

THE CENTENARY OF THE ARGENTINE RED CROSS

The Argentine Red Cross, in June this year, celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its foundation. The ICRC was represented, at the commemoration ceremony in Buenos Aires, by Mr. Jacques Moreillon, Director of the Department of Principles and Law, who made the following speech. International Review is glad to print this text, with its compliments and best wishes to the Argentine Red Cross for its centenary.

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It is my pleasure to participate, with my friends of the Argentine Red Cross, in the centenary celebrations of their Society. It is above all an honour to commemorate this anniversary as messenger and representative of the founder institution of the international Red Cross movement.

The present occasion seems to constitute an urgent appeal to us all. It is a resonant encouragement to devote all our strength to a task whose necessity for more than a century and with each passing year has become increasingly obvious. Originally, the role of the Red Cross was restricted to helping those wounded in war, but this role has continued growing to the extent that today there is no form of human suffering that the Red Cross is not called upon to fight against.

The extraordinary development of the Red Cross clearly demonstrates the perspicacity of the pioneers of our movement. Amongst them the founders of the Argentine Red Cross hold an important place. Fortunately, well aware of the historic importance of their work, they made a point of leaving a written account of the circumstances which directed their actions and the difficulties they had to overcome.

As Dr. Pedro Roberts, the first President, narrates in his captivating memoirs of 1880, the impending armed clash between the national government troops and those of the province of Buenos Aires made it imperative to gather together and organize individual good will “ under

the banner of the international association founded in Geneva". Dr. Roberts continued: "Time was running out; fighting seemed imminent and while both parties were feverishly preparing for war, nobody thought of the help to be given to the victims".

An assembly was convened in the premises of the Spanish Club, on 9 June 1880, during which the ten articles of the first Geneva Convention of 1864 were read, Argentina having acceded to the Convention seven months earlier, on 25 November 1879. That assembly appointed a temporary Committee which the following day formally became the "Red Cross Association in its Argentine Section".

Without delay, the Association leaders approached the two conflicting parties to obtain official approval of their endeavour. On 14 June, the Society was officially recognized by National Government decree. In the meantime, the Red Cross collected funds, medical equipment and received permission to use rooms in several hospitals and clinics in the capital. When the hostilities broke out on 20 June, its volunteers were able to get to work immediately. By the end of the fighting, 319 seriously injured had been hospitalized and treated by the Red Cross and a much larger number of those less seriously injured had received treatment and returned home. In a purely humanitarian spirit, doctors and first-aiders treated victims of both camps, and their impartiality created some problems for them, fortunately temporary, with the local authorities.

After this first period of emergency, the founders of the Society concentrated on organizing their institution. The Argentine Red Cross adopted a new set of internal regulations taking into account the experience acquired in the heat of action. It received the help and patronage of various influential and respected notables. It set up sections in major towns of the country, consolidated its relations with the new government, which granted it various administrative facilities. It contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross which, with great pleasure, recognized it as a new member of the International Red Cross on 10 January 1882.

It is interesting, almost a century later, to re-read certain passages of the circular sent to National Societies of the Red Cross, wherein the ICRC recommends the new Society:

"Ever since almost all the States of Europe have Red Cross Societies, the International Committee has only rarely had occasion to inform its honourable members of the founding of like associations. Yet, how desirable it is for our work to spread to countries overseas.

Until today, there was only one Society in the New World which had established relations with those of Europe, the Society of Peru, but we hope to see others blossom in the near future. It is the Republic of

Argentina that we bring to you today... for the Argentine Society has asked to normalize its position in relation to other Red Cross Societies...

Before granting its request, the International Committee considered it necessary to have further correspondence with the Buenos Aires Committee and to make sure that the Argentine Society was in every way qualified to take its place amongst the concert of Societies already existing...

Consequently, it is with adequate knowledge of the facts and with great pleasure that we present to you today the Argentine Society of the Red Cross... and we urge the longer established Societies to lend it a helping hand..."

The Argentine Red Cross forged links with sister Societies, especially with the Spanish Red Cross, whose representatives in Buenos Aires had actively participated in the constituent assembly of 9 June 1880. It offered, in its turn, its support to Red Cross committees being formed in Bolivia and Uruguay.

After the lapse of a century, we can only marvel at the ideals, drive and efficiency of the founders of the Argentine Society. Hindsight highlights the exemplary aspect of their work: their contagious enthusiasm, generation after generation, brought in the thousands of volunteers who animate this national Red Cross today.

This enthusiasm is more than ever necessary. By its past success, the Red Cross has raised hopes, sometimes quite out of proportion. Not only the victims of all present-day catastrophes, but even the population on the whole, and governments too, count on the Red Cross to give proof of solidarity and to untiringly spread, by word and deed, the respect of basic human values. Hence, every institution, every Society, every man and woman in the Red Cross shoulders a heavy responsibility with regard to our now universal movement.

The ICRC itself attaches the utmost importance to the existence in Argentina of a strong and active Society whose striking example of adherence to the fundamental principles of the Red Cross is so gratifying. It is grateful to the Society in Argentina for its collaboration over the years and for the support that ICRC delegates have always received in this country.

It is in this spirit that the International Committee of the Red Cross, on the occasion of this 100th anniversary, expresses its warmest wishes to the Argentine Red Cross for its future activities in the service of humanity.