

# INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

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## THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE'S ACTION IN THE YEMEN

The very year in which it has just celebrated its centenary, the International Committee of the Red Cross is carrying out a large-scale relief action in circumstances which, in a way, recall the experience of Henry Dunant, its illustrious promoter, a hundred years ago on the battlefield of Solferino. The victims today are in the mountains of the Yemen, but like those of the Lombardy plain a century ago, these wounded and sick troops are abandoned to their suffering. In this isolated corner of the Middle East, in an Arabia which can no longer be called a happy land, these unfortunates are forgotten.

The Red Cross, which was founded in the first place to bring relief to the victims of war, could not ignore those who are prey to the long drawn out conflict in the Yemen. In keeping with the dictates of one of its primary principles, its action had to be proportionate to the extent of the distress inflicted, which is at its worst in the highland territory held by the Imam El Badr's royalist forces, where there is not one single doctor and where most of the wounded die from lack of proper attention. The situation is quite different in the Yemen Arab Republic, which has several hospitals and where a medical service is well organized to take care of military and civilian wounded. Nevertheless the ICRC has contributed medical supplies and other relief material which it had been asked to provide. On the other hand, it was, thanks to its neutral status, the only organization able to intervene on the royalist side, and it undertook this arduous task with the conviction that to do so was consistent with the spirit of its founders, whose memory has just been celebrated throughout the world.

**The ICRC's action stage by stage.**—The task now being undertaken by the ICRC is of a unique character : It involves the establishment in the heart of the desert of a field hospital, at first with 50, then later on, 100 beds. However, from the very beginning of the conflict, the ICRC has been endeavouring to succour the victims.

As early as December 1962, it delegated two doctors to the territory occupied by the forces of the Imam El Badr, when it was able to make the first assessment of needs and to bring a measure of relief. It will be recalled that these two doctors were caught in an air-raid whilst they were with the royalist troops. Both were slightly wounded but this nevertheless did not prevent them from caring for and operating on men more seriously injured than they.

Shortly after, two other delegates went to Sanaa where they contacted Marshal Sallal, the President of the Yemen Arab Republic. The first result of these two missions was that the two opposing forces gave their formal agreement to observe the main provisions of the Geneva Conventions. On both sides, the delegates worked to bring relief to civil and military prisoners and arranged for a number of them to be repatriated.

An appeal was therefore launched by the ICRC to the National Societies of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and the Red Lion and Sun. On the first occasion, February 22, 1963, it had stressed the urgent needs observed by its delegates in the Yemen, both on the Royalist as well as on the Republican side, as a result of the war. It asked the National Societies to help in the relief action which it considered necessary to undertake, by sending medical teams, donations in cash for the purchase of medical supplies or donations in kind of a nature suitable for the action in the Yemen.

At the request of the Sanaa authorities, the ICRC distributed to the Republican side large quantities of medical supplies, part of which had been provided by various National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

However, it was not successful in its appeal for medical teams to work with the Royalists, so that the doctor-delegates sent by the ICRC were alone in administering to the sick and wounded. It became more and more obvious that the extent of the distress demanded a much larger relief force with adequate medical equipment to meet the situation.

# THE ICRC IN THE YEMEN



Loading at Geneva airport of various items for the field hospital and of medical equipment.

Photos Jean Zbinden





The second aircraft landing on the sand strip at Najran in the Yemen...

Photos «Comet»

...where medical equipment is being unloaded.



On September 19, seeing that the fighting was continuing in the Yemen and that numerous civilian and military victims were receiving little or no attention, it renewed its appeal to the National Societies. At that time, it advocated a twofold action which it considered indispensable: i.e. firstly to increase the number of medical teams working in the interior of the Yemen, and secondly to set up a field hospital in the North of the Yemen close to the Saudi Arabian border.

On November 7, the International Committee urged numerous National Societies to provide financial contributions in view of the decision which it had in the meantime been impelled to take by the disappointing result of its previous appeals. The situation was explained in a cable, the main passages of which are quoted hereunder:

*Disappointing results totally out of proportion with most urgent health and medical requirements in areas controlled by imam entirely devoid of doctors or hospitals ICRC has decided immediate acquisition and installation north Yemen 50 bed field hospital stop all necessary equipment in course acquisition accordance directives experienced experts knowing local requirements including fully equipped operating theatre and ward with accessory apparatus surgical instruments X-ray plant laboratory unit water filtering plant tents bedding vehicles etc stop recruitment Swiss medical and technical personnel undertaken in cooperation Swiss Red Cross stop Installation field hospital expected around November 15 on reconnoitred site whose precise location will be notified all parties concerned accordance Geneva Conventions.*

In view of the poor response to its appeals in February and September 1963, the ICRC was obliged to assume the financial burden for the relief action planned to meet the drastic situation in the Yemen. It was obvious beforehand that this would be a costly operation. The necessary resources would have to be found in Switzerland.

**A desert hospital.**—Thanks to support from the Swiss Federal Council and the active co-operation of the Swiss Red Cross, the ICRC was able to assemble sufficient personnel and equipment to set up the field hospital. This is on Yemeni territory in the demilitarized zone established for the United Nations observers, some 30 miles S.E. of Najran in Saudi Arabia. It has a “clinobox”—an operating unit of the most modern type containing four compart-

ments—a genuine miniature clinic where all the main major surgical operations may be performed. Several tents are pitched around this central unit to accommodate fifty patients and the staff. The latter comprises some 30 persons, including seven doctors, recruited by the Swiss Red Cross.

