

M I S C E L L A N E O U S

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION IN CASES OF DISASTER

The first International Conference on the Prevention and Elimination of the Effects of Disasters was held at Skopje from October 25 to 30, 1966. The organizing committee, apart from the Yugoslav Red Cross and representatives of various Yugoslav authorities, comprised those of several international organizations such as War on Want, the Oecumenical Council of Churches, the League of Red Cross Societies and the ICRC. There were 200 persons present, amongst whom were delegates of twenty National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, of ten governments and different international organizations, such as UNO, FAO, UNICEF and UNESCO. The ICRC was represented by Mr. C. Pilloud, Director and Mr. C. Ammann, Head of the Relief Section.

The Conference had some sixty reports submitted to it which give a clear impression of what prevention and assistance can be effected. We think it to be of interest to quote the titles of those submitted by National Red Cross Societies to enable account to be taken of the problems examined and our movement's contribution to studies whose urgency has become strikingly apparent. It will, at the same time, be seen how varied and often extensive humanitarian work has been in tragic circumstances.

We mention beforehand that Mrs. M. Rupena-Osolnik in her address described the action of the Yugoslav Red Cross of which she is Secretary-General.

Yugoslav experience in preventing and eliminating the consequences of disasters (Yugoslav Red Cross).

The rôle of the Yugoslav Red Cross in cases of natural disaster.

Red Cross action during the Skopje disaster (Red Cross of Macedonia).

Relief action of the German Red Cross in the German Democratic Republic at Skopje.

The intervention of the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany in cases of natural disaster.

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The activity of the Red Cross of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in the 1965 floods.

Relief actions following on disasters (Hellenic Red Cross).

Report of the Indian Red Cross on relief in cases of disaster.

Experience of the Turkish Red Crescent in earthquakes.

The rôle of the Red Cross in international relief actions (Yugoslav Red Cross).

Experience of the Swiss Red Cross.

Methods employed by the Swedish Red Cross in relief action in cases of natural disaster.

On certain plans of action during the period immediately following natural disasters (Yugoslav Red Cross).

Three reports of the Czechoslovak Red Cross on its relief action during the floods in Czechoslovakia in 1965.

Report of the Netherlands Red Cross on the transporting of equipment and goods in cases of disaster.

Activity of the Polish Red Cross in floods, first-aid, evacuation and social welfare.

Representatives of international Red Cross institutions also submitted reports. Mr. Pilloud, on behalf of the ICRC, explained, inter alia, the problem of searching for missing persons, a sphere in which the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva possesses unique experience. This account we now publish below.

The Central Tracing Agency, which is one of the services of the ICRC, has been and is still carrying out very large numbers of searches for missing persons. However, its experience of cases of natural disaster are practically non-existent and the searches it undertakes for persons missing in conflicts are of a completely different nature. In fact, the disappearance of persons during the course of a conflict is generally due to some human factor connected with the state of the conflict.

The system practiced by the Central Tracing Agency is known to a certain extent. This office receives information on persons, such as prisoners of war, the wounded, interned civilians, detainees, the dead etc. . . . It then records this on information cards classified in alphabetical order. In another connection, the Agency receives requests for information which is also recorded on an inquiry card and placed in the same card-index. When an inquiry card coincides with an information card there is what is known as concordance, thus enabling the inquirer to be provided with the information he wishes to obtain.

In cases of natural disaster, no information is available.

The situation is somewhat similar to that which existed towards the end of the Second World War when the ICRC was concerned with the reuniting of families dispersed by the events. At that time it established a special descriptive card (No. 10,027) which members of a separated family were invited to complete and return to the Central Agency.

In this way it was possible to indicate to members of a family the location to which they had been transferred, a first step with a view to their reunion.

In natural disasters, the tracing of missing persons should employ systems dependent on the methods of organization and registration and possibly also on the degree of organization in a particular country.

In certain countries, for example in Austria, all inhabitants are registered and if they leave their place of residence for more than 24 hours they must, according to the regulations, report the fact to the local authorities. All this information is centralized, so that it is possible at any given moment to determine the number and names of persons in such and such an area. A similar system also exists in Switzerland.

In other countries such as the USA for example, people travel freely across the entire territory and are not obliged to report their moves. It would naturally be more difficult with such methods to discover population figures in a determined area.

Again, other countries do not possess any real system of registering the population and it would therefore be difficult, if not impossible, to establish the number and names of inhabitants in a stricken area.

The first step in creating a Tracing Service in the case of natural disasters would be to determine the extent of the area afflicted.

That having been done, the two following measures could be considered.

- 1) The most effective means and one which could be everywhere applied would be immediately to make card-forms available to the survivors, enabling them to write to their relatives informing them that they were safe and sound.

For illiterates, announcements could be made on the radio, mentioning places where card-forms could be found and where they could be filled in by third parties.

These cards should be directed to their destinations as quickly as possible and it would be desirable for them to be free from postal charges.

The wording of these card-forms should therefore be drawn up, as these could vary from one country to another, but they should

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always enable the sender and the recipient to be clearly identified.

