

IN THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT WORLD

8 MAY 1989

THE HUMANITARIAN GESTURE

*Appeal to all States
on the 125th anniversary
of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*

During its November 1987 meeting in Rio de Janeiro, the Council of Delegates adopted a programme (Resolution No. 7) to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. For one event it was decided that all States would be asked to make an exceptional "Humanitarian Gesture" on 8 May 1989, World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day. This gesture was intended to restore a sense of hope and dignity to people or groups of people who are destitute, in despair or forgotten.

To that end, the President of the ICRC, Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, and the President of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Mr. Mario Villarroel Lander, sent a letter to all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on 10 February, asking them to call on their respective governments to make such a gesture and to present them with a precise, concrete and feasible proposal.

With this in mind, the ICRC and the League drew up a document for the National Societies to promote the Humanitarian Gesture (see below). It contains a list of suggestions drawn up jointly by the two international institutions.

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125 years at work... protecting human life

The purpose of commemorating this 125th anniversary is to promote the Red Cross and Red Crescent and project the image of a youthful, universal and dynamic movement.

We want this anniversary to be an opportunity to celebrate, for the 250 million people, young and old, who belong to the Red Cross and Red Crescent family. These volunteers of National Societies and staff of the ICRC and the League are proud to be links in the chain of international solidarity. It is a family united in its endeavour to develop, to become more effective in protecting human life.

We want this anniversary to mark a return to our roots, to the principles which gave birth to our Movement and today form the basis for its revival: *Iter arma caritas, Per humanitatem ad pacem*.

This anniversary would be of little importance were it merely a reminder of those principles. But it is also an opportunity to appeal to all States, to the entire family of man. The original Geneva Convention was signed 125 years ago. Our appeal will be the culmination of this year of commemoration.

The humanitarian reflex which spurred Henry Dunant into action at Solferino had far-reaching consequences. We are calling for a worldwide series of such humanitarian gestures on 8 May 1989, World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day.

An unprecedented appeal

To mark the 125th anniversary, all States party to the Geneva Conventions are being invited to make some exceptional humanitarian gesture to demonstrate their commitment to the Movement's ideals and principles. This appeal is the result of a resolution adopted unanimously at the 1987 Council of Delegates in Rio de Janeiro to approach the anniversary not only as an occasion for self-congratulation but rather as an opportunity to call on all States, on all mankind, to heed its universal conscience and act in the interest of the victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts.

In 1859, Henry Dunant was horrified to see so many thousands of soldiers left to die slowly on the battlefield at Solferino, of their wounds and of hunger and thirst.

Is it possible not to feel similar horror today at the arbitrary, senseless violence committed against so many people in the world? Is it possible not to do everything in our power to put an end to these cruel acts so unworthy of our humanity, to save the lives and relieve the suffering of those who, accidentally or unjustly, become the victims of natural or man-made disasters?

Our Movement continues to base its conviction and determination on the human capacity to be moved by the suffering of others and to refuse to see that suffering as unavoidable. The Red Cross and Red Crescent are symbols of man's concern for the welfare of his fellows. They carry their message to all

corners of the globe and strive to ensure respect for fundamental rights and human dignity. The members of the Movement are idealists but also realists. They are united by the same principles and the same commitment to humanitarian action, to ensuring respect for international humanitarian law and promoting a wider knowledge of that law.

The chain of solidarity which the Movement represents still depends on the support and co-operation of States. By becoming party to the Geneva Conventions, the world's most widely accepted treaties, those States have united for humanity and undertaken to protect human life.

The humanitarian gestures made by States on 8 May 1989 will be an extraordinary way of marking 125 years of solidarity with the victims of conflict and natural or man-made disasters, 125 years of fidelity to our fundamental principles and unity transcending frontiers and differences.

As the heirs of Henry Dunant, we are being idealistic in calling on States to seize this opportunity to make a gesture of solidarity, humanity and peace, to mark the Movement's anniversary. But we remain realistic in our determination to put forward proposals which are precise, specific and feasible.

Bringing about an event that catches the public eye, building momentum for a much-needed humanitarian mobilization and, in so doing, fostering fraternity, justice and peace, are the aims of this unprecedented appeal to be addressed by the 147 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to their respective governments.

