had resumed their flights over Cuba. The strategic forces of both sides remained on full alert.⁵

Since Castro rejected any supervision of the dismantling of missile bases in Cuba, the negotiations to resolve the crisis shifted to inspection of Soviet ships on the high seas, and it was with that option in mind that the United Nations turned to the ICRC.

The ICRC's involvement

The ICRC's offer of services and the United Nations appeal

On the evening of 25 October 1962, as the tension reached a zenith and the world stood by while Washington and Moscow engaged in a battle of increasingly aggressive declarations and stepped-up military preparations, with no sign that the crisis would be peacefully resolved, Roger Gallopin (1909–1986), ICRC executive director, who was travelling through New York on his way back from a mission to Latin America and the United States, met at United Nations headquarters with a man well-known to the ICRC, Martin Hill, United Nations deputy under-secretary-general; Gallopin told Hill informally, on behalf of ICRC President Léopold Boissier (1893–1968), that the ICRC stood ready, should the need arise, to support the secretary-general's initiative in any way in its power. The information was transmitted the following day to the secretary-general's chef de cabinet:

wich (Conn.), 1965, pp. 726–769; U Thant, *View from the UN, op. cit.*, pp. 154–194 and 460–471; André Fontaine, *Histoire de la Guerre froide*, Fayard, Paris, 1971, Vol. II, pp. 483–514 and 556.

⁴ U Thant, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–190.

⁵ Keesing's *Contemporary Archives*, 1963, p. 19238.

“Mr Gallopin, Delegate General [sic] of the International Committee of the Red Cross, came to see me yesterday evening. He (...) had been asked by Mr Boissier, the President of the International Red Cross, to convey to us informally the Committee’s readiness and desire to help the Secretary-General in any way in its power, should the need arise. I thanked him and promised to convey this kind message.”⁶

There is no trace of Gallopin’s representation in the ICRC’s archives. We know about it only from Martin Hill’s note. The idea nevertheless soon caught hold. On 26 October, U Thant met separately with the delegates of the United States and the Soviet Union in an endeavour to negotiate the terms of a resolution to the crisis. During his meeting with Ambassador Zorin, the secretary-general announced that the United States Government was prepared to suspend the blockade for two to three weeks, with the proviso that measures would be taken to guarantee that ships arriving in Cuba were not supplying any weaponry during this period. The inspections could be carried out on the high seas or in Cuban ports; responsibility for conducting them could be given to United Nations inspectors from neutral countries or to ICRC representatives.⁷

U Thant repeated his proposal during further interviews with the delegates of the United States and the Soviet Union on 29 October. The aim by then was to sort out the conditions for the dismantling of the Soviet missile sites in Cuba and for the inspection of ships bound for the Caribbean. During a meeting with the new Soviet delegate, Deputy Foreign Minister Vassili Kuznetsov, whom Khrushchev had dispatched to New York to help resolve the crisis, U Thant described three possibilities for the inspection of ships bound for Cuba: by American vessels, by neutral countries or by the ICRC.⁸ Kuznetsov declared that his Government would be prepared to allow ICRC representatives board Soviet vessels.⁹ The United States agreed to that procedure, provided that the inspectors appointed by the ICRC were exclusively Swiss.¹⁰

It was in the wake of those discussions that U Thant turned to the ICRC; the latter had not been informed of the secretary-general’s initiative, nor of the follow-up to the offer of services transmitted by Roger Gallopin. Understandably, therefore, the United Nations request took the ICRC by surprise.¹¹

6 Interoffice memorandum from Martin Hill, deputy under-secretary general, to C. V. Narasimhan, the secretary-general’s chef de cabinet, 26 October 1962, reproduced in Chadwyck-Healey Inc. & The National Security Archives (ed.), *Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962*, Microfiche Collection, Chadwyck-Healey, Alexandria, 1990, document 1392, cited by Thomas Fischer, “The ICRC and the Cuban missile crisis”, *International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC)*, Vol. 83, No. 842, June 2001, p. 294. Mr Fischer kindly pointed us in the direction of several significant documents relating to the ICRC’s involvement in the Cuban missile crisis that were not available in the ICRC’s archives. We are deeply grateful to him. Mr Gallopin was not the ICRC delegate-general but its executive director.

7 Thomas Fischer, *loc. cit.*, pp. 294–295.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 298–299.

9 *Ibid.*; U Thant, *op. cit.*, pp. 179–180.

10 Fischer, *loc. cit.*, p. 299.

11 The feeling of surprise can be gleaned from the minutes of the Committee’s meeting of 31 October and 1 November 1962: “Since the discussion, following the unexpected request from the United Nations...”, ICRC Archives, A PV A Pl, Minutes of the Com-

In any event, on the evening of Monday, 29 October (EST), shortly before taking off for Havana, U Thant, acting with the consent of the United States and the Soviet Union, asked the director of the United Nations European Office, Ambassador Piero Spinelli, to request the ICRC's assistance in visiting ships bound for Cuba so as to ensure their cargo comprised no offensive weapons.¹²

The following day, Tuesday, 30 October 1962, at 8 a.m., Ambassador Spinelli contacted Léopold Boissier and handed him a confidential aide-mémoire summing up the instructions he had been given by the secretary-general during the night. The aide-mémoire read as follows:

“1. A major difficulty has arisen in the Cuban quarantine matter because – while the USSR has agreed to suspend arms shipments – there are no indications from the part of Washington to lift the quarantine (except for the two days of U Thant's presence in Havana), and the main reason for this attitude of the USA is the argument that there is no means of verifying the Moscow affirmation that arms shipments to Cuba have indeed been suspended.

2. During the conversations which the Secretary-General, U Thant, had yesterday with representatives of the interested countries, a proposal was made regarding an agreed verification procedure which would be imple-

mittee, plenary sessions, Wednesday, 31 October and Thursday, 1 November 1962, p. 14 (ICRC translation). In both its internal documents and in its public statements, the ICRC steadfastly referred to the secretary-general's initiative, never giving to understand that the initiative had been prompted by a representation made by the ICRC itself.

12 “I then had the UN office in Geneva contact the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and that same afternoon received the reply that ICRC would undertake the assignment, but only, of course, with the consent of the Cuban government”, U Thant, *op. cit.*, p. 180. U Thant places the request on 29 October, whereas the ICRC's documents indicate the date of 30 October; however, a representation made on the evening of 29 October in New York would take place in the early hours of the morning of 30 October in Geneva. In addition, one or two hours may have elapsed between the time U Thant, from New York, instructed Spinelli to contact the ICRC, and the time that contact was indeed made. In an article entitled, “Paul Ruegger – Envoyé extraordinaire de l'humanité”, Melchior Borsinger, who was at the time adviser to President Léopold Boissier, was deeply involved in the ICRC's handling of the crisis and accompanied Paul Ruegger on his mission to New York, speaks of a representation U Thant is said to have made to Boissier at 4 a.m.: “It was in the night of 30 to 31 October 1962, at 4 in the morning, that U Thant asked Léopold Boissier, who was president at the time, whether the International Committee could inspect ships bound for Cuba that were the object of a blockade by the United States”, Melchior Borsinger, “Paul Ruegger – Envoyé extraordinaire de l'humanité”, in: Victor Umbricht (ed.), *A Paul Ruegger pour son 80^e anniversaire, 14 août 1977*, Schudel, Riehen/Basel, 1977, pp. 155–162, at p. 159 (ICRC translation). Borsinger's account is borne out by that of Paul Ruegger, who was also closely involved in handling the crisis: “Thant, who was an excellent man of the finest kind, very sensitive, was undoubtedly at one point panic-stricken by the looming disaster. He called Boissier during the night and, when he finally reached him, told him that the situation was grave and that he was calling on the Red Cross for assistance. Then Mr Spinelli, who was at the time Director-General of the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva, came to see President Boissier and told him again that the Secretary-General was extremely worried”, Ruegger declared in March 1988 in the framework of a project aimed at setting down the accounts of certain ICRC staff and officials in an “oral history”, ICRC, Oral History, Interview with Paul Ruegger, former ICRC president, 8-10 March 1988, transcript, p. 62 (ICRC translation).

mented by trustworthy inspectors of an international organisation. Naturally, the first organisation considered was the International Red Cross.

3. We believe that the solution of this problem is a crucial issue. In addition to the humanitarian consideration regarding possible political and military complications, there is the factor that failure to solve the inspection problem might result in a continued and expanded quarantine that could affect seriously the supply of food, medical supplies and other essential items required by the civilian population of Cuba. U Thant is therefore asking whether the Red Cross could consider participation along the following lines:

(a) provision of perhaps 30 inspectors to function for the purpose of inspecting cargoes of incoming ships and satisfying themselves that no arms shipments are involved;

(b) selection of these inspectors would be entirely in the hands of the Red Cross;

(c) suitable conditions of service would be worked out by the United Nations which would bear all costs and would provide administrative and logistical support services;

(d) inspectors would proceed initially to New York for detailed briefing and would then depart for designated duty stations under arrangements made by the United Nations;

(e) actual verification action may not be required for more than a month in all.

Geneva,
30 October 1962”¹³

As can be seen, the aide-mémoire does not mention the offer of services made by Roger Gallopin on 25 October.

Léopold Boissier immediately replied to Ambassador Spinelli that the ICRC could not consider the request unless asked to do so by the three parties directly involved, namely Cuba, the USSR and the United States. He added that he could not commit the organization without first consulting the ICRC plenary Assembly, which would meet the following day.¹⁴

This request was to confront the ICRC with an extremely difficult choice. On the one hand, the mandate the United Nations wished to confer on it obviously far exceeded the traditional scope of its humanitarian mission; on the other, it felt that it could not refuse, given the threat to world peace and the risk to humanity’s survival.

13 ICRC Archives, B AG 200 060-011, letter from the European Office of the United Nations to the president of the ICRC, 30 October 1962, and appended memorandum; Melchior Borsinger, “Paul Ruegger – Envoyé extraordinaire de l’humanité”, in: *Paul Ruegger, op. cit.*, pp. 158–159.

14 ICRC Archives, A PV A PL, Minutes of the Committee, plenary sessions, Wednesday, 31 October and Thursday, 1 November 1962, p. 4.

The deliberations of the ICRC Assembly

As President Boissier had told Ambassador Spinelli, the ICRC plenary Assembly was scheduled to meet in ordinary session on Wednesday, 31 October, at 4.30 p.m. However, given the urgency and exceptional nature of the United Nations request, Boissier convened an extraordinary session the same day at 11 a.m. In order not to arouse suspicions, he decided to ask his colleagues to meet, not at the ICRC, but in town, at a very exclusive private club, the *Cercle de la Terrasse*.¹⁵

In his opening statement, Boissier emphasized that he had already answered Ambassador Spinelli, who had called on him to deliver U Thant's message, that the ICRC could only consider the request from the United Nations if all three parties directly concerned, namely Cuba, the USSR and the United States, asked it to. He also recalled the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross unanimously adopted by the Council of Delegates in Prague, in October 1961, in particular the principle of humanity, according to which: "the Red Cross promotes ... mutual understanding, ... cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples".¹⁶ He underscored that the crisis was the most serious facing humanity since that of Munich in September 1938 and that no less than global peace was at stake.¹⁷ Lastly, he pointed out that if the Committee agreed to the request, it would be embarking on an entirely new activity that would constitute a first step along the path outlined in the Fundamental Principles. If it refused, "it will stand accused – if the worst were to happen – of having failed to act and not having done all in its power,

