Chapter 23
Assistance to the Victims of Armed Conflicts and Other Disasters*

1 Purpose of the Conference

The subject of international humanitarian assistance to the victims of armed conflicts and other disasters holds great topical interest. Yet it is far from new: instances of such assistance being offered and accepted have occurred in every period of human history. For present purposes it seems both proper and sufficient to go back about 125 years, to the origins of what has since developed into the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The story of the early beginnings of the Movement is well-known: 24 June 1859, the Battle of Solferino, between a French and an Austrian army; that same evening, arrival on the scene of Henry Dunant, a young Geneva banker and entrepreneur; the appalling sufferings he witnessed over the next few days, of the more than 9000 wounded of both parties; the manifest incapability of the few French medical officers present, to give the wounded anything like adequate care; and finally, the strenuous efforts by Dunant and some other volunteers, to relieve as best they could the misery of these war victims.¹

The point to be emphasized here concerns the two stages in his reactions to these dramatic events: first, his immediate activities, both on the spot (cleaning and bandaging countless wounds and, sadly, assisting the many dying in their agony) and by taking the initiative for a modest international relief action. These heartbreaking experiences were followed by a phase of reflection, culminating in the publication, in 1862, of his book Un souvenir de Solferino.

In the final chapter of the book, Dunant advanced two important, narrowly connected ideas; to quote his own words:²

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2 Un souvenir de Solferino (1862) pp. 102, 113; the quotes in the text are from Boissier, op. cit. note 1, p. 40.
would it not be possible in time of peace and quiet to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?

And some pages further down:

when princes of the military art belonging to different nationalities meet …

would it not be desirable that they should take advantage of this sort of congress to formulate some international principle, sanctioned by a convention inviolate in character, which, once agreed upon and ratified, might constitute the basis for societies for the relief of the wounded in the different European countries?

With these few lines, he had thrown a clear light on the need for the organization of private efforts combined with international norm-setting, as essential conditions for an effective assistance to the victims of events as disastrous as the Battle of Solferino. It was not long before both ideas began to materialize, with the creation, first, of national Red Cross societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross and secondly, the adoption of the Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field.

In retrospect, the Battle of Solferino, no matter how horrendous from the point of view of human suffering, was a fairly simple affair when regarded as a disaster: it was really nothing more than a pitched battle between two opposing armies. To be sure, the two armies, taken together, had numbered more than 300,000 troops; but the violence did not extend beyond the battlefield and claimed no victims other than the dead and wounded among the combatants: it did not, in particular, expose such outsiders as the inhabitants of the nearby localities to any direct risks. Then, although the aftermath of the battle might have brought to light the desperate shortage of military surgeons and medical supplies on the French side, the idea itself, that the wounded of armies in the field should be given adequate assistance and treatment, did not at the time encounter any serious opposition. And last but not least, there was no question yet in Europe of closed State borders that could effectively have stood in the way of an international relief action.

Since those early days, a never-ending stream of armed conflicts and other disasters, often of far greater scope and complexity than the Battle of Solferino, has continued to provoke the need for international humanitarian assistance; and this has in turn run into far graver difficulties than could ever have been imagined in 1859. The point to stress here is the in essence unchanged reactions to such disaster situations: again and again, it is action first, followed by reflection; and each time, the main recurrent themes in the latter phase are the twin ones of organization and international legislation.