Mr. A. Rochat, the delegate in charge of the ICRC mission to the Arab peninsula, left Geneva on November 11, 1963, whilst the head doctor of the hospital, Dr. Wolfgang Schuster, left on the 13th, together with twenty-three members of the staff under his orders.

Although the personnel of this field hospital left Switzerland by ordinary commercial flight, the hospital equipment had to be transported by special aircraft. The first of these took off from Geneva-Cointrin airport on November 12 for Saudi Arabia, from where the equipment was forwarded on to its destination in the Yemen. This was a C.124 "Globemaster", the only plane big enough to stow the operating theatre unit. It also carried tents and beds for the patients as well as large quantities of medical equipment.<sup>1</sup> This aircraft could not land anywhere near the site chosen for the field hospital, so that its cargo had to be discharged at Jeddah and then transported over-land to its final destination.

Some idea of the difficulties of this operation can be deduced from the fact that the distance covered by the heavily laden lorries was 750 miles across mountainous desert.

The first plane being unable to take all the equipment, a second plane was chartered to carry the remainder.<sup>1</sup> When it left Geneva on November 16, it was not known whether it would be able to land at the field hospital site.

This was managed, however, thanks to the skill of the pilot who then made several trips between Jeddah and Najran (the nearest town to the hospital) to carry some of the equipment landed by the first plane.

A third flight took place on November 29, which enabled all the remaining equipment to be delivered to its final destination and the field hospital to become fully operative.

**The International Committee represented in Sanaa.**—A delegate of the International Committee is carrying out the traditional tasks

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<sup>1</sup> *Plate.*

of this institution and he has been able to visit prisoners of war. Furthermore, in agreement with the Yemeni Red Crescent, he has organized a modest relief action and planned to set up from the beginning of December a milk distribution centre for war orphans. Later on, a second milk distribution centre will be organized at Taiz.

It may also be mentioned that he will be joined at Sanaa by a second delegate.

**Mobile teams.**—With this field hospital as a base, it will be possible no doubt to send mobile medical teams of several doctors throughout the North of the Yemen to attend to the wounded wherever they may be found and to examine the possibilities of evacuating the most serious cases to the field hospital. National Societies have been requested to supply mobile medical teams and several of them hope to make these teams available very shortly. It is hoped to be able to have these teams working in other regions which are difficult of access and where needs appear equally great, using the field hospital as a base.

At present only the British Red Cross has supplied a team. This consists of one surgeon and one male nurse, accompanied by an ICRC delegate and an interpreter. It is now working in the North-West of the Yemen.

**Financial problems.**—The cost of the programme, as may be appreciated, is considerable. The expenses incurred or planned for the purchase of the material necessary for the field hospital come to about 600,000 Sw. Frs., without allowing for air transport which is estimated at another 200,000 Francs. The subsequent cost of operating the hospital cannot yet be assessed. The administrative charges incurred by the ICRC for its mission to the Yemen are of the order of 50,000 Francs monthly and so far this item has involved an outlay of over 350,000 Francs from the inception of the action in the Yemen.

The financial responsibility of this mission is assumed by the ICRC thanks to the funds which have been advanced by the Swiss Confederation. The ICRC must therefore endeavour to find additional finance elsewhere to alleviate the burden of setting up and operating this field hospital and its other works in the Yemen.

A certain number of National Societies have advised their intention to contribute, but so far the total only represents a small fraction of the expenses involved.

In conclusion, it might be added that the cost of employment and maintenance of the field hospital personnel (30 persons) is not borne by the ICRC but by the Swiss Red Cross and is estimated at 100,000 Francs per month.

**The delegates of the International Committee.**—In order to form a picture of the difficulties involved in the action undertaken by the ICRC, it is necessary to know something of the task facing its delegates in the Yemen. In the course of their mission they bring medical relief and, if they are doctors, treat the sick and wounded. They visit prisoners held by both sides, bringing them the assistance of which they stand in need and intervene in order that the prisoners may communicate with their families.

The delegates' task also includes on the spot study of needs arising from the situation created by the war. The conditions under which they carry out their expeditions are often dramatic. One example which may be mentioned to illustrate this is the mission undertaken by Dr. Spirgi and Dr. Wild, accompanied by Mr. Vust in this mountainous desert country of North-West Yemen.

After leaving Jeddah by plane for Jisan they headed into Royalist territory by lorry, then by mule and often on foot. They came across isolated villages perched on the mountain slopes, where, each time they came to a halt, they were surrounded by the sick and the wounded. At times they walked for more than 12 hours of the day and found nothing but deplorable conditions of housing and food. Dr. Wild had an unfortunate fall from his mule and fractured a vertebra. Accompanied by the other two ICRC delegates he managed with great difficulty to make his way to the Republican front and from there he was taken by helicopter to the hospital at Sanaa. The three delegates then returned by plane to Jeddah. They had, in spite of everything, accomplished their mission and were able to observe to what extent a neutral and disinterested assistance such as that being provided by the Red Cross, is necessary in the Yemen.



First steps in the setting up, in the middle of the desert at Uhd near Najran, of the future field hospital...

...identified by a red cross flag.

Photos Jean Mohr





One of the first  
visitors to come near to the  
camp at Uhkd...

s Jean Mohr

... where tents have now been pitched.

