

**125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADOPTION
OF THE GENEVA CONVENTION
OF 22 AUGUST 1864**

The International Review of the Red Cross is especially pleased to publish hereunder the text of the speech made by Mr. Jan Martenson, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, to mark the 125th anniversary of the Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864. The speech was given during a Round Table organized at the University of Geneva on 22 June 1989, in the framework of courses on international humanitarian law, and the text brings out the special significance the initial Geneva Convention has for the international community. It also highlights the long-standing, close and fruitful co-operation between the United Nations and the ICRC in humanitarian law and human rights.

**The 1864 Geneva Convention,
a link between the ICRC
and the United Nations**

It is an honour and a privilege for me to speak to you today, as we celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Geneva Convention.

This commemoration is of special significance in that the Geneva Convention—which deals with the situation of war wounded—was the first text providing for international humanitarian action and regulating individual behaviour in certain defined circumstances.

It is also of special significance in that it has been organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was likewise born of the appeal to man's conscience made by Henry Dunant, who witnessed the battle of Solferino and was the first co-ordinator of humanitarian aid for wounded soldiers left untended on the battlefield.

In 125 years, the Red Cross Movement has spread throughout the world: the number of its members has grown, its activities have expanded; it has succoured millions, in time of peace and in time of war, and the protection and assistance it affords are known and respected worldwide. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute, on behalf of the United Nations, to the President of the

International Committee of the Red Cross, Cornelio Sommaruga, to all those who make sure, day after day, that help is given to anyone in urgent need of protection and assistance, and to those whose various contributions provide invaluable support for these activities.

We can say of the 1864 Convention which has brought us together today that it is the source, the wellspring of contemporary humanitarian law: it opened the way for an unprecedented body of law, one which currently comprises over twenty conventions, declarations and protocols laying down the rights and obligations of the individual, whether civilian or soldier, in time of armed conflict. History will remember this Convention above all as the first text providing for the protection of the person, the human being. Therein lies, to some extent, the link between us, between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations.

For the welfare of the human being has, in the past forty years, been of major concern not only to you, but to the United Nations as well. The United Nations too, has insisted that fundamental individual rights and freedoms be established and accepted as universal rules to which there can be no exception. The 1948 Universal Declaration has been followed by about sixty conventions, treaties and covenants which, with the body of humanitarian law I mentioned a moment ago, are now a guaranty of real protection for all those whose rights are denied, abused and violated. We have, for example, the *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, and the *International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid*. The *Convention on the Protection of the Rights of the Child*, the text of which has just been approved by the Human Rights Commission, should, by the end of the year, be part of the formidable panoply of legal documents now at the service of the international community.

As their very titles indicate, all these texts seem to mark the point at which ICRC and United Nations activities converge. The persons concerned are indeed very often those who need your assistance, those who belong to exposed and vulnerable groups, who have long been deprived of their recognized rights and, thereby, of effective protection.

The road has been long and arduous. We have suffered many setbacks and encountered many obstacles arising, for the most part, from the intransigence of States imbued with their absolute sovereignty and loath to renounce a single iota of power.

And we still have quite a way to go. Several bodies of rules are still needed to complete this set of legal instruments which the international community has resolved to adopt, for its own good.

Since 1945, both the Red Cross with its millions of members and the United Nations, its bodies and specialized agencies have been working in the same spirit towards the same goal, that of peace and security in a world in which conflicts, underdevelopment and other human rights violations will have been replaced by genuine dialogue and constructive co-operation between all States and all peoples.

While substantial progress must still be made there has been an evident turn for the better. Current conditions augur well for the efforts made by the international community in recent decades and may, in the long run, play a decisive part. The international scene has been marked in the past few years by a clear swing back to multilateralism, by the long-awaited revival of true east-west dialogue, coupled today with intensive co-operation between the great powers. This renewed détente has in turn favoured the success of negotiations at a number of levels: suffice it to mention the disarmament agreements which, in the wake of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, have made it possible to start dismantling intermediate-range nuclear missiles; the Geneva Agreements on Afghanistan; the results achieved in the Iran-Iraq negotiations; the opening of talks on Cyprus and the Western Sahara; and, more recently, the start of the independence process in Namibia.

But I would also like to emphasize that this tangible renewal of the spirit of the Charter goes hand in hand today with new awareness in an area which is very dear to me (I should probably say us)—that of action to promote and protect human rights, those inalienable rights which the 1948 Declaration has rendered universal.

In this domain the International Committee of the Red Cross has co-operated often and well with the United Nations and some of its specialized agencies, on the basis of resolutions of the General Assembly and the Human Rights Commission calling for closer co-operation with the Centre for Human Rights.

Co-operation between our two organizations may very soon take on a new dimension, particularly in the framework of the Programme of Advisory Services and Technical Assistance implemented by the Centre.

This programme, which I have made every effort to set up and activate with the means at our disposal, is at present a key element in action for human rights, in that in the long run it may ultimately enable sometimes inadequate national human rights structures to be reorganized by mobilizing, through courses, seminars and other

conferences, various social-professional groups which can influence society.

It is not sufficient, however, to draft additional rules and implement existing technical assistance and advisory services programmes. All members of the human family must be educated and informed as widely as possible about their fundamental rights and freedoms. This was the *raison d'être* of last year's World Campaign for Human Rights, the long-term purpose of which is to build up a truly universal culture of human rights.

Conducted at all levels and in every field the Campaign was based on the same principles as the mission the ICRC has set itself: to educate and inform on a large scale, thereby making it possible for each and all to work towards greater co-ordination of humanitarian activities, towards greater respect for the international standards established to improve the protection of the individual, irrespective of origin or beliefs.

Our hope in this context is for greater co-operation between our two organizations, a co-operation leading, for example, to an extended information and publications programme which could encompass all the work that we, like you, are determined to accomplish.

The links between our organizations can, I am convinced, become even stronger in the future, in the spirit of the Charter, in the spirit of the 1948 Universal Declaration, and *noblesse oblige*, in the spirit of the 1864 Convention, to the benefit of all those throughout the world who need our help, our protection, our assistance.

Jan Martenson
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United Nations Office
of Geneva