

In Vietnam

Our readers will be aware that the League of Red Cross Societies, at the request of the Vietnam National Society and in agreement with the ICRC, has started a relief programme in the Republic of Vietnam. This work has been going on for several months under the efficient leadership of Mr. Olof Stroh, Secretary-General of the Swedish Red Cross, who has established close and productive co-operation with the ICRC delegation in Saigon.

The League has now issued a report on its action and we believe our readers will be interested in reading the following extracts thereof.¹

At the end of last year the Red Cross of the Republic of Vietnam launched an appeal to sister Societies for help in establishing an emergency programme for 50,000 families, or 250,000 to 300,000 persons. These are the most destitute of all. Many are children. Geneva immediately acted on this appeal. At the end of January, thanks to the support given by 28 National Societies, a League delegation directed by Mr. Olof Stroh, Secretary General of the Swedish Red Cross, was set up in Saigon to co-ordinate assistance from members of the world federation to the Vietnamese Red Cross.

Once on the spot it soon became clear that attempts to do too much in too short a time would jeopardize the whole relief programme. The Vietnamese Red Cross is still developing and in some places was not yet ready to undertake a large scale operation.

The head of the League delegation came to the conclusion that, parallel to the emergency distribution of foodstuffs and mass medical consultations, it should be possible, through a large and carefully planned pilot project in an easily accessible region, to carry out an effective rescue operation for a considerable number

¹ *Panorama*, March 1967, "Red Cross in the Mekong Delta" by Marco Flaks, League Delegate in charge of information at the League delegation in Saigon.

of refugees left to their own resources and even long-term medico-social activities. At the same time Red Cross leaders at national and local level would rapidly gain practical experience and so, in the Red Cross tradition, be better prepared for any subsequent action.

After a detailed enquiry in the country several courses of action were studied, but were finally rejected by the League Chief Delegate in Saigon and the Central Committee of the Red Cross of the Republic of Viet Nam, presided by Dr. Hat. Quite simply, priority needs exceeded the resources available. An area had to be found where conditions would give maximum results from the limited means at the League's disposal at the present stage of the operation. The Mekong Delta met these conditions. The Regional Red Cross is comparatively strong. The distances are relatively short. Compared with the rest of the country communications are good. As Saigon is nearby, the League delegation and the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Red Cross can keep in close contact with the scene of relief operations. The Central Committee can more easily direct and support the operations. This is important at the beginning when adjustments have to be made to fit changing circumstances and the experience gained on the spot.

With these facts in mind, Mr. Stroh and the Vice-President of the Southern Region of the Vietnamese Red Cross, Mr. Trunc, during an information mission in the Delta region—at Rach-Gia and Can Tho—decided to launch, there and then, at the beginning of February, the first combined action.

Rach-Gia lies 130 miles to the South-West of Saigon and is accessible by road. Around the town 30,000 or more refugees are living in camps, hamlets and villages. Some have obtained the Government resettlement premium; others as we have already seen, have nothing whatsoever. Some peasants displaced from the rice-paddies live in boats. From time to time, during lulls in the fighting, they return by the canals to tend their land and then come back to safer zones. They are the new nomads.

Rach-Gia has one advantage: a local Red Cross which, though still developing, has a President, Dr. Tran-Ly, a Secretary General and Treasurer, Mr. Khoa, and a Committee of eminent personalities. They had, however, never organised a relief action.

On the morning of 11 February the Red Cross of Rach-Gia started its trial by fire. Once the decision was taken to start immediately on a relief action for 200 families living for a long time in atrocious conditions near a pagoda cemetery, urgent messages went out to Saigon and Can-Tho. There teams of first aiders were assembled, Red Cross lorries made ready and loaded with dried milk, mats and lengths of material. In Rach-Gia itself Mr. Khoa and a League delegate undertook the delicate negotiations involved in purchasing 8 tons of rice and a consignment of mats. At the same time it was decided to include in the action 233 families left homeless when a whole district of the town went up in flames.

The Vice-President of the Local Red Cross Committee had banners painted announcing the distributions. The Office of Public Works lent a lorry to transport foodstuffs to the spot. The Head of the Province supplied fuel for the lorry as well as a portable loud-speaker for announcements. These are small, but very important details in a country which unless spurred on by the war has lost all sense of initiative.

