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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

By their very nature and the extent of the suffering they brought in their wake, the conflicts waged around the world in 1997 pointed up all the complexity of the post-Cold-War era and made it painfully obvious that ensuring the safety of entire populations, and of innocent civilians in particular, constitutes a challenge that the international community seems increasingly unable to meet.

This state of affairs is the expression of a moral and political crisis which affects, to a greater or lesser degree, contemporary society as a whole. It is evident in the resurgence of nationalistic, religious or ethnic ideologies which jeopardize the political unity of States. It can also be seen in the rejection of the values of tolerance and solidarity. In conflicts sparked by this crisis, State authority disintegrates, power becomes fragmented and armed gangs take over from regular military forces.

It is therefore hardly surprising that our delegates in the field should have difficulty in finding individuals in positions of influence who are willing to assume their responsibilities, and that in situations where political and moral chaos is rife, where no distinction is made between combatants and non-combatants, utter disregard for civilians should become commonplace. This trend must be reversed. Indeed, to ensure that it is represents the greatest humanitarian challenge that we face today.

True, in a number of conflicts diplomatic initiatives have fortunately brought hostilities to an end and paved the way for a peaceful settlement, even if implementation often remains an uncertain and complex affair. In mentioning such cases, I wish to draw attention to the fact that in countries whose economic and human resources have been devastated, humanitarian needs do not disappear the minute that the guns fall silent, and conflict could all too easily flare up again. There are detainees to be visited, assisted and protected; the search for missing persons must continue; all necessary support must be provided to

restore health services, to care for the war-disabled, to provide drinking water, and to meet the basic needs of hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

It is also in these situations of renewed calm that active campaigns to promote international humanitarian law and humane values must be conducted, since the traumas of war not only mutilate the body but also frequently dull the conscience. In a world characterized by a constantly widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, by soaring arms sales, by terrorist activities which claim ever more victims, including a rising number of children, in a world where 800 million people go hungry and 1.2 billion live in absolute poverty, sources of conflict and violence are aplenty, and preventive action appears more necessary than ever.

I should like to pay tribute to all those who, despite ever-growing dangers, put their own lives on the line and continue to strive, by working tirelessly in behalf of victims, for a world imbued with solidarity. And I call on the donor community to keep up its support for the International Committee of the Red Cross and thereby to enable those brave men and women to accomplish their tasks.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Cornelio Sommaruga', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the ICRC