A light in the darkness

Even in the most desperately inhuman and violent situations, one humanitarian gesture can be the spark that kindles a gleam of hope for a better way of life and eventually ignites the flame of peace.

Every humanitarian gesture contributes to a spirit of harmony, understanding and co-operation. When you reach out with open arms in a situation otherwise dominated by the clenched fist, you can, in the midst of violence and disaster, foster trust and brotherhood. You help promote a spirit of peace. This is because such a gesture is inspired not by fear of domination, but by respect for people as human beings. It is proof that, in the face of suffering, it is possible to cease being enemies and to work together for the common good.

The Movement's 125 years of experience have shown that humanitarian ideals are not an illusion. The unselfish, impartial and independent work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has rescued millions of people from death, contempt or oblivion.

As we approach the end of the millenium, the solutions to the great problems of our time cannot be dissociated from respect for the universal values on which

humanitarian endeavour is based. Whether we are trying to protect human life and alleviate human suffering, fighting hunger and disease or promoting understanding and co-operation, no lasting progress can be made unless our work is backed up by measures to safeguard human life and dignity.

We must redouble our efforts to encourage this awareness, this new realism. We must persuade people to convert their minds and redirect their energies, by demonstrating that the interests and values of all mankind converge—both in situations of conflict and in the growing number of natural and man-made disasters.

It is possible today to take a new and realistic approach to humanitarian undertakings, for their justification lies not only on moral grounds but also in practical necessity.

The prevailing tendency, it is true, remains that of giving precedence to immediate political and security imperatives over humanitarian considerations. Nevertheless, though man's deeds almost invariably deviate from the principles he espouses, fighting has recently been stopped and negotiations have been opened in many areas of conflict. At the same time, progress has been made in disarmament and human rights. These are all hopeful signs that the priorities of States may be beginning to correspond to humanitarian priorities.

This is why the various Humanitarian Gestures of 8 May 1989 can be a symbol of a new departure, a new commitment.

This being the case, the Humanitarian Gesture provides a valuable opportunity to present the Movement as a strong and close-knit family, and to make use of all the moral force of its universality in the struggle to ensure respect for human life and dignity.

This is a struggle which we can and must win.

An exceptional request

Our objective is ambitious and it is clear: 147 National Societies ask 147 governments to carry out 147 special Humanitarian Gestures for World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day, 8 May 1989.

The success of the Humanitarian Gesture will depend on the active participation of each National Society which will have the responsibility of approaching its government with one or several specific proposals.

This will not be easy, either for the Society presenting it or for the government receiving it. Much courage will be required to ask one's government to do something it does not normally do and firm conviction will be necessary to believe that it will nevertheless be done, for the Red Cross and Red Crescent, for its anniversary. Knowing that 146 other National Societies are also approach-

ing their governments, with similar requests for the same day and in the same spirit, will help give each Society the courage and conviction it needs.

Of course, each individual Society knows best what *exceptional* gesture it can reasonably ask of its government. But it will make its request, explaining that members of a universal Movement have decided to join forces in obtaining from all their respective governments 147 “gifts” to celebrate a common anniversary.

The obstacles are many but we believe that cohesion between all the Movement’s components can make this possible. Therefore, in response to the desire expressed by some National Societies, and naturally only at their request, the ICRC and the League might consider giving appropriate support to approaches made by National Societies to their governments.

To do this, in association with the National Societies, we must be very clear not only about our objective but also about how it can be reached. So we shall now describe the kind of measure that would constitute such a Humanitarian Gesture and make some suggestions.

What should a humanitarian gesture be?

The Humanitarian Gesture announced by each State on 8 May 1989 might be viewed as a “birthday present” to the Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. It will demonstrate the State’s commitment to our Movement’s principles and ideals; it will be a message of compassion and conciliation and will illustrate the spirit which guides our work.

A gesture of humanity

We are seeking authentically humanitarian acts. They must have the effect of protecting life and alleviating suffering. They must therefore be specific, and directly benefit people in need. The Humanitarian Gesture will restore hope and dignity to persons or groups of persons who are deprived, forgotten and in despair, and whose condition could not be improved without some gesture of exceptional benevolence made on that day.