Meanwhile the first aiders—all under 20 years of age—had arrived from Saigon and Can-Tho by road. After some preparations, mainly checking the lists of those entitled to relief, the operation began. It was conducted in two stages and went without a hitch. First came the refugees. Among them was the pitiful case of a grandmother with 5 grandchildren in her charge, two of them crippled; in 13 months all the assistance she had received was two yards of material. The next day it was the turn of the fire victims.

The state of health of this population was very bad—malnutrition, all kinds of skin diseases, tuberculosis and parasites. A dispensary was set up and Dr. Tran-Ly faced the onslaught with some volunteers from the local health service. He recorded 500 consultations, given on a platform in the open air, and showed then the empty cases of medicaments.

A similar operation was conducted two weeks later in the same region: 2,763 persons (70 per cent of them children), i.e. 640 families, received rice, dried milk, mats and material. A further 450 medical consultations were given by Dr. Ly with the help of the male nurse of the district, mainly in the localities of Vinh-Hoa and Soc-Thuan.

This terminated the first, unpretentious, phase of an emergency action, which, in view of the circumstances, has had remarkable consequences. For the displaced population and the Red Cross of Rach-Gia it has proved the beginning of a story whose final chapter will only be known a few years from now. What happened ?

Having gained confidence, the Red Cross Committee of Rach-Gia has since reinforced its numbers by recruiting a teacher, a second doctor and a business man representing private enterprise. A tri-lingual Vietnamese secretary-interpreter is working full-time in the regional office-warehouse opened in Rach-Gia by the League delegation. As this article goes to press, two League delegates and their local friends are continuing the relief action on behalf of the civilian war victims and also long-term activities comprising training courses for first aiders, help for the Junior Red Cross and a medico-social programme for resettled refugees. In many villages there remain only women, old people who have survived 25 years of war, and multitudes of children, who are an easy prey to sickness and delinquency.

In the week 13 to 18 March a third distribution took place around Rach-Gia for 560 families in Soc-Soai and 140 families in Tuanh-Dong, i.e. 4,415 persons. Here again the Provincial Government lent the lorries.

In addition, two milk stations have been started near Rach-Gia: one in Soc-Soai for more than 2,000 children and the other in Binh-Hoa for almost 3,000 children. This one was installed in the Buddhist cemetery mentioned above.

Obviously these milk stations are open both to the children of displaced persons and those of the local inhabitants, who also need the extra nourishment.

Medical consultations are held once a week in these two stations by the four Vietnamese civilian doctors of Rach-Gia.

For the moment, Rach-Gia is serving as the League centre for the Delta. Here activities will be co-ordinated which will extend progressively to Long-Xuyn, Camau, Bac-Lieu, Son-Trang and Can-Tho, where, according to official statistics there are about 100,000 displaced persons, victims of the war.

At Can-Tho digging has started prior to the building of a Red Cross orphanage for war orphans, thanks to the goodwill of the

regional authorities who have made bulldozers available free of charge.

The Red Cross of Can-Tho has opened two milk stations, financed by the League. The powdered milk has been supplied by various voluntary agencies. A sewing room with six sewing machines provided by the League will operate under the direction of Red Cross women volunteers, who will give basic instruction in dress-making.

Finally, the "Henry Dunant I", the first vessel of a flotilla of small boats flying the Red Cross flag, will soon be sailing the Delta canals. With an out-board motor and a long horizontal pole, she is able to thread her way along the smallest waterways right up to lonely hamlets inaccessible by road. The "Henry Dunant I" is a narrow vessel some 20 feet in length with a very shallow draught. Made of wood, and covered by a waterproof straw roof, which is painted with a large red cross, she can carry four persons and medicaments as well as a folding stretcher. She was built in Rach-Gia by a boat builder according to the traditional methods of the Delta.

This is the first mobile floating dispensary in Viet-Nam. Other boats will be acquired as the needs arise.

RED CRESCENT HELP TO PILGRIMS

Vast numbers of pilgrims go to the Mecca and it is obvious that when so many people are grouped together a serious sanitary problem arises. As has been mentioned in a previous issue, the Seminar of North African and Middle East National Societies, at Rabat in May 1966, considered this question and in its Resolution No. VIII pointed out "the responsibilities which National Red