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Red Cross 'lost moral compass' in war but says drew lessons

GENEVA | BY [STEPHANIE NEBEHAY](#)

(Reuters) - The Red Cross "lost its moral compass" during World War Two, turning a blind eye to atrocities committed by the Nazis, but is speaking out more now about conflicts including Syria, its president said on Tuesday.

Peter Maurer said the International Committee of the Red Cross had not recognized Nazi Germany for what it was and failed to protect civilians and especially Jews from persecution and murder.

"It failed as a humanitarian organization because it had lost its moral compass," Maurer said in a speech. "It failed ... by responding to the outrageous with standard procedures, it looked on helplessly and silently..."

The aid agency had access to prisoners of war during World War Two but could not enter Hitler's concentration camps until the final days.

"The first lesson coming directly from the Holocaust is that in the face of a human catastrophe silence is not a moral alternative. This is more important today than ever because of what we see through the Middle East and Africa and even right here in Europe," World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder said.

"When Christians are slaughtered in Africa and the Middle East just because they are Christians, we cannot be silent."

In 1995, Cornelio Sommaruga was the first ICRC president to publicly recognize that its failure to speak out during the Holocaust was a "moral defeat". Sommaruga and Lauder attended Tuesday's event to mark the 70th anniversary next month of the war's end and to examine the ICRC's shortcomings.

"Since then, we have chosen to confront our past and to embrace transparency," Maurer said. "The ICRC has also adopted a new policy on confidentiality, explicitly acknowledging that there is a path to condemnation of acts of inhumanity.

"We cannot just be a relief organization."

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ICRC officials visited more than 800,000 detainees in 90 countries last year, but in exchange for access its confidential findings on conditions are only shared with authorities.

It has visited four government-run detention centers in Syria, but the jails of China, Cuba and North Korea, which activists say contain many political prisoners, remain off-limits.

(Reporting by Stephanie Nebehay; editing by [Tom Miles](#) and Ruth Pitchford)

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