

Foreword

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FOREWORD

At the start of a new year, it is customary for the political leaders of most countries to wish their fellow citizens happiness and prosperity and to hope for world peace. Nations thus see in these messages a reason for hoping for a better future, in true solidarity among men and in greater understanding amongst each other. Without doubt, these wishes bear the mark of sincerity. All human beings legitimately aspire after peace, whatever their rank in the scale of responsibilities.

But the traditional optimism of the new year messages is unfailingly answered by the hard reality of facts. Twelve months later, when taking stock, we have to admit, in fact, that all these messages remained pious hopes and that, finally, the world is no better but still more gloomy and pitiless. This is my feeling when examining closely what happened in 1983. Relations between States became still more difficult — I am tempted to say still more strained — especially between the Powers on whom world peace depends. Trouble spots continued to multiply, some of them degenerating into open conflicts, as in Central America or in the Asian sub-continent. Wars between nations, and civil wars, instead of dying down and dying out, have burst out afresh, as has happened in Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Kampuchea, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Angola and in other countries I shall not name, the list being too long. Whoever speaks of wars also speaks of victims and the list of these also has grown longer: civilian populations victims of shot and shell, prisoners tortured, then often killed, refugees abandoned and forgotten, in short, so many stereotyped pictures of the deadly folly of man.

A witness of the immense suffering caused by warfare, through working in the heart of conflicts, the ICRC looks back on 1983 with grave anxiety. How could it rejoice in the 'record' facts and figures punctuating the account of its operations? On every page of this Annual Report is sketched the drama of men, women and children to whom the ICRC tried to bring a little comfort and hope, sometimes at the price of efforts out of all proportion with the results obtained. To protect and assist the victims of conflicts is an extremely difficult, almost hopeless, task nowadays, in a world where everything has a political bias, where humanitarian values

appear to be the last and the least concern of numerous governments and where human life has become something to bargain about.

But how can we effectively combat this fatal trend, when the community of States shows such extreme reserve, and even indifference, to the ICRC's anguished appeals to ensure that the basic rules of humanity are respected in that deadly conflict between Iran and Iraq? Have international relations deteriorated so much that certain States can flout international humanitarian law with impunity without fearing universal reprobation?

The informed reader will find food for thought in this Annual Report. Although, in the interest of the victims, the ICRC must be somewhat cautious in the way it expresses its opinions, its observations as set out in the following pages constitute a cry of alarm. May it be heard by all those who, in some way or other, are in a position to influence the plight of war victims needing protection and assistance; all those not, or no longer, taking part in the fighting. It is not sufficient that political and military leaders reaffirm their attachment to the basic principles of humanitarian law around the conference tables. They should put them into practice in the heart of conflicts. Only then will there be hope of curbing the disquieting evolution of these last few years.

Alexandre HAY
ICRC President

