

CENTENARY CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS

Geneva, 28 August - 10 September 1963

COUNCIL OF DELEGATES

Development and nature of relations of the Red Cross with non- Red Cross Organisations

(Item 4 of the provisional agenda
of the General Commission)

Report presented by the International Committee of the Red Cross



Geneva
April 1963

DEVELOPMENT AND NATURE OF RELATIONS OF THE RED CROSS WITH NON-RED CROSS ORGANIZATIONS

There have never been any specific rules in connection with cooperation between the Red Cross and other international institutions, especially the United Nations and their Specialised Agencies. This cooperation, which has proved valuable to humanity in so many ways, has been empirical and ruled by the specific opportunities which have presented themselves.

The most outstanding examples are the assistance to Palestine refugees and the medical action in the Congo. In Palestine the ICRC took sole charge for over a year of the maintenance (food, accommodation and medical care) of 500,000 Arab refugees, while the necessary funds (144 million Swiss francs) were supplied by the United Nations.

In the former Belgian Congo, the United Nations and the World Health Organization requested the assistance of the International Red Cross to keep the hospitals running. A hundred or more doctors and nurses from a score of National Red Cross Societies took over these duties, also past twelve months.

The relations between the Red Cross and the United Nations in both these cases were defined in a special agreement laying down the details of cooperation.

The Red Cross acts as a sort of "advance guard" for the United Nations on such occasions, while the latter is mobilising the necessary forces. The feeding of an entire population or the running of the hospitals in a large country would be far beyond the possibilities of the Red Cross over a long period. These vast enterprises are government tasks on the national and international levels. The Red Cross mobilises volunteers and private funds and provides auxiliary assistance and is there to offer emergency relief in case of need. But this is just where it proves its value, during the initial phase, when there has not been time to get the official services organised. Hence it is to be hoped, for the greater good of suffering humanity, that there will be growing cooperation of this type.

It is certain that in any cooperation of the Red Cross with non-Red Cross organizations everything must be done to safeguard the full independence of the former and assure respect of its doctrine and ideal.

Independence and in particular autonomy vis-à-vis the public authorities is one of the Red Cross fundamental principles. In the declaration adopted by the Council of Delegates in Frague in 1961, it was expressed as follows: The Red Cross is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with Red Cross principles.

In the Principles formulated by the League Board of Governors in 1946 at Oxford, we read: "A National Red Cross Society has full liberty to cooperate with its Government and also with other organizations, on condition it is understood that their activities are in concord with the principles of the Red Cross".

The XVIIth International Conference of the Red Cross meeting in 1948 at Stockholm, in its XVIIIth Resolution, recommended "that the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies and the National Societies exercise the greatest care in regulating their relationship with inter-governmental, governmental or non-governmental organizations".

Finally, on 19 November 1946, the General Assembly of the United Nations, in a Resolution encouraging Member States to help the National Red Cross Societies requested that their "independent voluntary nature be respected in all circumstances".

The reasons for which independence is a vital necessity to the Red Cross are so obvious that there is no need to dwell on them. The Red Cross must be master of its decisions and acts. It must be free to obey purely humanitarian motives, apply its own principles at all times and especially as regards exercising no distinctions among men on any other basis than their suffering.

Independence is furthermore the guarantee of the neutrality and universality of the Red Cross, and of the general confidence it must inspire, in those it assists and in States, on which its action often so largely depends. As a non-political organisation, it must above all beware of the danger of political intrusions.

It should not be forgotten that, however great its peacetime achievements, its touchstone is in time of war. There may be cases where many international organizations are paralysed or witness their possibilities of action singularly reduced, and the Red Cross alone is still in a position to intervene. There have been striking examples of this. But if the Red Cross has played and can still hope to play its rôle in acute situations, where it stands out as the last link between men, and at moments when heightened national pugnacity arouses mistrust of everything that comes from outside, this is in virtue of a refusal to compromise and the observance of a strict line of conduct.

Hence the Red Cross can only associate or cooperate with institutions which pledge themselves to respect its full independence and consent to unreserved respect of its principles and ideal in conducting a joint action. This requirement, we are glad to say, has hitherto been fully understood by the institutions with which the International Red Cross has been called upon to cooperate. Doubtless this will continue to be so in future.
