

Henry Dunant Medal

Tribute to

Cornelio Sommaruga

Cornelio Sommaruga became president of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1987 after a long and successful career in public service. His presidency spanned a historic period marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. He successfully guided the ICRC into a new era.

Dr Sommaruga contributed greatly to the ideals of the Movement by constantly promoting Red Cross and Red Crescent values. This was especially important at a time characterized by genocides and ethnic cleansing. In his own words, the Movement had to close the gap between moral progress and scientific and technological advances. He strived to promote worldwide solidarity, to restore tolerance and respect for others and to create awareness of collective responsibility in the Movement. He fiercely defended the neutrality of the ICRC while maintaining close ties to all States party to the Geneva Conventions.

Dr Sommaruga led the ICRC through many challenges. He reached out to Holocaust victims, paved the way towards a solution to the question of the emblems by proposing a new emblem alongside the existing ones, and introduced reforms within the ICRC to respond to the concerns of a younger generation of delegates. He helped the ICRC to weather a series of shocking killings of field delegates and local employees.

He wholeheartedly committed himself to the ideals of the Movement through his strength of character, integrity and lack of pretention. He personified these characteristics in his actions and in the way he led the ICRC: tirelessly campaigning for conflict victims, forcefully defending international humanitarian law and humbly recognizing that the ICRC was but one component of the larger Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

Dr Sommaruga is a born humanitarian with great tact. He has earned the respect of the leaders of many great powers, and yet is perfectly at ease talking with people from the humblest walks of life. His sincerity and warmth can disarm even the most sceptical of people. His vivid personality and genuine caring leave a strong impression on all who come into contact with him. He is perhaps most admired for the fervour and dedication he brought to his duties as ICRC president, and for not hiding his feelings in public.

Thanks to his immense charisma, and his talent as a communicator, he brought the ICRC and the Movement – traditionally media-shy – into the age of modern communications and successfully rallied support for the causes he championed. Through numerous interviews and speaking engagements around the world, he raised awareness of the ICRC's work among the general public and won over his audiences with eloquence and conviction. He became the driving force behind the campaign by the ICRC and the Movement to ban anti-personnel landmines.

For his personal commitment, his important contribution to the development of humanitarian activities, and for his work in promoting the Movement's Fundamental Principles and ideals, the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has unanimously agreed to award Mr Cornelio Sommaruga the Henry Dunant Medal, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's highest distinction.

Geneva, 23 November 2009

H.E. Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid
Chairman

Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent