

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

Africa: A Wide Field of Action for the Red Cross

The Red Cross movement, which has now entered its second century of existence, is passing through a most intensive period of transition and development such as the world has not seen in so short a time, with the exception of the first few years following the foundation of Europe itself.

In every sphere, the African continent which is in full development, is of great topical interest. This also applies to the Red Cross. There particularly striking figures in fact show how much progress it has made in a few years. Whilst in 1948 there were only three Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in existence on that continent, today there are twenty-two recognized on the international level with a further dozen which have been founded more recently or are in the process of foundation. This demonstrates the important position held by the Red Cross in Africa where both possibilities and needs are immense and where it is evident that its aid as the traditional auxiliary of the public Powers is indispensable to its populations¹.

It is not difficult to imagine all the problems which can be raised for the leaders of a newly formed National Society in a country of any continent which has recently become independent, lacking in resources and qualified personnel, where multiple tasks have to be carried out by a small number of people of good will, the immensity of the work to be accomplished with the scant resources available, not counting obstacles which can be encountered through hereditary beliefs, the vast distances and also rudimentary means of communication.

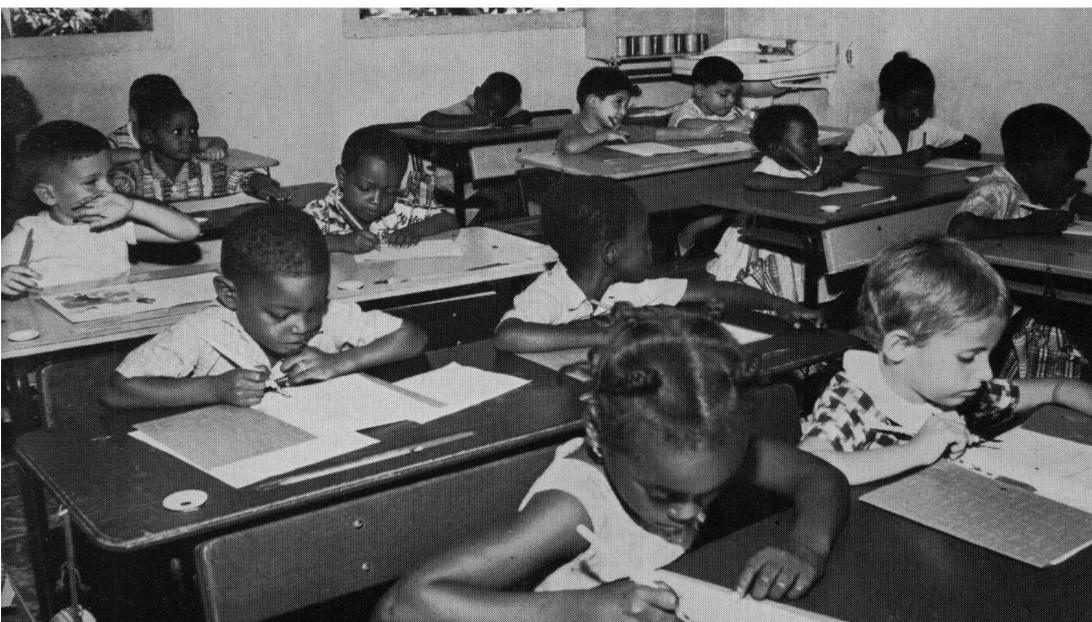
¹ *Plate* : Some activities of National Red Cross Societies in the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Dahomey, Nigeria, Upper Volta.



Mr. Denise, Minister of State, leaving the Palace of the National Assembly at Abidjan where he has been presiding over the opening session of the Red Cross Seminar (**on his left**, Mr. Beer, Secretary-General of the League)