An exceptional gesture

Like all birthday gifts, the Humanitarian Gesture will be something exceptional. It will provide governments with an opportunity to take humanitarian measures which they would not otherwise be willing or feel in a position to take.

A “costly” gesture

We are asking governments to make a special effort to mark the anniversary of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It may require some measure of sacrifice on the part of governments: not necessarily a financial sacrifice, and not necessarily for the benefit of the National Societies.

A reasonable gesture

It need not be extravagant nor spectacular. What is important is that it should be feasible in the short term, that it should be for the protection and assistance of people in need and contribute to the ongoing work of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.

Suggestions

This list drawn up by the League and the ICRC is not exhaustive. It is merely a list of suggestions.

Measures to benefit refugees or displaced persons

- *Non-refoulement* of political refugees, in particular humanitarian cases.
- Increasing the government’s quotas.

Measures to benefit separated families

- Distributing and forwarding messages to restore contact between members of families separated by armed conflict or natural disaster.
- Tracing and identifying people reported missing or whose relatives are without news of them.
- Reuniting families.

Measures to benefit detainees

- Releasing “political” detainees, giving priority to humanitarian cases: old people, the disabled, the sick and minors.
- Releasing “illegal immigrants” and placing them in the care of national organizations. These are people with no papers, who are not recognized as citizens of the country detaining them and are not “repatriable” because they are not even recognized as citizens of their countries of origin.
- Granting amnesty or a stay of sentence for certain persons who have been condemned to death.

Measures to benefit prisoners of war

- Notification and forwarding of family messages.
- Releasing and repatriating prisoners of war in areas where hostilities have ceased (ceasefire), with priority given to the wounded, the sick and minors.

Financial measures

Direct or indirect financial support for the National Society and other components of the Movement:

- Annual grant, reductions (for fuel, communications or shipping costs).
- Free use of buildings, permission to organize an annual lottery, to issue postage stamps or design postmarks.

Administrative measures

- Exempting National Societies from customs duties and simplifying administrative formalities for donations, in kind towards the Society's relief and assistance activities.
- Fixing a preferential exchange rate for the transfer of funds to support the National Society's humanitarian work.
- Assigning the National Society a permanent radio frequency, indispensable for emergency communications.
- Drawing up a National Emergency plan which specifically defines the role of the National Society.
- Recognizing and supporting the National Society's efforts to promote voluntary unpaid blood donation.

Legislative measures

- Where no National Society exists, give national recognition to the local interim committee; then enact legislation to establish a National Society.

Educational and promotional measures

- Teaching primary school pupils about the humanitarian principles and activities of the Movement.
- Distribution in secondary schools and universities of publications on the Movement's work in connection with natural disasters and armed conflicts.
- Obliging candidates for driving licences to take first-aid courses organized by the Red Cross or Red Crescent.
- Conducting an official ceremony to give the name "Henry Dunant", "Red Cross" or "Red Crescent" to a street, a square or a park.

“Directions” for the use of this list might contain three main recommendations:

- 1. The gesture must be authentically humanitarian in nature. It must be something exceptional, yet reasonable, and costly. The significance and credibility of our initiative depends on this. The media and public opinion will judge it on the actual “weight” of the government’s action, and its impact will depend on its measurable beneficial effect on people and situations.*
- 2. These measures are not necessarily meant to be taken in isolation. They can and, in certain circumstances, must be complemented by others, such as accompanying an exclusively financial or legal measure by a gesture which will directly and visibly benefit certain persons or groups of persons.*
- 3. It is up to each National Society to judge whether these suggestions are relevant in its particular case and to decide what it will ask its government to do on 8 May 1989. The decision will naturally take into account the local situation and the humanitarian priorities of the moment.*

An international event

The simultaneous announcement of such Humanitarian Gestures being carried out on 8 May 1989 will constitute an international “event”. It will attract the attention of the media and the public.

Such a manifestation of universal commitment to humanitarian ideals and principles will stimulate a mobilization of forces to:

- stir the conscience of the political authorities and encourage them to develop a “humanitarian reflex”;
 - strengthen currents of opinion favouring respect for humanitarian principles;
 - enhance the Movement’s credibility and freedom of action and build up its resources;
 - lend moral support to people working for dialogue, reconciliation and solidarity, aimed at peaceful and lasting settlements to conflicts.
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