

INFORMATION AND ICRC

In Contact,¹ Mr. Alain Modoux, head of the ICRC Press and Information Division, provides the following clarification on a subject of increasing importance.

The information policy of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has two distinct sets of objectives which, on many occasions, are hardly reconcilable. First, ICRC information must support its operations to help victims of conflicts; this is "operational" information. Secondly, it must spread knowledge and understanding of the ICRC, or in other words create a certain public "image" of the Institution; this is "general" information.

"Operational" information is not an end in itself, but an essential support of ICRC operations, and a means of emphasizing the importance of Red Cross principles and humanitarian law. It also enables the ICRC to assert its position in the international community and mobilise the material, financial and logistical means it needs to conduct its operations.

One criterion : the interests of the victims

"Operational" information may be copious or scanty, according to the needs of the moment. Can it help to make action more effective, in the interests of the victims? This consideration will determine the attitude of the ICRC. Discretion is essential not so much regarding the

¹ Joint Publication of the ICRC and the League, No 5, 1975.

action of the ICRC, but regarding its field delegates' reports. These are passed to no authorities other than those directly concerned.

Accordingly, a certain discretion at the ICRC is more a working method of long-proven worth than a limitation on information. Nothing prevents the ICRC from publicizing fully its activities, and press conferences, interviews, news releases and information bulletins are prepared regularly for "mass media" which disseminate the gist of them throughout the world.

The ICRC frequently works in a highly political atmosphere which may be dominated by passion and violence (international conflicts, civil wars and internal unrest). This makes "operational" information an extremely delicate matter. It cannot be successful unless it makes allowance for national susceptibilities and anticipates the way in which they may be exploited by any of the adversaries, and unless it eschews polemics, which can do more harm than good.

"Operational" information must exactly describe ICRC activities in the field and at its headquarters, and avoid even the least contradiction or distortion of the facts. It can be part of the action itself. A press release can confirm or even replace a difficult diplomatic approach.

Operations and information are, therefore, closely interrelated. Their complementary character is reflected in the ICRC's organizational structure, in which the Press and Information Division is linked directly to the Executive Council, close to the direction of operations.

Long-term general information

Naturally, the ICRC seeks constantly to become better known to the public at large concerning its international action, its place in the community of nations, its work in developing and promoting humanitarian law, and its own organization, financing, etc. This is where "general" information comes in.

Understandably, the ICRC's general objectives are longer-term; in contrast with those of "operational" information, they do not depend on world events and are not conditioned by topics of current interest. General information uses a different language. It is conditioned to public opinion, requires novelty, and is a constant challenge to the information specialist.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

Over the last few years there have been extraordinary advances in audio-visual methods, and prospects for their use in general information are encouraging. Unfortunately results all too often depend on the funds available.

The ICRC is well aware of many changes in mass communication methods over the past few years, and does what it can to get the most for its money. Several projects have been carried out in close co-operation with the League of Red Cross Societies. The ICRC is endeavouring to provide a maximum of information in order to evoke positive interest in its humanitarian work.
