

Foreword

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FOREWORD

Never since the end of the Second World War had the International Committee of the Red Cross been faced with as many murderous conflicts as it was in 1992. Looking back on the year's crises, I cannot help having mixed feelings: never before had our delegates, working in over 60 countries, been so active or reached so many victims, and yet never before had our activities in certain conflicts seemed so fundamentally questioned, nor had the rights of victims been so tragically flouted.

In the troubled aftermath of the Cold War, history has suddenly unravelled under the pressure of nationalist, ethnic, religious and political claims. New ideologies of violence have wrought a fundamental change in the nature and traditional dimensions of conflicts. Anarchy and intolerance have turned war into a merciless struggle in which no one is spared, least of all civilians. Millions of men, women, children and elderly people have been starved, detained, tortured or massacred as a result of intolerable policies; others have been forced into exile, deprived of even the most basic necessities. Countless women have been viciously raped. In the light of the odious acts and widespread devastation witnessed by our delegates, I wonder whether we can still speak of war. When each person is considered the enemy of all others, when hatred and cruelty cease to be the product of hostilities and become instead their driving force, it is no longer simply war we are confronted with, but the very denial of humanity. We have reached the very depths of barbarity.

The events of 1992 have shown the horror that awaits us when the rules of international humanitarian law, set forth in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, are flagrantly disregarded.

More than ever before it is imperative for all governments to assume responsibility for what is happening throughout the world. They must be reminded that only through compliance with the humanitarian rules can the tragic consequences of war be limited, the spiral of violence halted and barbarity kept at bay. It is up to the international community to put an end to these heinous acts. It is up to neutral and impartial humanitarian institutions to assist and protect the victims of these acts while avoiding any politicization of their work.

In these dark times when the principle of humanity itself is in jeopardy, the ICRC will continue with perseverance, thoroughness and humility to carry out the tasks of prevention and assistance that are entrusted to it under the Geneva Conventions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Cornelio Sommaruga', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the ICRC