

SEMINAR IN DAKAR ON INFORMATION TECHNIQUES

The First Regional Seminar for Information and Public Relations Officers of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of French-speaking African countries was organized by the League of Red Cross Societies, in co-operation with the Senegalese Red Cross Society, in Dakar (Senegal) from 17 to 29 January 1977.

The aim of this seminar was to promote a better knowledge of information techniques among Societies of the Red Cross.

National Society Information and Public Relations Officers of thirteen countries took part in the seminar. Based on African experience in this field the seminar was centred on the promotion of Red Cross knowledge among rural populations, as well as on learning professional techniques in the fields of press, radio, television, and methods of communicating with the public. Radio, one of the most effective means of sensitizing rural African populations, was a major item on the seminar's programme.

EUROPEAN SEMINAR ON DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE OF GENEVA CONVENTIONS

The first European Red Cross seminar on dissemination of knowledge of the Geneva Conventions took place in Warsaw from 21 to 29 March ¹. It was attended by about eighty delegates from twenty-three National Red Cross Societies of Europe and North America, and by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies.

Under the patronage of the Polish Premier, Henryk Jablonski, the seminar was organized jointly by the Polish Red Cross and the ICRC. Its purpose was to enable National Societies to exchange their views and experiences in order to improve the dissemination of knowledge

¹ *Plate.*

of humanitarian law in their respective countries, especially in the armed forces, and in schools, universities and among the general public.

Premier Jablonski said in his inaugural address:

“The support consistently given by Poland to any new development, strengthening, dissemination and application of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts is entirely in line with the peaceful objective of our foreign policy. We consider it to be an important duty for us, one which is always timely. The banning of war by existing international law, unhappily, is not yet respected in many parts of the world. We have not yet succeeded in eliminating armed conflicts. . .

“It follows from this situation that the main objective in disseminating and applying humanitarian law in armed conflicts is to reduce the suffering of victims of these conflicts and to increase protection for the civilian population. . . Such dissemination also has great importance in consolidating and propagating universal humanitarian values, strengthening the foundations of humanitarian culture and the education of society in a spirit of peace”.

In his warm welcome to the participants in the seminar, Dr. Ryszard Brzozowski, President of the Polish Red Cross, told them:

“As Poles and Red Cross militants, as inhabitants of a Europe which places all its hopes in the development of international co-operation and an atmosphere of security and peace, we are aware that our seminar, however modest, is a concrete expression of the profound desire which all of us share to contribute through the means specific to the Red Cross to an atmosphere encouraging the achievement of peaceful coexistence in Europe and throughout the world, and thus to the elimination of armed conflicts as a means for settling differences.

“The dissemination of the principles of humanitarian law in the Geneva Conventions is for us one of the means of education which helps to instil, especially in youth, the conditioned humanitarian reflex which impels us to be ready to serve mankind under all circumstances, reminding us at the same time that the most effective means of safeguarding human life and dignity is the construction of peace.

“We are happy indeed, in this part of Europe, that we have been granted the honour of serving as hosts for this seminar, which is the expression of our common desire to make an ever greater contribution, through the humanitarian activities of the Red Cross, to the development of co-operation and the consolidation of peace among peoples”.

ICRC President Alexandre Hay commented in his address, "It serves no purpose to develop, negotiate and ratify humanitarian law if it is to remain unknown to those responsible for applying it, and especially to the armed forces".

"The work of diffusing knowledge of the Geneva Conventions", went on the ICRC President, "is one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most difficult duties of the National Societies and the ICRC... It is difficult, because it is, as it were, a long-term investment—and often unpopular. Nobody likes talking about war in time of peace, even within a movement that originated on a battlefield... Yet if the Red Cross does not at least make the effort, who will do so? Dissemination, in the wide sense which we attribute to it, implies also spreading knowledge of the ideals and principles of the Red Cross... Above and before the letter of the law, there is the spirit. The Red Cross spirit is conducive to mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and long-lasting peace among all nations".

Mr. K. J. Warras, Vice-Chairman of the League of Red Cross Societies, defined as follows the importance of the tasks confronting National Societies and the League:

"Our task should not be limited to disseminating only the Geneva Conventions but should also include dissemination of the Red Cross principles and the humanitarian ideals which constitute the basis for all Red Cross activities... Efforts at dissemination, for example, must be part of the programmes of Junior Red Cross groups, so as to implant in the minds of youth an attitude encouraging mutual understanding, friendship and humanitarian conduct. A National Society can and should instil humanitarian values into their communities... At the same time, close co-operation between National Societies and their governments is of vital importance... The National Societies should continue to influence their governments in this field... and play a role in the application of the Law of Geneva... In this field of activity, the Red Cross can only achieve its maximum effectiveness by mobilizing the resources of the whole movement. This is one of the objectives of this seminar..."

The atmosphere during the proceedings was excellent. The spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding characteristic of the Red Cross was evident throughout the ten-day meeting, and the unanimous view of the organizers, in the Polish Red Cross and in the ICRC, was that this first European seminar had fully achieved its avowed objectives.

On a practical plane, despite marked differences between the National Societies, both in their programmes of activities and in their working methods, the participants succeeded in finding grounds for agreement on most of the subjects discussed, and they enunciated several significant conclusions:

- the spread of knowledge of international humanitarian law, though primarily a duty of the States, should be one of the principal concerns of the Red Cross in general, and particularly of each National Society within its own country;
- the work of dissemination ought not to be limited to the Geneva Conventions; it should include the fundamental principles of the Red Cross;
- this work cannot be dissociated from the encouragement of a spirit of peace, and should never make war appear “acceptable”;
- since it is an ideal that is to be disseminated, the work should be done by persons motivated by a deeply held belief in this ideal.

All those taking part in the seminar considered that its success was largely due to the fact that it was organized by the Polish Red Cross, in a country that has suffered from centuries of conflict and that has paid a heavy price for its profound conviction that any dialogue which brings nations together helps to prevent war.

BOARD VOTES NEW LEAGUE CONSTITUTION

The League's Board of Governors voted a new constitution for the world federation during an extraordinary session held in Geneva 1-6 November.

The International Review of the Red Cross, in its December 1976 issue, published an account of this important session of the League Board of Governors and gives below some additional details.