Such printed cards could contain a certain number of details which could eventually be deleted as, for example, "in good health", "slightly injured" etc. . . . These should comprise a column indicating the new address, should the person sending it have been transferred away from his domicile.

Considerable stocks of these card-forms should be printed and distributed to different points in the country. This is a task which the National Red Cross could undertake. One could also consider entrusting it to the postal authorities.

2) The second measure could consist in making all persons, who have had to leave their domicile, complete a card of a change of address, indicating their new whereabouts. These cards should be filled in by all displaced persons and centralized in a card-index at a post office.

Details of death and unconscious persons should also be forwarded to this office.

It would also receive inquiries and, by means of the card-index thus constituted, would attempt to reply to these.

It should therefore be necessary to establish considerable stocks of change of address cards which could be either card-forms used regularly by the postal service or special cards reserved for cases of natural disaster.

The centralization of these cards could be entrusted to another authority or to the National Red Cross Society. However, in countries where the postal system operates in a regular manner, the postal authorities would be most fitted to keep this card-index up-to-date.

The two measures mentioned above could naturally be combined. For example, a person who has been displaced as a result of a natural disaster could easily complete at the same time a card indicating a change of address and send to relatives in other localities card-forms informing them of his new address and of his state of health.

It is obvious that such measures should be accompanied by the creation, should circumstances so demand, of an identification service of deceased persons which would resort to every possible means of investigation for the purpose of identifying the victims' bodies.

Finally, special measures would be required to identify persons who may be incapable of revealing their exact identity and address, young children, persons rendered unconscious as a result of wounds, or those suffering from shock, etc. . .

For such persons whose tracing is rendered particularly difficult, one should, before evacuating them, try to establish their identity, by calling upon their neighbours as witnesses.

Information thus obtained would be mentioned on a label with which the person in question would be provided.

Once evacuation from the site has been made, identification would in fact become much more difficult and even sometimes impossible.

It should also be mentioned that the League representatives submitted reports of general interest. Mr. H. Mathiesen, Chairman of the Disaster Relief Advisory Committee of the League of Red Cross Societies and Secretary-General of the Norwegian Red Cross, referred to the importance of the co-ordination of disaster relief work. He stressed the need for co-operation and said that if the central relief plan was "the most important factor in the structure of co-ordination", this should not, on a national level, be considered distinct from international co-ordination, the one conditioning the other.

Then Mr. J. P. Robert-Tissot, Director of the Relief Bureau, described the problems raised in the planning and co-ordinating of disaster relief. He recalled Resolution XVII of the XXth International Conference of the Red Cross relative to international relief actions,¹ and the fact that the League is setting up a draft National Disaster Relief Plan. It is therefore for this National Plan to assign specific tasks in cases of natural disaster to the various bodies capable of taking part in a relief programme. Mr. Robert-Tissot concluded as follows:

... We must underline that the Plan should also assign specific duties to the Red Cross Society. It is not possible to state precisely those which should apply to each Society. This will depend on the degree of development of the Society in question, its organisation, structure, normal activities, the number and qualifications of its staff and volunteers and its financial and material resources, all of which vary from country to country. However, this is no obstacle to "being prepared in advance and act when disaster strikes." The principle remains the same whether the entire Society is organised on a disaster relief basis or only includes within the organisation a disaster relief department, section or bureau. It must be prepared to act, because one of its fundamental duties is to assist disaster victims.

¹ See *International Review*, November 1965.

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In accordance with the Plan and their degree of preparedness, National Societies will be able either to direct or co-ordinate or simply participate in relief operations.

In providing relief, the Red Cross' role is to supply the four primary emergency needs of disaster victims : food, shelter, clothing and supplementary medical aid. The National Society can assume responsibility for carrying out all or any one of the tasks involved in satisfying the four main immediate needs referred to above. Usually it should stop there. The temptation to go further is strong but should be resisted. Maintenance of law and order, police work, removal of debris, care of the dead, public health and sanitation etc., are matters for the authorities. Similarly, in most cases, reconstruction and rehabilitation are outside the Red Cross sphere.

Whatever the responsibilities falling to a National Society in a relief operation—direct, co-ordination or simply participation—it must never deviate from Red Cross fundamental principles and principles already adopted for relief operations (Oslo principles). Its duty is to proclaim and ensure the respect of these principles and refuse to accept any form of infringement. This is a *sine qua non* for Red Cross intergration in a National Relief Plan and an unconditional preliminary.

Red Cross responsibilities having been established, the National Society will draw up its own plan of action (on national, regional and local levels). Its duty is to prepare itself for effective intervention in the event of disaster, corresponding to the requirements of the National Disaster Relief Plan or the expectations of its government. It should ensure through such measures as seminars, practice and staff exercises that plans are practical and sufficiently flexible to meet the unexpected.

Later on, as the National Society's programme develops, and according to its degree of preparedness, it can add other duties to those originally assigned. Above all, it will constantly endeavour to improve and increase the effectiveness of action at every level of its organisation. Bilateral or regional agreements may also be drawn up with sister Societies for mutual assistance.

The Conference adopted these conclusions which we will publish in a forthcoming number, in view of their significance.