

ICRC Relief Operations

The importance of ICRC relief actions is well known. Figures published in International Review provide eloquent testimony thereto. We therefore thought it of interest to bring to our readers' attention an article by Frank Schmidt, Head of the ICRC Relief Division, giving a general outline of the problems encountered in the development of those activities.

The ICRC carries out three basic types of relief operation for the benefit of war victims. First, there are its traditional activities; second, there are large-scale international operations such as Biafra, Bangladesh, Cyprus and Angola; and third, there are operations to distribute food-stuffs supplied to the ICRC, mainly by the European Economic Community and the Swiss Government.

1. Traditional relief operations. — These operations consist in providing relief to victims of international and non-international armed conflicts or of internal disturbances; particularly prisoners of war, political detainees and civilians.

In Israel, for example, the ICRC delegates have for a number of years been distributing relief of a rather sophisticated character to prisoners of war and civilian internees. The basic needs of these prisoners being fairly well covered, the delegates are concentrating now on distributing clothing, books, spectacles, fruit, etc., to the prisoners. They have also organized and financed visits to the prisoners by their families from all parts of the occupied territories.

The ICRC provides material assistance to political detainees. This can often become fairly important. For example, in 1973, ICRC delegates visited the prisons in a certain central Africa country. They distributed large quantities of relief supplies. In fact, they very soon realized that even basic goods such as soap, blankets and clothing, as well as leisure equipment, such as footballs, card games, paper and writing materials were lacking in all the prisons. As a result, the

delegates set out every day for a new prison with several vehicles loaded with relief supplies which they could personally distribute. That was actually an important aspect of the mission, as helpful as the routine of inspecting, interviewing without witnesses and sending reports.

The ICRC in some cases provides material assistance to National Red Cross Societies, particularly in developing countries, through its regional delegates. This relief assistance is primarily designed to help those Societies to improve their services for the victims of conflicts or natural disasters. It may take the form of providing tracing-service specialists and the necessary material. It may also simply be office material which is given to the National Secretariat in order to render it more efficient, or it can be fairly large quantities of food for the Society to use in its own distribution programme.

For a number of years the ICRC has been providing various liberation movements, particularly in Africa, with assistance in the forms of medical supplies and ambulances. This was the case during the wars of independence in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Angola and now in Zimbabwe and Namibia.

The traditional operations differ from other relief operations in that they are planned and are provided for in the ICRC Relief Division's annual budget. The total relief budget in 1974 was 2.2 million Swiss francs. The funds are provided by the ICRC annual collection in Switzerland and by various special donations.

2. Large-scale international relief operations. — Whereas in the operations described above the ICRC meets the cost from its own resources, in large-scale international operations it relies on donations in cash, in kind and in services from National Red Cross Societies, governments and various voluntary agencies, the ICRC acting essentially as co-ordinator. In a way, it is also an intermediary between the beneficiaries and the donors. Its aim is to adjust donors' offers—in other words the material or commodities they are prepared to make available—to the needs of the conflict victims. This is essential for efficiency.

The Relief Division acts as a clearing house, transmitting information and supplies of all kinds from donors to delegates. It finds out from donors the kind and quantity of relief supplies available, the delivery schedules, the standards applied in medical supplies, the various technical details about shipping, insurance, and so forth. From the delegates, it has to obtain information on needs and the ways in which relief supplies are distributed, regular stock returns and distribution reports, etc. All this information is then transmitted to the donors, who require it in

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order to obtain more support from their governments and from the general public in the various countries supporting the operation.

This clearing-house function is performed not only in time of war but also—at a slower pace—in time of peace. The relief division maintains contact with all donor societies, exchanging information on available relief supplies, transport, formalities and the standardization of certain supplies. The principal phases of a large-scale international relief operation (for example, in Cyprus in 1974) are the following:

- (a) First of all, it is imperative for the ICRC to get to the theatre of operations as rapidly as possible. Sometimes this is done by flying to the country concerned the first delegates and relief supplies, mostly medical, with radio and other necessary equipment for the setting up of a delegation. It is often very urgent that the aircraft leave as quickly as possible. Landing rights may have to be negotiated with the various parties. This logistic function is often a very hectic and delicate phase of the operation.
- (b) One of the first acts of the delegation is to establish telecommunications with Geneva.
- (c) Lists of needs, in most cases of medical supplies, have to be transmitted to Geneva. Only on the basis of this information can ICRC headquarters launch its first appeal to National Societies and governments to provide it with the necessary money and relief supplies.