IVORY COAST

Red Cross Centre in Abidjan : an infant class





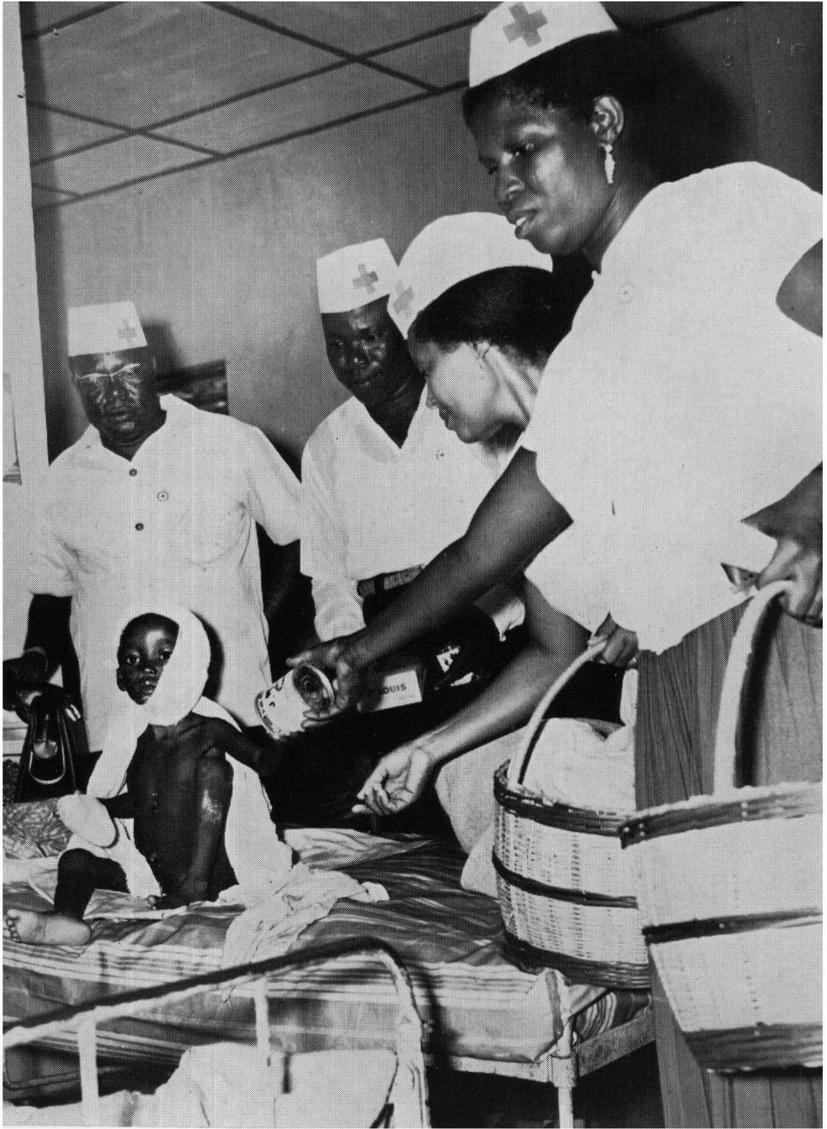
Upper Volta Red Cross: Exercise in first-aid

Sierra Leone Red Cross: Publicity for blood donation in the streets of Freetown





Nigerian Red Cross: A lesson in the clinic for paraplegic children



Red Cross of Dahomey: Distribution of relief to the sick in the Porto-Novo hospital

Photos: Photo-Service, Abidjan; Jean Carval, Studio de Paris; Ministry of Research & Information, Lagos, Nigeria; Service de l'Information du Dahomey.

The Red Cross had to deal with innumerable problems relatively new to it, to interest old-established Societies for them to come to the aid of their younger members in so far as they were able to do so and to draw up realistic plans of action, taking the most pressing needs into account. It was with these ends in view that in 1961, at the XXVIth session of the Board of Governors of the League held in Prague, a technical assistance body was set up, financed mainly by voluntary contributions from member Societies. This was to be called the Red Cross Development Programme, a designation which might at first sight appear somewhat ambitious but which is not at all so, when one considers the work to be undertaken in spite of the extremely limited means at its disposal.

Of what does the help which has to be given to the new National Societies consist? Their new leaders have to be given advice, they have to be guided for a certain period in their various tasks, aided in organizing the Society and in its technical services, encourage and subsequently develop activities which are of greatest use to the population by making available to them specialists, funds and equipment. The experience acquired by the older Societies can also be of great service, taking into account the essential adaptation involved.

It is only on very rare occasions that the leaders of recently formed National Societies meet each other, exchange their new experiences or discuss their difficulties in order to discover common solutions by specifying the best methods to be pursued. Such meetings are of great value and consequently the League of Red Cross Societies has in the past few years organized a certain number of regional meetings and seminars in Latin America or for South-East Asia and the Pacific.¹ It was therefore with the same aim in view that the idea of holding an African Seminar took shape, the first international meeting ever to be held by the Red Cross on that continent.

Why was Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast, chosen to be the site of this work? One can reply without hesitation that the

¹ The *International Review* has published several articles on this subject, viz., by Mr. K. Seevaratnam on the South-East Asia and Pacific Red Cross Forum (September 1964 issue) and by Mr. J. Gómez Ruz on regional meetings which recently took place in Peru and Chile (in its April 1965 number). (Ed.)

very position of that town, placed as it is on the western seaboard of Africa, made it the ideal setting for a meeting between some fifteen National Societies from the western part of the continent. To this should be added the helpful support given by the Ivory Coast authorities, the friendly co-operation of the Junior Red Cross of the Ivory Coast and its leading members, of whom particular mention should be made of its President, Mr. A. Barou and Mrs. M. Basque, Secretary-General, as well as the numerous facilities which can be found in a capital such as Abidjan.

