

AID TO THE INDIAN POPULATION OF THE AMAZON REGION

The *International Review* has several times in the past published information about the operation sponsored by the Red Cross on behalf of the Indian population of the Amazon region. It will be recalled that, under an agreement with the Brazilian Ministry of the Interior and in close co-operation with the League of Red Cross Societies and the Brazilian Red Cross, the International Committee sent a team to Brazil early in May 1970, to make a survey of the health situation and the needs of the population.

The team was headed by Mr. S. Nessi, ICRC delegate-general for Latin America, who accompanied the mission during the first few weeks. It comprised three doctors assigned to the International Red Cross by the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands Red Cross and the Swedish Red Cross, which agreed to bear the cost of the expedition; a Swiss ethnologist, and a Brazilian Red Cross doctor. The first stage of the expedition brought the team to the "open" reservation of Ilha do Bananal, on the northern border of the states of Mato Grosso and Goiás, where 2,000 Indians were in contact with civilization. The team visited four tribes, took blood samples, carried out various medical tests, and administered medicaments.

In July 1970, the team went from the Peruvian Amazon border to the island of Aramaçá and into the Cruzeiro do Sul region, 400 km away. After its return to Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas, the team proceeded towards the Venezuelan frontier. It met various tribes in a number of villages.

Early in August, the team returned to Ilha do Bananal, its starting point, and a few days later left for Rio de Janeiro. It had covered some 20,000 km, mostly by air. In six Brazilian states it had come into contact with more than twenty tribes, about one-third of the Indian population of the Amazon region.

On their return to Geneva, the doctors who had taken part in the mission prepared a report containing their general remarks

and findings.¹ In it they stressed the importance of the time factor and laid down the following priorities for the assistance programme: 1. Control of contacts. 2. Allocation of protected land. 3. Immunization. 4. Health education. 5. Agricultural training. 6. Establishing of basic curative medical services.

They stated that in their opinion the enjoyment of good health was a necessary prerequisite for any action designed to raise the standard of living of any individual or group of people. "A good assistance program must contain elements of a plan aiming at the widest possible community development... The question remains whether the field of any Red Cross action as such should extend beyond that of health".

A long-term project for medical assistance to the Indian population of the Amazon region was therefore instituted. In Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, the ICRC delegate-general for Latin America discussed the project with the President of the Brazilian Red Cross, a representative of the Ministry of the Interior, the President of FUNAI (*Fundação Nacional do Índio*) and FUNAI's Director of Assistance. According to the ICRC's report of May 1972, the Red Cross assistance area was to be divided into two principal zones. The mission, which would have its headquarters in Manaus, would comprise three medical teams, each composed of seven persons and equipped with two shallow-draught boats, one aircraft for such places as could not be reached by boat, and adequate supplies of medicaments. A telecommunication network was to link Manaus headquarters, the ICRC regional delegation in Caracas, the institution's headquarters in Geneva, FUNAI in Brasilia, and the Brazilian Red Cross in Rio de Janeiro.²

*

The second stage of the Amazon operation was about to start. In Geneva, a Co-ordinating Committee was set up which was composed of the ICRC, the League and the donor Societies. A sum of five million Swiss francs had been pledged by Governments

¹ See *International Review*, June 1971.

² The aircraft and the two boats would be in radio communication with one another and with Manaus headquarters.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

and Red Cross Societies. An Executive Council was to carry out the decisions of the Co-ordinating Committee whose first official meeting, held at ICRC headquarters on 23 and 24 May 1973, was attended by the Presidents of the Brazilian Red Cross, FUNAI and the ICRC, as well as by representatives of some European Red Cross Societies and the League. The purpose of the meeting was to prepare and launch the ICRC's medical assistance programme. FUNAI's President confirmed that the Brazilian authorities would co-operate in every way. Financial support was already being lent by Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. As a number of other countries had expressed interest in the operation and stated that they proposed to make financial contributions, the programme was due to start at an early date and a first team was to leave for Brazil in August 1973. It was to comprise European and Brazilian medical and technical personnel.

Mr. S. Nessi went to Rio de Janeiro and on 14 August 1973 signed, on behalf of the ICRC, a Statement of Understanding which was also signed by the President of the Brazilian Red Cross and the President of FUNAI. The text of the Statement is given below:

Statement of Understanding

“ Following its 1970 medical survey in the Amazon and suggestions contained in the report on that survey, the International Committee of the Red Cross, in May 1972, prepared a draft program of long-term Red Cross medical assistance in favour of the Indian population of the Brazilian Amazon region.

The program has been accepted without any change by all donor countries, represented through their National Red Cross Societies in the Amazon Program Co-ordinating Committee, as well as by FUNAI and the Brazilian Red Cross.

The program is therefore the sole basis for the International Red Cross medical assistance action in the Brazilian Amazon region.

All special and separate agreements on technical questions necessary for the satisfactory development of the action will be discussed and signed by FUNAI and the Amazon Program Executive Council represented by its Secretary. These agreements will

also be discussed with and signed by the Brazilian Red Cross, should the signature of an institution with legal personality be required to represent the Executive Council in Brazil.

The ICRC, promoter of this assistance program, considers that from now on any moral, financial and legal responsibility for the whole action rests with the Co-ordinating Committee and its Executive Council of which an ICRC representative will continue to be a member.”

*

Activities such as those planned for the Indian population of the Amazon region were obviously beyond the specific and traditional duties of the ICRC. Once the programme submitted had been approved and financial coverage ensured, the International Committee therefore requested the League of Red Cross Societies to take over the operation. This the League accepted, and the transfer was made on 1 December 1973. The Co-ordinating Committee and the Executive Council ceased to exist, for in Geneva the Amazon action was now the responsibility of the League's Relief Section.

The duties of the League consist in aiding the Brazilian Red Cross which, for its part, co-ordinates its activities with FUNAI's. These activities are geared to *preventive medicine* (immunization against measles, influenza, smallpox and tuberculosis); *curative medicine* (treatment of the sick and the wounded, dental care); *health education* (especially for women and children); and, lastly, *logistic aid* such as the requisite support for basic medical services.

A Red Cross medical mission composed of three members is in Brazil at the present time.