

ONE MORE BIG JOB FOR THE CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY

The *International Review* has several times described the work done by the ICRC in rendering humanitarian assistance to victims of the 1971 events in the Asian sub-continent. That assistance was for civilians as well as for prisoners of war and civilian internees, and it was rendered in various ways. A detailed article in our April 1974 issue described the repatriation of 250,000 persons in the Asian sub-continent, with the co-operation of the ICRC.¹

But there is another activity which we have also frequently mentioned, that of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA)². In September 1971, this ICRC Agency, in Geneva, established agencies in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, which were to act as its branches in the capitals of those countries and which, in turn, were to set up sub-agencies in different places in each country, their main purpose being the transmission of civilian messages (more than three million such messages circulated between Bangladesh and Pakistan) and the registering of those who wished to be transferred from one country to another (more than 680,000 persons). At the time of peak activity, the CTA's agencies and sub-agencies were manned by more than twenty delegates from Geneva and 300 local employees.

Now that the repatriation of Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees from India has ended, and the ICRC's work in Bangladesh and Pakistan is in its final stage, the Central Tracing Agency is preparing to close down its bureaux in those three countries. As we shall see, however, work is going on at CTA headquarters in Geneva.

¹ As mentioned then, it was possible for this repatriation operation to be carried out only through the positive stand adopted by the three countries concerned and the co-operation shown by Switzerland, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the ICRC.

² *Plate.*

Ten persons are still at work in the card-index section covering the December 1971 Indo-Pakistan conflict, and our records are completely up to date, so that when the Indian and Bangladesh Red Cross Societies and the Pakistan Red Crescent take over the local bureaux, the Agency will be in a position to give them speedy and efficient co-operation in tracing the missing.

What at first sight might seem obvious is, in fact, extremely important: an incomplete or poorly recorded card-index would be of no use whatever to a family in quest of news about one of its members. Precision is a prerequisite for the work which CTA will henceforth carry out, in close co-operation with the National Societies.

While the Agency is the only link between separated families during or immediately after a conflict, it later becomes the "notary" of captivity, for it keeps in its archives a minute record of all information obtained about persons protected by the Geneva Conventions.

For the Indo-Pakistan conflict alone, the Agency has 800,000 cards relating, on the one hand, to Pakistani and Indian prisoners of war and civilian internees and, on the other, to Bengalis and Pakistanis transferred to their country of origin. The large number of index-cards can be explained by the fact that for one person there may be several documents. Thus, for a prisoner of war there will be the capture card completed on his arrival in camp, the official notification from the detaining authorities, a possible notification of transfer or death, and, lastly, the repatriation card.

Moreover, documents drawn up in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan will shortly be sent to Geneva, where they will be assembled. An individual medical card-index established by ICRC doctor-delegates may prove invaluable at some future date. It often happens that long after a prisoner's return the Agency will receive a request for a certificate of captivity, sickness or death, for the purpose of claiming compensation or a pension.

With the end of repatriation, too, the Agency may receive a number of inquiries from families distressed because they have not managed to find a relative who, they thought, was a prisoner or internee; and, in the case of deceased captives, their heirs often