The relief supplies normally needed in these situations are five in kind:

- (1) blood substitutes such as plasma and solutions, and the necessary equipment for transfusions;
 - (2) surgical and other medical supplies, in particular drugs;
 - (3) medical teams (surgeons, doctors, anaesthetists, nurses, etc.) to take care of sick and wounded people;
 - (4) shelter, i.e. tents, beds, blankets;
 - (5) food, such as flour, rice, tinned meat, milk powder, baby food.
- (d) The next phase is the organization of the local logistics system. The delegates on the spot have to find out what means of transport are available: trucks, boats, etc. The necessary logistics bases outside the country of operation also have to be set up. For the Cyprus operation, for instance, the logistics base was in Beirut, from which relief supplies were sent to Cyprus, initially by air and later on by sea.

Then shipping instructions have to be sent as quickly as possible to the National Societies in order to avoid shipments' being wrongly addressed or organized in a way which might expose them to loss and the necessary means of transport have to be hired.

The logistic operations involve the organization of the reception, storage and administration of relief supplies. To this end warehouses have to be rented and equipped. A stock-control system has to be set up; distributions have to be organized and supervised by the delegates; and distribution reports have to be compiled.

- (e) Medium-term plans must next be drawn up. Detailed surveys of needs have to be carried out and an estimate made of the period these needs will last. The quantities needed over that period have to be calculated on the basis of daily rations per individual or per family. Local resources have to be investigated, in particular the possibility of purchasing on the local market. Relief has to be co-ordinated with other organizations working on the same problems. At this stage a forecast should be made of the total length of the operation and the possible timing of its phase-out.
- (f) Once the operation has reached a steady volume and rhythm, with relief supplies arriving and being distributed regularly with better and more systematic checking of consignments, the delegates can give more time and effort to the distribution reports which they send to Geneva. ICRC headquarters then reports to the donors.
- (g) The final stage is the phasing-out of the operation. In some cases this may be begun by reducing the number of beneficiaries, perhaps by limiting assistance to certain categories, such as prisoners, or minorities still in need. The medical teams are gradually recalled, certain distributions are ended, and whatever stocks and equipment remain are handed over to the National Society, after obtaining the donors' consent. The final report on the operation is issued.

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These large-scale international relief operations obviously create quite a number of problems. It is usually the initial phase that raises the most serious problems for the Relief Division in Geneva, because at that stage needs are often extremely urgent. The Division suddenly has a much greater volume of work. The absence of clear and reliable information about the situation in the field makes it necessary to improvise.

Certain difficulties are inherent in these operations. One is the need for speed: the ICRC must be first on the spot in the event of an armed conflict. This requires swift action, to transport and set up the first delegation.

A second problem is the lack of discipline on the part of certain donors, in particular certain National Societies which may have other motives for helping the ICRC operation. A Society's sympathies may lie more with one side than with another and it may therefore want to help that side rather than the other. Sometimes, the supplies offered to the ICRC are what the donor chooses to give rather than what is really needed by the victims of the conflict. There is also the problem of direct shipment: some Societies prefer to send their relief supplies direct either to the ICRC delegation in the field or to the National Societies of the beneficiary countries. These shipments are not always announced to the ICRC. The packing and the marking may be faulty and lead to various errors; the shipping documents may not be in order; addresses may be wrong. Various other problems may arise from unprofessional handling of such shipments.

A still further problem is control of shipments and distributions. Often, in the heat of launching an operation, it is difficult or even impossible to keep a complete check on what relief supplies arrive and where exactly they are distributed. Of course, the ICRC gives all the necessary instructions to its delegates, but sometimes things happen too fast, and it is very difficult to keep track. However, the better this control, the more chances of continued support from donors. It is on the basis of the information the ICRC gives them that they can obtain more funds and supplies for Red Cross operations.

3. Food aid. — For a number of years, the European Economic Community and the Swiss Government have provided the ICRC with considerable quantities of surplus food, in particular wheat-flour and powdered milk, which the ICRC has used in its own operations and to aid a number of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In 1974, for instance, the Swiss Government gave 3,200 tons of wheat-flour and 300 tons of whole milk powder. In the same year the EEC provided 7,500 tons of cereal and 5,000 tons of skimmed milk powder. These foodstuffs were distributed to civilian populations and refugees in war-affected areas. The largest quantities were distributed in the Middle East, in Bangladesh and Indo-China.
