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After the Geneva Red Cross Conference

Is the Red Cross dying of politics?

*The question has been put by worried commentators after the 25th International Red Cross Conference at the end of 1986 in Geneva. The cause for concern was the suspension of the South African government delegation. Dr. Hugo Bütler, Editor-in-Chief of the «Neue Zürcher Zeitung» also comments on the Red Cross crisis. **

Grounds for concern about the future of the Red Cross idea have certainly existed since the Red Cross conference (comprising the national societies, the League, the ICRC and the signatory states of the Geneva Convention) met in Geneva and voted (illegally, according to expert interpretation of the Red Cross statutes) to throw out the South African government representatives at the conference. With this step, the humanitarian movement set in motion by Henry Dunant, baldly and for the first time sacrificed its *central idea of impartial aid* to the victims of wars, crises and disasters, to a political action. The black Africans, supported in the matter by the East bloc states and together with delegates from other third-world countries, placed *protest against the unacceptable apartheid regime in South Africa over and above practical help and protection for its black victims.*

**Shortened version of leading article in the «Neue Zürcher Zeitung» of November 1-2, 1986.*

The Botha government, whose representative in Geneva did not even get leave to speak on the suspension decision, reacted promptly and ordered the representatives of the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) in South Africa, some twenty in all, to leave the country.

The practical consequences of this expulsion were, first, that the 300 black prisoners in the apartheid state who were being visited regularly in their prisons by the ICRC officials were deprived of this protection and, second, that the tens of thousands of refugees from Mozambique who fled over the border into South Africa were also no longer being cared for.

Thus, in the event, the victims of internal conflicts are also victims of a politicization of the Red Cross. *The hypocritical, even cynical, overtones of the Geneva conference's decision, which was reached as a result of the Kenya government representative's motion, cannot therefore be disregarded; it was already apparent from the attitude of the front-line states on the sub-*

ject of sanctions. We must not forget that for any understanding whatsoever of the motives of the delegates at Geneva we have of course to take into account that in their decision they pleaded a human rights principle, namely racial equality. All the more, then, does it leap to the eye that a political decision such as was reached at the Geneva conference is in no way compatible with the Red Cross concept.

Whoever has committed himself (or herself) to his fellow beings must also refrain from trying to change the world politically, let alone to improve it. The *victims* of wars and civil strife cannot be helped by those who first call for the prohibition and abolition of armed force and intolerance in the world and then simply sit down and wait. The *Good Samaritan* cannot, must not, get involved in the motives of the conflicting parties but has to succour the wounded and those in danger always, everywhere, and immediately – in whatever circumstances he encounters them. That is why the *Red Cross idea* is intrinsically bound up with the concept of political *neutrality* and, without it, cannot be upheld or realized. To this extent, therefore, the expulsion of out-of-favour South Africa from the Geneva conference must be seen as nothing less than a *serious threat* to the apolitical basic idea of the Red Cross as well as to its claim to universality of action. If one were to apply moral criteria of this kind to all the conference states, then the number of those taking part in the future would be drastically reduced.

Can the damage caused be contained and, with the time, repaired? Or will there now follow, bit by bit, in the Red Cross too, the nauseating spectacle of the expulsion process against the pariahs of *weltpolitik*? The next is the likely danger of a new blowup in the tug-of-war over the ratification of the Geneva additional protocols of 1977, which was intended to be speeded up by the conference. Like a few European states, the Reagan administration has given notice of reservations against texts which in its eyes appear as legitimizing guerilla fighters and terrorists.



The ICRC distributing frijoles, the basic food of the people of El Salvador.



However, there are also grounds for hoping that the ban on the South African government delegation – the South African national Red Cross society was spared – remains a *special case* and need not necessarily be regarded as a precedent in the UNO style. After its offence against the apolitical impartiality of the Red Cross, the Geneva conference passed the *revision of the statutes* without any rows and, in so doing, definitively laid down the basic law of the Red Cross movement in a sense that to a large extent corresponds to the *intentions of the International Committee of the Red Cross*. Moreover, South Africa remains a partner-state of the Geneva Convention with its own recognized Red Cross society. The humanitarian essence of the Red Cross idea and its necessarily apolitical character

will long still not be understood all over the world. The serious setback in Geneva has made this drastically clear. It could well generate resignation and lead to the prejudicing of goodwill on the part of government financial sponsors and private donors. Yet one should not bow to the challenge by becoming discouraged. The *real challenge* consists in helping Dunant's idea to come into its own, despite everything, through the humanitarian act and through work of conviction – and this in a world which is politically as well as morally fissured and which by no means holds, throughout, to European values and conceptions of justice. This is the challenge which will remain the duty and task of Swiss diplomacy for decades to come.

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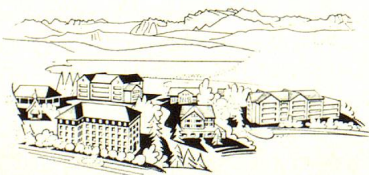


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