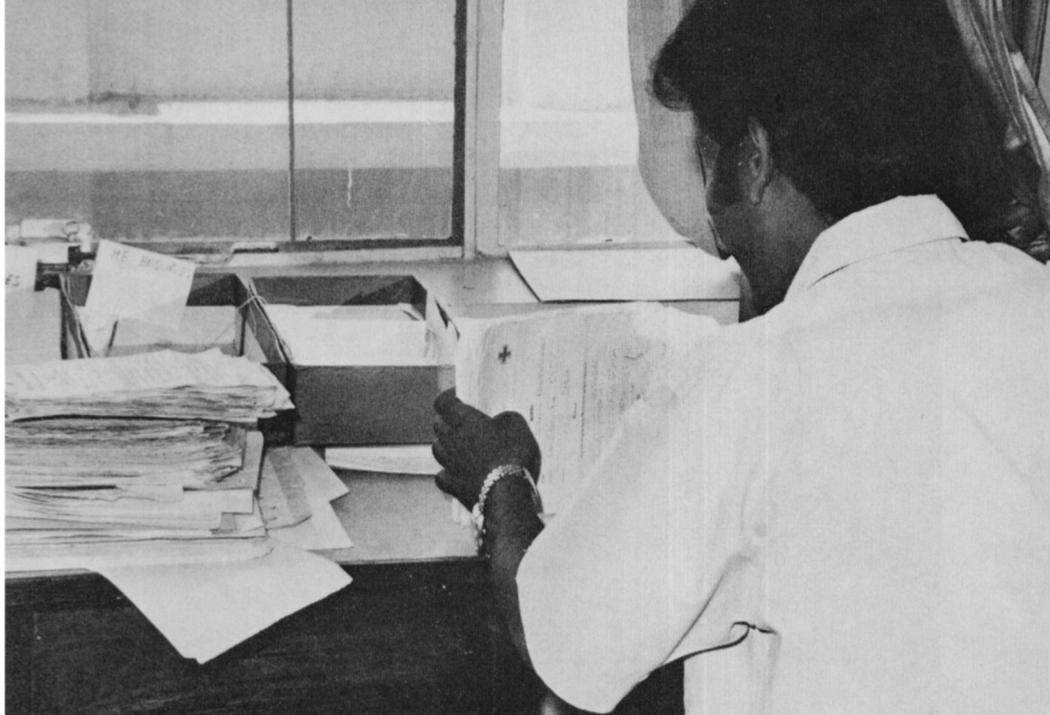
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

apply to the Agency long after the events. Incidentally, the Agency still receives requests for certificates of captivity relating to World War One.

Hence the importance of the card-index system: it must allow any item of information to be ascertained at any time. The problem is sometimes complex because of the language, phonetic spelling or homonyms.

In the case of the Asian sub-continent, the names of captives in India and Pakistan were recorded phonetically rather than alphabetically, and army registration numbers were recorded with a view to sorting out homonyms. For Pakistanis, 7,700 cards were found to bear the name Mohamed Siddiqi, and for Indians one-third bore Singh! Yet the officers of the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva have meanwhile gained considerable experience in this sphere.

There is not the slightest doubt that these records, which were so useful during the period of captivity, will for many years to come continue to be useful, like those established following a great many other conflicts.



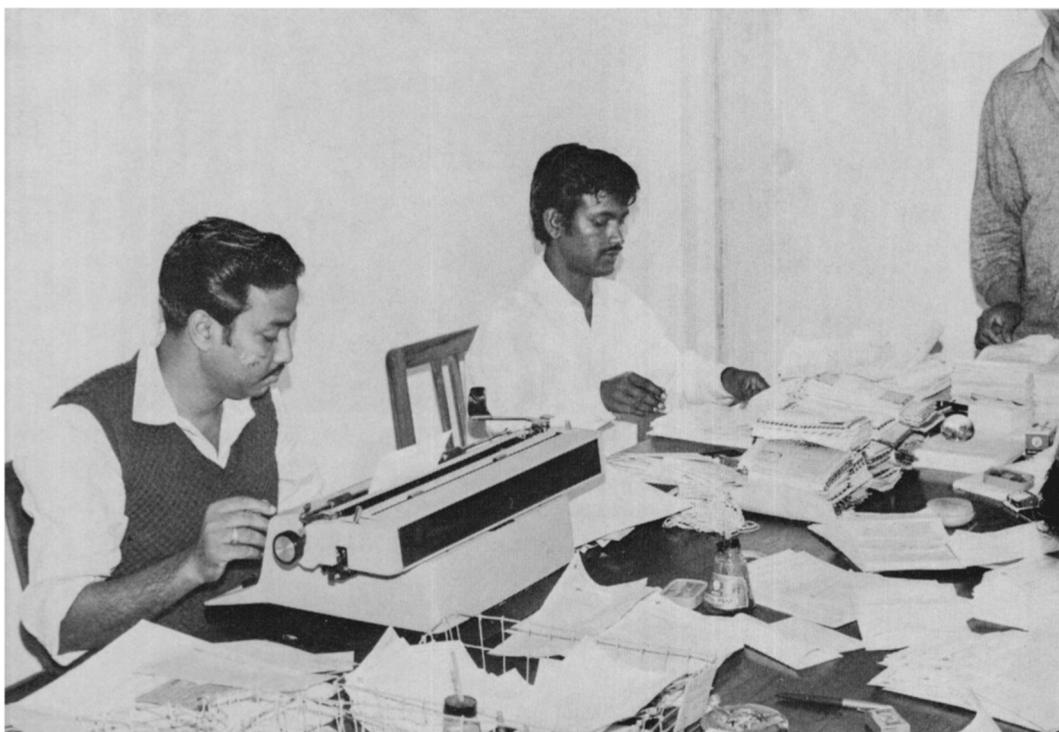
Local branches in Islamabad of the Central Tracing Agency ...

