

The ICRC and the reuniting of dispersed families

At the Conference of Experts on the Reuniting of Dispersed Families, held in Florence last June, Mr. N. Vecsey, Deputy Director of the Central Tracing Agency, Geneva, submitted a statement on recent Red Cross action in that specific field. We give below an outline of his statement.

Large population movements (refugees, displaced persons, etc.) are to be seen wherever there is conflict or political strife. Frequent appeals for action are made to the ICRC and National Societies because so many families are separated, and requests come in from every quarter for the reuniting of families. It should, however, be borne in mind that actual reuniting, once exit or entry permits are obtained and travel arrangements made, is merely the final stage in a long and minute process carried out by the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) and National Societies. This traditional work of the Red Cross is essential.

For a family to be reunited its members must know the whereabouts of relatives. In principle, the CTA is responsible for making inquiries and conducting research, for keeping a record of refugees and for tracing the missing.

The task is one which can, and in principle should, be assigned to the tracing services of National Societies, but it has often come to our notice that National Societies, particularly in countries which have experienced unrest, lack facilities for an undertaking as

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

vast as the recording of hundreds of thousands of persons. That is when the CTA itself opens bureaux in those countries, sends out delegates and recruits local staff. It can provide the National Societies with technical advisers.

Let us consider some war situations which have given rise to population movements in past years.

With the unstable political situation which has prevailed in the Middle East for more than twenty-five years, there have been and still are hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. When some serious event takes place, it causes disquiet among families whose members are on either side, and many thousand inquiries and family messages reach the CTA in Geneva. There have been more than 10,000 repatriation operations, which have led to the reuniting of families, as a rule through the ICRC. An ICRC delegate escorts the families to the frontier, where another ICRC delegate will be waiting for them.

The Asian sub-continent, after the war between India and Pakistan, saw the largest ICRC action carried out since the Second World War. True to the ICRC's traditional duties, more than 90,000 prisoners of war and civilians were regularly visited by its delegates. The ICRC transmitted family mail (more than 16 million letters). ICRC delegates escorted prisoners of war repatriated on more than 100 trains. But what concerns us more particularly at the present moment is what happens to civilians and families separated because of a conflict, and the tracing operations necessary to ensure their reunion.

After the war, East Pakistan became an independent State: Bangladesh. Yet on account of the war hundreds of thousands of persons from one part of the country were held up in some other part of the country. They were there because of a job or military service, or for family reasons. They could no longer go home or correspond with their people. That was when the ICRC set up a message service that transmitted more than three million letters in both directions. Further, some 20,000 inquiries were opened with a view to tracing persons missing during or since the war, or during the unrest which shook East Pakistan from March to December 1971. The two governments also required the ICRC to

register applications from those who wished to be repatriated from Bangladesh to Pakistan or vice versa. The ICRC subsequently conveyed that information to the governments concerned, in order to secure exit permits and entry permits for the country of refuge. The ICRC informed applicants when a permit was obtained. Again, it was the ICRC which issued travel papers, assigned people to transit camps and made final arrangements for their departure, by means of an airlift organized and financed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.¹

Then there is the case of Uganda. In the context of its family reuniting action and with effective UNHCR and ICEM co-operation, the ICRC helped Asians who were being expelled from that country. It issued some ten thousand travel documents and thereby enabled them to leave Uganda in November 1972. At the same time, a record was kept of departures, so that a great many inquiries could be answered. It was unavoidable that in their hurried departure families should become separated. In a number of cases, one member of the family held a British passport and was in the United Kingdom, while other members of the family were living in various provisional transit camps set up in Austria, Italy, Malta, Belgium or Spain.

In Africa, there are many refugees and dispersed families who are in need of aid, especially in Tanzania, which has seen an influx of thousands of refugees, on the one hand from Burundi, Rwanda and Zambia, and on the other, from Mozambique. Aware as it is of the importance of "registering" a population which is on the move, Tanzania has asked the ICRC to send out an expert to set up a tracing service in the National Red Cross Society.

But what should the criterion be, in family reuniting operations, as to the degree of relationship? The criterion varies from one continent to another. In Europe, for instance, the reuniting process tends in the direction of the head of the family. The wife, children under age and close relatives are regarded as members of the family. In the East, the situation is different. Let us take the case of the reuniting of families between Pakistan and Bangladesh,

¹ See *International Review*, April 1974.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

where the criterion accepted by the governments concerned includes the wife or husband, all children (even adult children), dependent relatives, unmarried or widowed sisters, brothers under age, grandparents and grandchildren, plus the families of married children should the rest of the family be living in the country of refuge.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the majority of the countries confronted with the problem of displaced persons are convinced that humanitarian action in this field can be appropriately undertaken by the Red Cross.