The opening ceremony took place on February 27, 1965 presided over by Mr. Auguste Denise, Minister of State of the Republic of the Ivory Coast at which were present a large number of ministers, senior officials, members of the Diplomatic Corps, participants in the Seminar as well as the leaders and members of the Ivory Coast Red Cross¹. After stating how pleased he was to see Abidjan chosen for the first meetings of the Red Cross ever to be held in Africa, the Minister of State on behalf of the Government felt that "public tribute should be paid to the fine work done by the Red Cross since it had been created so long ago by Henry Dunant, for it had in fact been the first to consider and place before the conscience of nations a kind of law of international humanisation and fellowship which were beyond the sovereignty of States. Since then, the world had seen his ideas progressively outdistancing individuals and frontiers to become universal.

Certainly, one cannot say that these have advanced with the speed and vigour which Dunant would have wished, but it is no less true to say that his humanitarian programme remains the catalyzing element of the world today, if it wants to continue to survive."

From February 27 to March 3, some thirty leaders of 13 National Societies² thus came together beside several members of the League Secretariat under its Secretary-General, Mr. Henrik Beer, several of its delegates working in Africa and with observers of the International Committee of the Red Cross and of National

¹ *Plate* : Mr. Denise, accompanied by Mr. Beer, leaving the National Assembly after the inaugural session of the Abidjan seminar.

² Cameroon, Congo (Léopoldville), Dahomey, Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Upper Volta.

Societies such as the British and French Red Cross. For a week most of the principal subjects of interest to the Red Cross were discussed in the spacious Palace of the National Assembly, flying the flags of the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and the Red Lion and Sun and the countries represented. Each delegate was able to talk at length and describe life in his own country, the many urgent needs, for example, in the field of public health. Realistic and sometimes heated points were raised following speeches made by the leaders of the National Societies or by those responsible for technical services. "It will be a long time before we can estimate the effects of the Abidjan Seminar", said the League's Secretary-General several days after its closing session, "however, we are aware of all the energy employed to cut a path for the Red Cross in Africa although we cannot yet see where this path will lead us."

*

Having had the privilege of taking part in the Red Cross Seminar at Abidjan, I would like to try to recapture the attractive atmosphere in which the work took place. Imagine the large semi-circle of a national assembly with seats rising in tiers in which Red Cross representatives sat instead of parliamentarians, stifling heat outside, yet cool inside the air-conditioned assembly room and it only needed a short space of time amongst all those people who were mostly unknown to each other, talking in either English or French, who were meeting for the first time in a country which the majority had never visited before, for a general atmosphere of confidence and sincerity to be created. Any observer would have been struck, as I was, by the earnestness and the way in which all genuinely participated in the debates. One really gained the impression that all present, as time went on, became aware of the significance of the Red Cross, of its possibilities and also the problems it has to face. Did they previously know exactly what the International Red Cross was, the different characteristics of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League, or the contents of the protective articles of the Geneva Conventions? Personally, I do not think so, especially as this was admitted by a number of delegates during the course of that week in Abidjan.

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

This awareness was not only restricted to the leaders of the African Red Cross Societies, since, for their part, the representatives of the League and the ICRC heard language which would perhaps not have been expressed at a more important, a more international conference. Were we ourselves aware, before Abidjan, of the realities and problems which have to be faced daily by the leaders of the Red Cross in that part of the world? When they spoke, each one in such a different manner, Presidents, Secretary-Generals, those responsible for various activities in the National Societies, one could realise the vastness of their countries, the diversity of populations, the extremely scant resources available to them in relation to the tasks to be accomplished in so many fields and in particular in that of health, which by itself is so immense.

One or two questions of major importance were daily on the agenda and one of the participants was charged with presenting the subject. After he had spoken, views were exchanged between the various delegates conducted by the chairman of the meeting whose office was taken over each day by the President or Head of a different National Society's delegation. This procedure certainly contributed to enlivening the debates, aroused greater interest and held the attention of the auditorium.

Mention should now be made of the agenda itself which one must admit was fairly full since, in the space of a week, a very wide range of subjects which serious study of the Red Cross entails, had to be discussed such as, the role of the Red Cross in Africa, possibilities for the Red Cross in Africa, principles to be put into practice, medical education, first-aid, the care of mother and child, the Junior Red Cross, financial appeals and recruitment, publicity and information, etc.

Some extracts of the discussions will suffice to give an impression of the tone of what was said, to bring out the novelty of some of the subjects broached and the wide horizons opened up for the whole of the Red Cross.