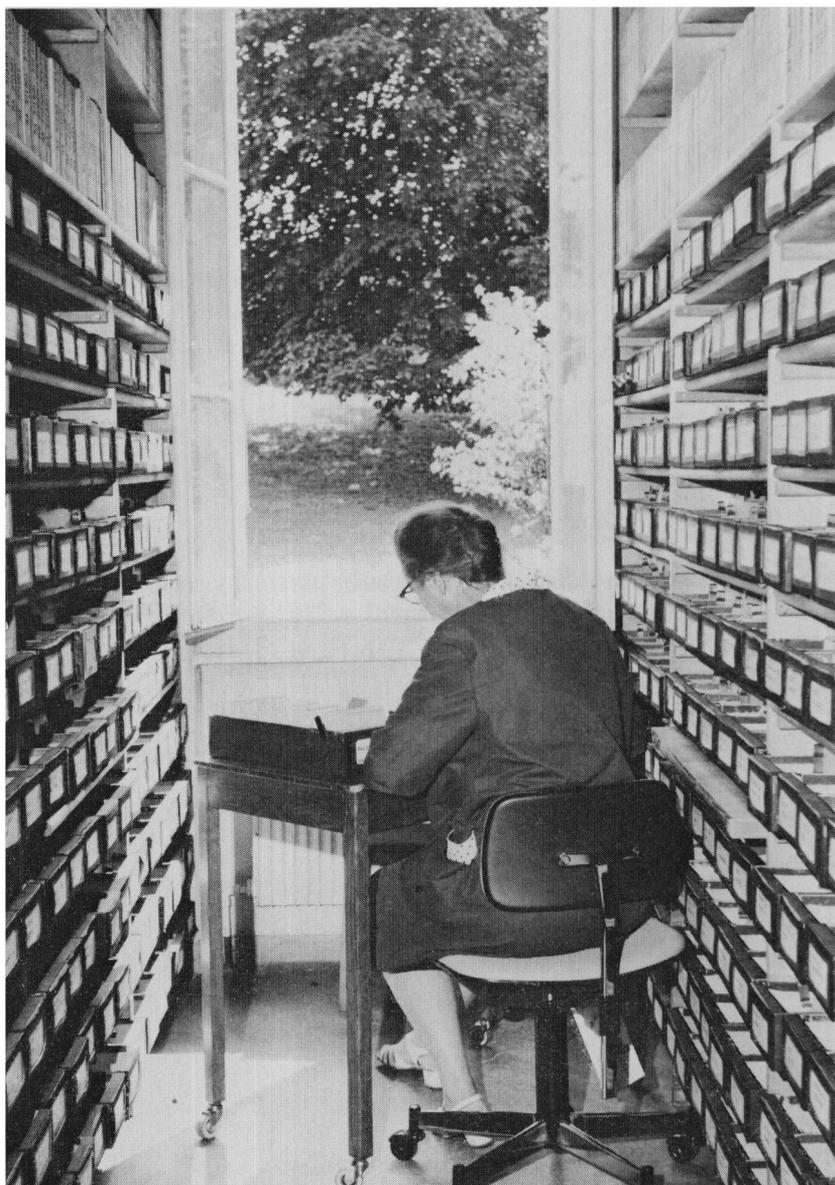
Photo J. J. Kurz/ICRC

FOR THE VICTIMS OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

... and in Dacca

Photo Jolliet/ICRC





The Central Tracing Agency continues its work at ICRC headquarters in Geneva.
Photo J. J. Kurz/ICRC