15 The ICRC's Archives contain no written record of the extraordinary session that took place there. However, during the interviews conducted on 22 and 23 June 1989 by Paul Reynard, Melchior Borsinger said that Boissier called him very early in the morning, at around 6 a.m., and instructed him immediately to convene the Committee members for an extraordinary plenary session that would start at 11 a.m. at the *Cercle de la Terrasse*. Accordingly, Borsinger said, he called each of the Committee members on the telephone and informed them of the message from the United Nations secretary-general, which Boissier had dictated to him over the phone. The meeting reportedly got under way the same day at 11 a.m., and Boissier apparently urged his colleagues not to allow any information to leak on the deliberations. The Committee members are said to have discussed the matter until about 1.30 p.m., then broken for a quick lunch on the spot before resuming their deliberations in the afternoon (ICRC, Oral History, interview of Melchior Borsinger von Baden, 22 and 23 June 1989, transcript, pp. 182–184). During an interview with the author of this article on 12 August 2009, Professor Dietrich Schindler, who was a member of the Committee at the time, unhesitatingly confirmed Borsinger's account.

16 The Council of Delegates is attended by representatives of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies (today the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). In Prague in October 1961, the Council of Delegates had adopted – provisionally – the Declaration of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. To enter into force, the Declaration still had to be endorsed by the International Conference of the Red Cross. Interestingly, the draft declaration of the fundamental principles prepared by a joint ICRC/League committee made no mention of peace. The reference was added during the deliberations at the initiative of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR.

17 The Cuban missile crisis was from many points of view far more serious than the Munich crisis, since a nuclear war involving the United States and the Soviet Union would within days – perhaps even hours – have caused more deaths and destruction than the Second World War.

by making its contribution, to eliminate the threat of war hanging over humanity”.

Observing that the United Nations representatives in Geneva were not authorized to negotiate with the ICRC, Boissier recommended that a high-ranking official be immediately dispatched to meet with U Thant, “to explore with him the repercussions of the request made of the ICRC”, and said that, for a mission of such importance, only one name could possibly come to mind, that of former ICRC president Paul Ruegger.¹⁸

In conclusion, Boissier again stressed “the irrevocable and far-reaching scope” of the decision to be made and exhorted his colleagues to give careful thought to the pros and cons of a decision that would be historic in reach.¹⁹

Judging by the minutes of the meeting, however, Boissier made no reference to the discussion Roger Gallopin had had – with his consent – with Martin Hill on 25 October, or to any subsequent contacts.²⁰ The words he used left his colleagues with the impression that the question was whether or not the ICRC should agree to a request from the United Nations secretary-general, and not whether there should be any follow-up to a request that the ICRC had, in fact, instigated.²¹

The president’s introduction was followed by an extensive debate that lasted into the evening of Wednesday, 31 October and the morning of Thursday, 1 November. The Committee members inclined to three points of view.

Some felt that, by accepting such a mandate, “the ICRC would clearly overstep its role, or rather the scope of its action, which must always be strictly limited to questions of a purely humanitarian nature and to action in favour of the direct victims of a state of open conflict or serious disturbances”. They feared that the ICRC would compromise its humanitarian mandate by agreeing to take part in an operation intended to provide a political settlement to the crisis: inspection of ships on the high seas.

18 Paul Ruegger was president of the ICRC from 1948 to 1955.

19 ICRC Archives, A PV A Pl, Minutes of the Committee, plenary sessions, 31 October and 1 November 1962, pp. 4–5 (ICRC translation); Fischer, *loc. cit.*, p. 301.

20 Although the minutes are not verbatim, it may be assumed that Boissier did not inform his colleagues of Gallopin’s action, which is never mentioned in the subsequent discussions or in later documents. Generally speaking, people at the ICRC considered that the institution had been caught unprepared by the secretary-general’s appeal. At the time, the reasons for the request gave rise to much speculation. On the basis of the documents available today, Thomas Fischer concludes that it was U Thant himself who suggested to the Soviet and American delegates that the ICRC be asked to inspect Cuba-bound vessels (“As the documents clearly indicate, it was the Secretary-General who came up with the proposal to consider the ICRC’s help in this matter”, Fischer, *loc. cit.*, p. 296). Today, however, it is obvious that U Thant acted on the basis of Gallopin’s representation of 25 October. Ultimately, therefore, it was the ICRC itself that took the initiative and offered its services to the United Nations: “The document cited above hints that it was the President of the ICRC, Léopold Boissier, himself who inspired the Secretary-General’s idea to make use of the ICRC’s good offices in the crisis” (Fischer, *loc. cit.*, p. 296).