To the question: "Are the fundamental Red Cross principles easily accepted in Africa?", Mr. A. Mamboulou, Secretary-General of the Red Cross of the Congo, gave the following reply: "They are unknown to the population and not understood". Of the main

problems impeding the Red Cross idea amongst the people one should quote "the lack of preparation of the population for benevolent or voluntary work... the low standard of living of the average African... primitive housing conditions..." It is the family taken in the widest sense of the word, which gives stability to man by the cohesion and solidarity which exist in it and the force of habit. By economic transformations and migrations this notion has been disrupted from several sides. One should; therefore, through the Red Cross and its spirit, try to compensate this lack of stability which engenders fear and makes people think again of evil spirits and other malefactions." "For the African the clan remains the foundation of his existence..." "Those concerned with Red Cross publicity can profit from this spirit of mutual aid which animates the members of a clan by inculcating in them that fellowship which ought to unite men for the establishment of a better world..." "What we do know is the life of the clan, of the tribe... and this leads me to say that it will be easier for us to make the Red Cross known in villages rather than in towns, since in small communities, leisure and collective events are devised by the village for the village."

The same subject was also brought out by the Secretary-General of the Nigerian Red Cross, Mallam Saïdy Z. Mohammed who, amongst other things, defined the channels by which the Red Cross could make itself known to the largest number of people: "In rural areas, family ties, the immense prestige enjoyed by the chief, the importance of the teacher and of his school, oblige one to conform to certain rules of precedence when first making contact with the population, both adults and children. Whilst the school represents the channel through which it is essential to pass to make known the Red Cross in the community, it can be very quickly seen that the approval of the chief and of his immediate entourage is necessary for the population's turning in favour of the Red Cross idea. The chief still holds a preponderant position in his village and, as he is legally and morally responsible for the well-being of the population, he is the more often prepared to adopt any idea capable of being able to improve its conditions."

It is not possible in a brief space to quote all that was said during the sessions and all speakers, naturally, according to their

own centres of interest, referred to the best ways open to the Red Cross, expressing themselves with realism and conviction, showed their enthusiasm for their task and their desire for co-operation between the African Societies and the two international Red Cross institutions.

We should also mention three other meetings of a rather special nature which took place during the Abidjan Seminar. A symposium with the title "Partners of the future" consisted of representatives of inter-governmental organizations in operation in Africa, such as UNTAB, WHO, UNESCO, FAO and UNICEF, as well as those of Catholic Relief Societies and the Oecumenical Council of Churches, and others. From the various views expressed many points in common were revealed, showing the similarity of problems presenting themselves on the African continent to those organizations as well as to the Red Cross. Such an initiative can be considered as being the basis for even closer co-operation than hitherto.

Several information experts, wireless technicians or members of the press belonging to government information services followed the Seminar's working sessions devoted to those fields. The object sought was that these should bring practical ideas and suggestions for better use to be made by the Red Cross of the considerable channels available today in order to make it better known to the public.

There is however a long way to go before such a stage is reached in those vast countries in the process of development in which the Red Cross will first of all and no doubt for a long time to come have to ensure reaching rural populations through town criers and the chiefs of villages.

Finally, one evening was reserved for the International Committee of the Red Cross. An important and an extremely animated debate between the representatives of that institution and the delegates of the African Red Cross Societies showed the importance which the latter attach to the rôle played until now by the International Committee in Africa—on account of the events which took place in several countries in that part of the world following on their becoming independent. Several speakers mentioned the necessity of putting the Geneva Conventions within real reach of the masses.

*

Whilst the delegates present at Abidjan expressed on a number of occasions their need for assistance in the organization of National Societies and in the training of personnel, they also emphasized how they were all well aware of the fact that, finally, the principal responsibility for the development of their respective Societies lay with themselves. As the Secretary-General of the League of Red Cross Societies wrote: "It is encouraging to see the existence of such a state of mind without which aid coming from outside could never be judiciously used and would even be in vain." Mr. Henrik Beer continued, "It will be a formidable and thrilling undertaking to seek ways of not disappointing all these hopes."

It would moreover be unfair not to mention, at least by enumerating them, the principal activities which the National African Societies have been attempting to undertake since their founding, traditional Red Cross activities common to all continents and all countries: medical education, courses in home care, first-aid, recruitment of blood donors, various activities, such as emergency relief to the population, welfare in hospitals, ambulance services, etc...

*

On the African continent, where immense tasks have to be accomplished, on the humanitarian level as well as in other spheres, the Red Cross must work as a pioneer since it has to encourage men of good will, train personnel, define its rôle in everything which is of greatest use for the immediate future and alone accomplish things where nothing has previously existed. The government authorities have, for their part, understood the importance of Red Cross work for their populations and have facilitated the establishment of National Societies and helped them in their early stages.

These are favourable conditions for enduring work, since the rôle offered to the Red Cross in Africa is indeed immense, as is also the desire for action on the part of the National Societies of that continent and of their leaders for whom to prepare for the future is, first of all, to be today at the service of all.

MARC GAZAY

Director of Information,
League of Red Cross Societies.