

ICRC'S ACTION IN THE YEMEN

Role of telecommunications

At 6 a.m., GMT, on February 3, 1966, the last message to be received by the head of the ICRC's mission to the Yemen through his mobile unit was broadcast from HBC 88, the International Committee's radio station :

Transmitting message from President Gonard to radio operators Yemen network and Station HBC88 : quote at this moment when you are about to dismantle your aerial in the Yemen after two years of daily communication which has contributed enormously to the success of the mission undertaken by the International Committee of the Red Cross, I have pleasure in extending my congratulations for the efficiency you have displayed and in expressing the ICRC's gratitude for your loyal service.

This was the end of a long-term operation, the first to have had the benefit of direct radio contact between ICRC headquarters in Geneva and the delegates in the field in a far-distant country.

Every morning for two years, without a single failure, inquiries and instructions were exchanged in short communications of a few hundred words, giving long lists of medical supplies urgently required, to which advices of despatch provided the answers ; this was the nature of the dialogue between the delegates in the field, working under difficult conditions, and the International Committee which gave them counsel.

Efficient logistic support, adaptable yet reliable directives, as well as a presence among those who were carrying the sign of the red cross into the wilderness of the tawny sands in the remote corners of North Yemen : this was made possible by the ICRC's emergency radio communications system.

One aspect of this network which was of particular interest to the experts was its reliability in spite of its relatively simple equipment. The mobile units working in the Yemen were transmitting and receiving on only 150 W — 100 to 1,000 times less than the power of commercial stations. Nevertheless, reception was at times so good that it seemed as if the delegates in the field and the executives at ICRC headquarters in Geneva were in touch by telephone, thus permitting important decisions to be made immediately, with a major influence on the outcome of the mission, particularly as regards the exchanges of prisoners.

In an earlier issue we described how an X-ray apparatus at the Uqhd hospital was repaired without loss of time thanks to the radio network.¹ Of the many appeals—veritable SOS calls—which reached Geneva, one we might mention is the radio-telephone link which enabled one of the head doctors in the field hospital, remote in the desert at Uqhd, to contact his wife at the grocery store in a village in the Swiss mountains, so that on the very same day she was able to send the ICRC a vitally important medicine.

Bringing relief to the wounded with a little lint and a few simple instruments is a thing of the past. Today's doctors and surgeons working in the field are no longer solitary first-aiders: they have the most modern techniques at hand to save ever more numerous human lives and they must, consequently, have recourse to a wider and wider range of pharmaceutical products and also to specialist advice. A link must be maintained between the first-aid station and the surgeons' wireless aerial, which itself should be in direct touch with its own base, the ICRC headquarters in Geneva, where the necessary ways and means can be brought into play.

Whilst it is true that the efficiency of medical and surgical facilities in a region cut off from the rest of the world depends to a great extent upon direct contact with a well equipped relief base, it is perhaps even more obvious that the organization of delegations carrying out the complex duties incumbent on the International Committee of the Red Cross would be inconceivable without some reliable and rapid system of communication.

¹ See *International Review*, December 1964, "Red Cross Radio Communications set up by the International Committee".

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It is not only the supply of food and equipment which depends upon constant exchange of information to avoid loss of time and to ensure safety for all concerned; equally dependent on such communication—and perhaps more so—is the movement of delegates and doctors in a country where ambush is a frequent occurrence, and also the relief of teams by fresh personnel sent out from Switzerland to take over. Radio communication is the only means of ensuring the well co-ordinated functioning of arrangements which must be constantly adapted to ever-changing circumstances and to the uncertainties of crises.

Relief operations must respond immediately to emergencies. Information and decisions today must travel at the speed of radio waves if assistance to the victims of disasters and conflicts is not to be found wanting.

P. E. B.