21 Roger Gallopin, who had not yet returned from New York, did not participate in the plenary meeting of 31 October and 1 November 1962. In his report to the ICRC Presidential Council on his mission to the United States, at the meeting of Monday, 12 November 1962, Gallopin, to judge by the minutes, breathed not a word about his contacts with the United Nations.

Others were of the view that “the ICRC could not refuse to offer its good offices in an endeavour to promote peace and prevent war”. They feared that if the ICRC refused to assist, it could be accused of having failed to act at a time when global peace and the very survival of humanity were at stake.

A third group believed that before a final decision could be taken a mission would have to be sent as soon as possible to New York. Information was required on the terms of the mission to be conferred on the ICRC, so as to ensure that the inspections would be effective and that it was possible to obtain the consent of all the maritime powers whose merchant ships called at Cuban ports.²²

According to the account of Melchior Borsinger,²³ who wrote the minutes of the meeting, it was Professor Dietrich Schindler who, shedding his customary reserve, tipped the scales in favour of Boissier’s point of view, invoking an argument as simple as it was unanswerable: he recalled that if the crisis resulted in a thermonuclear war, the Red Cross would be unable to act at all.²⁴ That argument pulled the rug out from under those who wanted to reject the request of the United Nations so as to preserve the ICRC’s humanitarian mandate. It was ultimately this point of view that won the day.

But the members of the Assembly stipulated from the outset that while, in the absence of any other neutral intermediary, the ICRC could envisage accepting the mandate in an effort to prevent war, its independence, both of the United Nations and of the three governments most concerned, would have to be spelled out and upheld.

In keeping with Boissier’s proposal, the Assembly decided to send Paul Ruegger to New York to examine, with the United Nations secretary-general, the latter’s request. However, the secretary-general having stated that he had obtained the consent of Washington and Moscow, it was agreed that Paul Ruegger would leave only once the ICRC had received assurances that the Cuban Government had also agreed to the proposal.

22 The great unknown in this respect was the People’s Republic of China, which was not yet a member of the United Nations and with which the ICRC had practically no relations at the time.

23 Melchior Borsinger (1915–2000) joined the ICRC in December 1940. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, he was Léopold Boissier’s adviser and, as such, the Committee secretary.

24 “The Committee wasn’t really able to make up its mind. You could tell that everyone was aware of the urgency of the situation but was also of two minds. I truly believe that. They were all torn, as I was on certain points, and they were unable to decide. It was the most silent, the least talkative of the Committee members who, for once almost miraculously opened his mouth – Dietrich Schindler... I remember that moment as though it were yesterday. He said, ‘Having listened to you, I personally think that since the world is on the brink of disaster and that each passing hour brings us closer to a thermonuclear war, if such a disaster happens, the Red Cross will have no scope for action at all. Humanity will be overcome. In these exceptional circumstances, therefore, the ICRC must say yes.’ He was applauded.” (ICRC, Oral History, interview of Melchior Borsinger von Baden, 22 and 23 June 1989, transcript, p. 184, ICRC translation). Schindler was a well-known expert in public international law, a professor at Zurich University and a member of the Institute of International Law and of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. He was a member of the Committee from 1961 to 1973, and again from 1980 to 1994.

The ICRC further resolved that it could not take responsibility for inspecting Cuba-bound vessels, but only for lending its good offices to the United Nations for the recruitment and constitution of a body of Swiss citizens who would carry out that task as independently as possible.²⁵

On 3 November, the United Nations informed the ICRC that while the Cuban Government was “negative on the question of Red Cross officials being stationed on Cuban territory, [it] had no objection to Red Cross inspection taking place on the high seas”²⁶.

