

MISCELLANEOUS

Participants came from more than twenty countries in several continents. Each group, composed of about fifteen, discussed the reports submitted by the participants on practical problems relating to the application of Article 3 common to the 1949 Conventions and on current work for the reaffirmation and development of humanitarian law in the same sphere.

The Red Cross was represented at the Centre by Mr. Jiri Toman, in charge of research at the Henry Dunant Institute, and Mr. Michel Veuthey, ICRC legal adviser.

This session appears to have roused in those who attended it considerable interest in the work at present carried out on the reaffirmation and development of humanitarian law, and action in favour of victims of non-international armed conflicts. A number of those present will be members of their country's delegation to the Diplomatic Conference on Humanitarian Law which is to meet in Geneva in the coming year.

IDENTIFICATION OF DISASTER VICTIMS

At the Ninth Congress of the International Academy of Legal Medicine and of Social Medicine, in Rome, a round-table meeting was held on 25 September 1973 on the problem of the technical organization of disaster victim identification. Participants from various countries considered the technical aspects of identification and the methods which should be used in case of disaster. Mr. Weyand, representing the League, made an interesting statement about his experiences in the course of numerous missions following large-scale natural disasters and drew attention to the difficulties with which the identification of victims was beset. Miss Katz, the ICRC representative, told the meeting of the methods recommended by the Central Tracing Agency, of which she is Assistant Director, for registering the bodies of victims.

In view of the experience acquired and the desirability of making the essential factors known, we reproduce below the text of her statement :

The methods of identification advocated by some scientists are undoubtedly of great interest, but could they be applied in a number of countries which, alas, are frequently struck by gigantic disasters ?

If we take the condition of teeth as an identification factor, what purpose can this serve in an area where the population receives no dental treatment whatever ? During the Second World War, one of the Powers party to the conflict took the initiative of including in the death certificate form the dental condition of the enemy found dead in the battle area. Although in itself a useful factor, this was valueless for identification purposes because the adverse party had no precise information about the dental condition of its own troops.

We therefore consider it essential to register such information as bone structure, apparent age, features, hair, special marks. While it might be useful to photograph the face of the deceased, the body must on no account be removed before :

- (1) attaching to it an identity disc bearing a number ;
- (2) noting the place where the body was found ;
- (3) registering any other bodies found nearby (it might be a family group) ;
- (4) collecting any objects lying near the bodies.

The index card on which all the information about the body is entered should also mention other bodies and any objects found in the immediate vicinity of the deceased. Moreover, it should bear the same reference number as the identity disc attached to the body.

The objects found on the dead man (jewels, pocket contents, etc.) should be listed and enclosed in a bag bearing the same reference number as the identity disc attached to the body. Some samples of the deceased's clothing should be added.

If immediate burial is necessary owing to the heat and the lack of a suitable place where non-identified bodies may be kept for a short time, care must be taken to ascertain that each body has a

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numbered disc affixed to it. Registration numbers must be duly indicated on the individual tomb or on the mass grave. As soon as the situation permits, it will thus be possible to reopen the graves and, taking all the necessary precautions, make a more systematic and scientific examination of the remains.

To revert to the question of registration, the teams responsible for the search for victims and the removal of bodies should be equipped with a set of registration discs and with special forms on which they may draw up a brief preliminary report.
