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HUMANITARIAN RELIEF - RED CROSS CONFERENCE

The Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, today made the following statement:

I am very pleased to be able to announce that Canada has been instrumental in achieving real progress towards the development of international humanitarian law during the 21st International Red Cross Conference, held in Istanbul from September 6 to 13.

Three decisions of far-reaching importance were made. The first was embodied in a Declaration of Principles on International Humanitarian Relief to Civilian Populations in Disaster Situations. This declaration was drafted by Canada and Norway, after consultation with the Canadian and Norwegian Red Cross, and was adopted without any opposing votes. The Declaration affirms that human suffering in all of its manifestations is of deep concern to the conscience of mankind; recognizes that further steps must be taken by the international community to ensure prompt and effective relief action to civilian populations in both natural and other disaster situations; and goes on to lay down six important principles, namely:

1. The fundamental concern of mankind is the protection and welfare of the individual and the safeguarding of basic human rights;
2. Relief by impartial international humanitarian organizations for civilian populations in both natural and other disaster situations should be treated as humanitarian and non-political;
3. Effective coordination of action by impartial international humanitarian organizations is essential;
4. Disaster relief should be provided without discrimination and should in no circumstances be regarded as an unfriendly act;

5. All states are requested to facilitate the admission, transit and distribution of relief supplies by such organization for the benefit and welfare of civilian populations; and
6. All other authorities should also facilitate disaster relief activities.

This resolution is not merely a collection of pious platitudes. Passed as it was by a conference grouping both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies, the organizations best qualified to claim the title of impartial international humanitarian organizations, and at the same time those with the greatest experience in providing relief to both natural and armed conflict disaster situations, the Declaration represents not merely a cry from the conscience of mankind but a demand for concrete action.

The other two related decisions adopted at the Conference go a step further towards concrete action by states to incur actual legal in addition to moral obligations to facilitate the provisions of disaster relief.

One of these resolutions, sponsored by Switzerland, actively supported by Canada and drafted together by the two countries, was adopted unanimously. It is entitled: "The Reaffirmation and Development of the Laws and Customs Applicable in Armed Conflicts". This resolution refers to the tragic fact of life that armed conflicts and other forms of violence continuously imperil peace and the values of humanity; it underlines the necessity and urgency of reaffirming and developing humanitarian rules of international law applicable in armed conflicts of all kinds, in order to strengthen the effective protection of the fundamental rights of human beings in keeping with the Geneva Red Cross Conventions of 1949. It goes on to request the International Committee of the Red Cross to pursue actively efforts towards four objectives, namely:

- a) Proposing as soon as possible concrete rules which would supplement the existing humanitarian law;
- b) Inviting governmental, Red Cross and other experts representing the principal legal and social system in the world to meet for consultations with the International Committee of the Red Cross on these proposals;
- c) Submitting these proposals to governments for their comments, and

- d) If it is deemed desirable, recommending to the appropriate authorities to consider the convening of diplomatic conferences of states parties to the Geneva Conventions as well as other interested states in order to elaborate international legal instruments incorporating these proposals.

Canada had already, prior to the Istanbul Conference, developed in consultation with the Canadian Red Cross Society certain proposals aimed precisely at placing upon states the legal obligation to apply humanitarian standards to all disaster situations, whether natural in origin or arising out of conflicts, whether international or internal. In the Canadian view it is not enough to ask states to facilitate the provision of disaster relief. The time has come to make such action mandatory, in order, in the language of the resolution, to strengthen the effective protection of the fundamental rights of human beings.

The third resolution, intended primarily to follow up the last mentioned resolution, also co-sponsored by Canada, relates specifically to non-international armed conflicts. This resolution recalls the unfortunate fact that since the conclusion of the Geneva Conventions in 1949 non-international armed conflicts have been on the increase and have caused much suffering. The resolution makes specific reference to one of the key provisions contained in each of the four Geneva Red Cross Conventions, namely Article 3, which lays down minimal standards applicable to all conflict situations, but goes on to point out that experience has shown that the provision in question is not adequate, and that the Article in question requires to be made more specific and to be supplemented. In the operative part of the resolution, the International Committee of the Red Cross with the cooperation of governmental experts is requested to devote special attention to this problem within the framework of the general studies, already referred to, towards the development of humanitarian law. The resolution was passed with an overwhelming majority of 95 to 4 with 12 abstentions.

All Canadians are aware of the reasons why the U.N. is not necessarily the only forum for all types of activity aimed at contributing to peaceful relations and relief of human suffering. The Canadian Government has long recognized the tremendous service of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies and the national Red Cross societies

in these vital areas of human concern. For this reason the Canadian Government has lent its full support to efforts by the Red Cross to go further than has heretofore been possible in building a system of legal as well as moral standards of humanitarian behaviour. The Government is extremely gratified at the success achieved at the Istanbul Red Cross Conference, and pledges to do its utmost in following up the decisions reached last week with continued support and concrete action.