As news of the appeal and of the ICRC’s positive response in principle had been leaked in New York, the ICRC decided to spell out its position in a press release.

Issued on 5 November 1962, the press release stated that the United Nations secretary-general, acting with the consent of the United States and the Soviet Union, had requested the ICRC’s assistance for visits of Cuba-bound vessels on the high seas; it specified that the ICRC had been assured through the United Nations that the Cuban Government would accept such a control.

The ICRC observed that “this is a task outside the conventional and traditional scope of its humanitarian mission. However, in the best interest of peace, recognized by the last assemblies of the Red Cross as being one of the organization’s principles of action, and with the desire to spare mankind suffering which it has attempted to alleviate during the course of international and civil wars, the ICRC could consider lending its good offices to the United Nations. Nevertheless, it would be unable to undertake any action without the formal agreement of the three parties concerned. Furthermore, the ICRC could not assume direct responsibility for the proposed operation, which would remain within the competence of the United Nations and the States concerned. The International Committee’s contribution would consist chiefly in recruiting personnel charged with visiting the vessels. The carrying out of this control should conform to the general principles of the Red Cross.”

In conclusion, the ICRC indicated that it had asked its former president, Paul Ruegger, to proceed to New York to make contact with and obtain information from the United Nations secretary-general and the representatives of the States concerned, and that its definite decision would depend on the result of that mission.²⁷

The following day, Paul Ruegger and Melchior Borsinger, the president’s diplomatic adviser, took off for New York on board TWA flight 803.²⁸

25 ICRC Archives, A PV A Pl, Minutes of the Committee, plenary sessions, 31 October and 1 November 1962, pp. 4–9; “The ICRC and the Cuban question”, press release No. 770b, 5 November 1962.

26 ICRC Archives, B AG 200 060-011, letter from P. P. Spinelli, under-secretary-general, representing the United Nations secretary-general, to the ICRC president, 3 November 1962.

27 “The ICRC and the Cuban question”, press release No. 770b of 5 November 1962.

28 Given the risks posed by the missile crisis and the urgency of the United Nations request, it may seem surprising that Ruegger and Borsinger left for New York only on 6 November; after all, the United Nations had informed the ICRC on 3 November that the Cuban Government had agreed to its participation in the inspection of Cuba-bound vessels on the high seas. The documents available in the ICRC’s Archives provide no explanation of this 48-hour delay, which was probably due to the uncertainty generated by a situa-

Paul Ruegger's mission

The ICRC's representatives arrived in New York on 6 November early in the afternoon. Barely two hours after landing they were received at United Nations headquarters by U Thant, accompanied by his principal staff members, for a lengthy discussion.²⁹ The following day they held separate meetings, together with Ambassador Omar Loutfi, under-secretary-general, with the representatives of the United States, the Soviet Union and Cuba. Further meetings were held between 8 and 10 November with United Nations officials and representatives of the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, France and the United Kingdom. In order to facilitate these meetings, the secretary-general's chef de cabinet made available to the ICRC's representatives, on their arrival in New York, an office on the 38th floor of the United Nations building,³⁰ evidence of the importance the organization attached to Paul Ruegger's mission. Pursuant to those discussions, it was agreed that:

- the ICRC would appoint a team of some 30 inspectors, not members of the Committee, who would be placed at the disposal of the United Nations and under its authority;
- the red cross emblem would not be employed to cover this type of operation;
- eventual inspections could in no case give rise to a resort to forceful means; if the inspectors were unable to carry out their search they were to confine themselves to reporting to the head of their mission;
- the United Nations would be responsible for negotiating acceptance of inspection by all powers under whose flag ships would sail for Cuba;
- regulations for inspection would conform to Red Cross principles;
- the secretary-general would grant extensive autonomy to the corps of inspectors.³¹

tion that changed hour by hour and, perhaps, the confusion caused by the leaks in New York about the mission.

