

Red Cross emergency radiocommunications

Red Cross emergency radiocommunications have been the subject of several articles¹ these last few years in *International Review*, as its importance indeed should not be underestimated. Since 1959, when the Administrative Radio Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), made a recommendation (No 34) in its favour, the Red Cross emergency radiocommunication network has expanded substantially. When armed conflicts or natural disasters occur, and normal means of communication are damaged or disrupted, it is essential that the Red Cross should have at its disposal an independent radio network for direct and rapid communications, enabling it to discharge its traditional humanitarian tasks in aid of the victims of those events. The international community, that is to say the 145 States and the 125 National Red Cross Societies of the International Red Cross, as well as the millions of people who are members of the Red Cross, and the countless others who, by their voluntary contributions, support its relief activities, would be at a loss to understand, and would not suffer, that this system² of radiocommunication, which ensures the efficient deployment of humanitarian aid, should be lacking.

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Since 1963, when its central radio station at Geneva for the transmission and reception of emergency messages was set up, the ICRC has continually developed its radiocommunication system. As a matter of fact, this expansion was forced upon the ICRC by circumstances, the natural disasters and the succession of crises and conflicts which have

¹ *International Review of the Red Cross*, January 1971, March 1972, November 1972, March 1975, October 1977.

² Note p. 105.

marked the past fifteen years, necessitating the intervention of the ICRC or of the League of Red Cross Societies. It should not be forgotten that the ICRC radio station is also utilized by the League; this is one of the spheres of action where co-operation between the two bodies of the International Red Cross is most active and fruitful.

At the end of 1978, the ICRC had twenty-two radio transmitting and receiving stations throughout the world. Eleven of them were in direct contact with Geneva, while the others had to be relayed by one of those eleven stations to call the Geneva main station. During that some year, the number of messages exchanged between Geneva headquarters and the other stations came to 7,800 (or over 500,000 words) while the various delegations sent each other a total of 12,600 messages.

It should be stressed that the ICRC stations transmit purely Red Cross messages, that is to say, communications directly concerning Red Cross action in the field (in an administration, they would be called "service messages") and that no other messages, for example for commercial purposes which other persons might wish to send, are transmitted. An exception is made by Red Cross stations, however, in the case of urgent messages of a personal character (that is a part of the normal business of the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency), when all other means of communication are lacking.

The radio stations that the ICRC sets up in countries where its intervention is necessary remain in operation for periods which vary a good deal, depending on circumstances. A station normally begins to operate when a delegation is set up and continues to do so for as long as the delegation is active. Quite often, after its delegates have left, the ICRC does not remove its radio equipment but donates it to the National Red Cross Society concerned, which can then make use of it for its own activities.

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With the development of the International Red Cross radiocommunication system, there was a similar expansion in the National Red Cross Societies which, stimulated by a resolution adopted by the Twentieth International Red Cross Conference held in Vienna in 1965, began to set up their own emergency radio communication networks. In 1978, there were almost fifty National Societies which possessed their own system and had obtained from their national authorities concerned an authorization and a call-sign to operate on the frequencies allocated to them.

It has been a spectacular advance, and the National Societies can measure the advantages of using radio stations in their relief programmes,

as communications within their own countries between Red Cross national headquarters and the local branches or first aid patrols are immediate; moreover, in emergencies the Societies of different countries may communicate with each other. A further advantage is that the International Red Cross radio system finds correspondents in those countries and an extension of its own network in that of those National Societies.

An immediate consequence of the increase in the number of transmitting and receiving stations of the International Red Cross and of the National Red Cross Societies is the vast number of messages exchanged on the frequencies allocated to the Red Cross. The licence-holders of these stations and those in charge of their operation must therefore beware of the dangers that may arise and it is essential that all concerned should keep to strict working rules.

