

The role and characteristics of an emergency mission

by André Aoun

Governed as it is by the very nature of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, an emergency mission is more than a mere effort to restore essential services. Although it is undoubtedly best characterized by the relief activities set in motion during the acute phase, its full scope cannot be measured without taking into account the preparatory and subsequent rehabilitation and development phases.

Such a mission thus consists invariably of three stages: preliminary, *in situ* and follow-up.

Likewise, a mission can never be an isolated undertaking. It is possible and viable only insofar as it is part of an ongoing and multifaceted national and international effort carried out through the voluntary commitment of qualified professionals.

The content of an emergency mission

An emergency mission presents various characteristics, in particular its unexpected nature and the diversity of the crisis situations giving rise to it and the needs to be met.

Setting up a relief operation must be considered as a routine task if an effective response is to be given to requests for assistance. For this, several prerequisites must be met.

First of all, a wide range of qualified professionals must be available in sufficient numbers to permit rapide mobilization of the specialists required by any given situation.

In addition to their expertise in their own fields, these professionals must be specifically trained for carrying out missions abroad in unfavourable circumstances and under the Red Cross or Red Crescent banner.

Adequate human resources and versatile know-how coupled with regular training to ensure speed of reaction and intervention constitute the backbone of an emergency operation.

A thorough knowledge of the environment is also essential. The National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society concerned must be able to provide its delegates with comprehensive information on the context in which they will be called upon to work.

Finally, the immediate availability of appropriate material resources is an essential factor for setting up certain emergency missions. These resources include not only the equipment needed by the operational staff but also communication facilities and supplies, which should be kept in stock or be obtainable at very short notice.

The experience of the French Red Cross has shown that the efficiency of emergency missions, whether carried out in situations of armed conflict or following natural disasters, and whether requiring a handful of volunteers or entire operational units, depends largely on certain well-defined rules.

Efficient logistics, providing the operational staff with a degree of autonomy and adequate means of intervention, including communication facilities, constitute the cornerstone of a successful mission.

It is equally important, however, that the operational staff be capable of adapting to specific local conditions, which are always complex and often vary in the course of the mission.

It is likewise important that each member of the team have a clear idea of his own role and those of his associates. Hence the advantage of codifying intervention procedures, while nonetheless preserving the flexibility needed to adapt to the demands of each individual case.

Quite apart from its conditions of implementation, an emergency mission is valid only insofar as it provides specific assistance in a situation beyond the capabilities of local teams.

This assistance may consist in introducing a given rescue or relief technique or in providing a special service such as tracing. Obviously this does not exclude the possibility in some cases of merely strengthening or relieving exhausted local teams.

The effects of an exceptional situation requiring emergency

action are rarely limited and are not easily remedied. The assistance provided must therefore be followed by rehabilitation measures.

Moreover, in cases where special expertise has been introduced, it is logical to ensure, as far as possible, that this is passed on to local teams through more long-term support and development activities.

Of course, each mission requires its own logistics and teams and sound organization. Beyond this, its success will be largely determined by the track record of the National Society concerned, as reflected in the knowledge and experience of those in charge of the mission.

Its success also depends on the team of volunteers responsible for its implementation. More generally, apart from the attributes of individual team members, another critical factor is the quality of the whole pool of volunteers available for international missions, particularly their frame of mind, their motivation and training.

A mission is thus characterized less by its content than by its scale within the structure of the National Society conducting it and by what the volunteers involved make of it.

The concept of “voluntary service” in emergency missions

A keen sense of humanitarian action, goodwill, true availability and solid professional qualifications are attributes characteristic of people who volunteer for emergency missions. However, specific training is required if these qualities are to be used effectively in exceptional circumstances.*

At the same time, the specific nature of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement plays a decisive role in recruitment. Volunteers are not always fully aware, however, of the implications of the Red Cross principles and the institution's rules governing field operations. One of the major training objectives is therefore to inculcate in volunteers the strict discipline needed for observance of the Red Cross principles and rules of conduct.

Training thus conceived and structured cannot be limited to one or two sessions. It must be continuous, through periodic refresher courses, ready availability of documentation and the constant briefing of volunteers.

* See *Training volunteer workers for international missions of the French Red Cross*, p. 535.

This training, which is indispensable for the effective implementation of emergency operations, should be completed by the participation of the volunteers in the National Society's routine activities. This has the twofold advantage of strengthening their position as members of the Red Cross and of providing an opportunity for other members of the Society to share the experience of volunteers who have carried out missions abroad.

Various difficulties await the volunteers out in the field. It would be impossible to list exhaustively all the problems encountered by the staff of successive missions; they range from distance from home to working conditions and life within a delegation.

However, at the conclusion of the mission, these difficulties are usually forgotten in the enthusiasm generated by the sense of accomplishment. Returning volunteers, while mentioning the problems involved, tend to give more emphasis to the achievements of the mission.

One of the major constraints affecting emergency operations remains the availability of mission staff. Mobilization at very short notice of professionals with permanent posts invariably poses a problem.

Setting up a structure for the organization of emergency missions involves constant preparation, a ceaseless effort to update knowledge and the availability of considerable resources.

Whatever the state of readiness and the experience gleaned from many earlier missions, however, each new mission must be approached as a unique undertaking. This expertise and experience will obviously come into play, but the organization of the new mission will be determined largely by the specific context in which it will take place.

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