29 ICRC Archives, A PV A Pl, “Rapport de M. l'Ambassadeur Paul Ruegger sur sa mission auprès du Secrétaire général des Nations Unies à New York du 6 au 11 novembre 1962 – établissement d'une procédure de vérification des cargaisons à destination de ce pays (sic)” (hereinafter “Rapport de M. l'Ambassadeur Paul Ruegger”), document SP 362 of 12 November 1962 appended to the minutes of the Extraordinary Plenary Assembly of 12 November 1962, p. 2.

30 ICRC Archives, B AG 251 071-010, letter from C. V. Narasimham, the secretary-general's chef de cabinet, to Paul Ruegger, 6 November 1962. The 38th floor of the “Glass Palace” holds the secretary-general's office and that of his closest staff.

31 ICRC Archives, B AG 200 060-011, telegrams of 7, 8 and 10 November 1962 from Paul Ruegger to the ICRC, note from Paul Ruegger to Ambassador Loutfi, United Nations under-secretary-general, 8 November 1962, letter from U Thant to Paul Ruegger and appended memorandum, 9 November 1962, and letter from Constantin A. Stavropoulos, United Nations legal counsel, to Paul Ruegger and appended memorandum, 12 November 1962; ICRC Archives, A PV Pl, “Rapport de M. l'Ambassadeur Paul Ruegger”, *op. cit.*

The Committee met in extraordinary plenary session on 12 November to hear Paul Ruegger's report and decide on the follow-up required. At the end of that meeting, the ICRC confirmed its availability.³²

In the meantime, however, the crisis was winding down. On 7 November, the White House indicated that the United States and the USSR had reached an agreement whereby American vessels would enter into contact with Soviet vessels leaving the Caribbean to count the missiles being withdrawn from Cuba.³³ The next day, five Soviet ships, three of which were bringing ballistic missiles back from Cuba, were approached and inspected by American navy vessels, the inspection itself being conducted by means of helicopter overflights.³⁴ The assistance of neutral inspectors was therefore no longer required, and, on 13 November, the United Nations indicated that the plan for inspections by the ICRC would be "kept in abeyance".³⁵ On 20 November, Kennedy stated that he had received Khrushchev's assurance that all *Ilyushin* 28 strategic bombers would be withdrawn from Cuba within one month and announced the lifting of the quarantine.³⁶ On 23 November 1962, U Thant sent a letter to Boissier thanking him for having sent Paul Ruegger to New York and observing that, since the United States had lifted the quarantine, ICRC action was no longer required.³⁷ The crisis had been resolved.

32 ICRC Archives, A PV A Pl, Minutes of the Committee, plenary sessions, extraordinary plenary session of Monday, 12 November 1962, pp. 1–3 and annex; "Mr. Ruegger's Report to the ICRC", press release No. 773b, 13 November 1962, and "The role of the ICRC in the Cuban crisis, circular letter to the Central Committees of National Red Cross (Red Crescent, Red Lion and Sun) Societies, 15 November 1962, *IRRC*, No 21, December 1962, pp. 655–656; "The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Cuban Crisis", *IRRC*, No 21, December 1962, pp. 653–657; *Annual Report 1962*, pp. 33–35.

33 *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 1963, p. 19239–19240; U Thant, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

34 *Ibid.*; Fischer, *loc. cit.*, pp. 303–304. Fischer points out in this respect that, for a short time, the United States and the Soviet Union considered having the ICRC inspect not only Soviet vessels bound for Cuba, but also those returning from Cuba and bringing back to the USSR the missiles withdrawn from the Caribbean. That option had never, however, been discussed with either the secretary-general or the ICRC (Fischer, *loc. cit.*, p. 303, note 63).

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 1963, pp. 19239–19240; U Thant, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

37 ICRC Archives, B AG 200 060-012, letter from U Thant to Léopold Boissier, 23 November 1962.