First of all, the intense traffic of messages borne on a small number of frequencies must not be the cause of interference leading to difficult or inaudible reception. A message which has been delayed or misunderstood may have serious consequences, not only for the Red Cross relief programme but, very likely, for the actual victims who have to be succoured. It is therefore highly desirable, when there are joint operations in a particular theatre of operations, that the radio transmissions should be carried out in accordance with a schedule which has been fixed and agreed upon beforehand, so that those taking part should not, through misplaced zeal and lack of organization, disturb each other's transmission and reception. This is particularly true when National Societies co-operate in International Red Cross activities in other countries. In such cases, co-ordination with the League or ICRC is essential.

Secondly, it should be remembered that the 1959 Administrative Radio Conference in Geneva recommended that countries should assign frequencies for the "relief work of the Red Cross organizations" when "normal communication facilities are disrupted". These terms give a very good indication of the Conference's intentions when it approved this recommendation. The expressions "relief work", "of the Red Cross", "when normal communication facilities are disrupted", all give an accurate definition of what is meant by "Red Cross emergency radiocommunications".

In other words, they restrict the use of the radio transmission facilities granted. The messages must be only Red Cross messages and the persons in charge of radio transmission in the Red Cross bodies must be capable of resisting pressure of all kinds exerted from various quarters, by charitable organizations, the authorities or the public, requesting the transmission of non-Red Cross messages. The communications must have a

connection with Red Cross relief work—either protection or assistance—and it is completely unthinkable that the wavelengths allocated to the Red Cross should be used for the transmission of items of general information, press comments, periodical bulletins, etc., even if the subject concerns the Red Cross. For this, the “normal communication facilities”, mentioned in the Conference’s recommendation, are available and the Red Cross radiocommunication system must on no account enter into illicit competition with the official communication systems—telephone, telex, telegraph—when they operate normally.

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The Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference held in Bucharest in October 1977, adopted a resolution (Resolution IX), requesting the World Administrative Radio Conference, to be held at Geneva in September 1979, to take a constructive approach to all practical measures which might make this emergency network still more effective.

The Geneva Conventions, which have been signed so far by 145 States which are thereby entitled to take part in the International Red Cross Conferences, entrust the ICRC with various tasks, including that of acting as a neutral humanitarian intermediary in the event of war, civil war or internal strife, a task which obviously calls for the use of autonomous radiocommunication. In the last fifteen years, the ICRC has utilized its autonomous radiocommunication system in situations where human lives were at stake and where it was necessary to protect and assist the victims of the events. To perform its tasks, the ICRC uses the frequencies allocated by the Swiss PTT Administration and other national administrations.

The League and the National Red Cross Societies, when acting to help people affected by natural disasters, or in various circumstances endangering their lives and health, also utilize radiocommunication facilities under the conditions granted to the Red Cross.

The ICRC, in its concern to prevent any risk of interference, would like the question of the frequencies used by the Red Cross for its autonomous radiocommunications to be examined at the coming World Administrative Radio Conference, which will be held in Geneva in September 1979. It hopes that the representatives of the States will give their support to any proposal submitted at the Conference in favour of ICRC and Red Cross radiocommunication and that, without changing the distribution of the frequency bands allocated to the ICRC by the

Swiss PTT Administration, the Conference will recognize the need for such radiocommunications and take all necessary measures to make them more efficient, thereby enabling the ICRC and the Red Cross to perform still better their humanitarian tasks.

The Administrative Radio Conference (Geneva, 1959) was decisive in the setting up of Red Cross emergency radiocommunications but similar recommendations adopted by other Conferences should also be mentioned:

- the World Administrative Radio Conference for Space Telecommunications (Geneva, 1971) adopted Recommendation No Spa 2-13, relating to the use of space radiocommunication systems in the event of natural disasters, epidemics, famines and similar emergencies;
- the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (Malaga-Torremolinos, 1973) adopted Recommendation No 2 relating to the use of radiocommunications for announcing and identifying hospital ships and medical aircraft protected under the Geneva Conventions of 1949;
- the World Maritime Administrative Radio Conference (Geneva, 1974) adopted Recommendation No Mar 2-17, relating to the use of radiocommunications for marking, identifying, locating, and communicating with the means of transport protected under the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 concerning the protection of war victims and any additional instruments of those Conventions.