

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE INDO-PAKISTAN CONFLICT VICTIMS

The Background

Since March 1971, the International Committee of the Red Cross had been watching the situation on the Indian sub-continent and had given particular attention to the development of its contacts with the Governments and Red Cross Societies of India and Pakistan with a view to carrying out its humanitarian mission for the benefit of the victims of events.

At the end of that month, in view of the crisis in East Pakistan, the ICRC offered its services to the Government of Pakistan for the first time. Two special missions in the summer of 1971 to follow up that offer resulted in the setting up at Dacca, in co-operation with the National Red Cross, of an office for the tracing of missing persons under ICRC auspices.

At the same time, the ICRC spared no pains to discharge its mission in India. More than 50,000 tons of relief supplies made available to the ICRC by the EEC were forwarded to the Indian Red Cross for the benefit of Bengali refugees, and in December a tracing service was opened in co-operation with the Indian Red Cross Society.

Just before the conflict erupted, there were already two ICRC delegates in New Delhi and two in Dacca. In due course the ICRC also made contact with the Bangladesh representatives in London, New Delhi, Calcutta and New York.

The League of Red Cross Societies, for its part, had a score of delegates in East Pakistan (Dacca, Chittagong and the islands). They had been working there since June 1971, co-operating with the National Red Cross for the relief and resettlement of cyclone victims. Its programme included the setting up of a cyclone warn-



Tracing Agency at Dacca: sorting enquiries and family messages...

Photos Jolliet/ICRC

of which thousands are received every day.

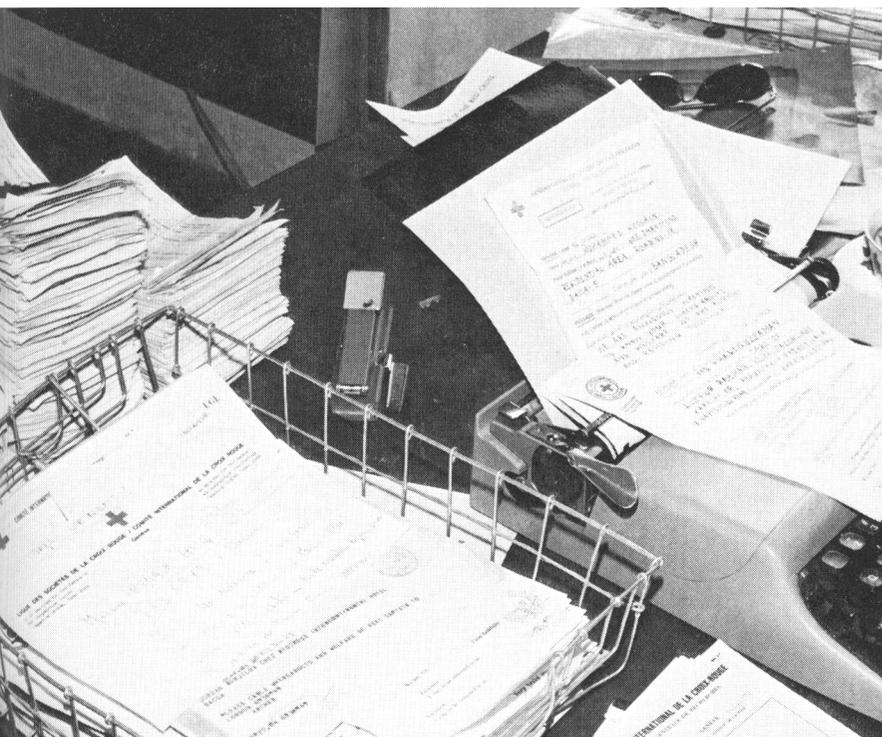




Photo Jolliet/ICRC

Two ICRC delegates interviewing a Pakistani prisoner of war with the help of a Pakistani officer acting as interpreter.



Photo Jolliet/ICRC

At the Holy Family Hospital, Dacca: an ICRC doctor-delegate and a Swiss Red Cross nurse tending a severe casualty.



Photo Mitra/ICRC

In a refugee camp near Calcutta : anti-cholera campaign by the Indian Red Cross.

ing and relief system, the distribution of emergency supplies and the administration of the Holy Family Hospital in Dacca.

At the outset of hostilities, on 4 December 1971, the ICRC reminded the Governments of India and Pakistan of their obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions. All parties to the conflict—including Bangladesh—gave their assurance that the Geneva Conventions would be applied in all circumstances.

The ICRC delegates in the field, assisted by those of the League in Dacca and with the agreement of the authorities, took the necessary steps to provide the best protection they could for the victims of the conflict, until such time as a large scale programme could get off the ground. Three buildings in Dacca, the Intercontinental Hotel, the Holy Family Hospital and the Notre Dame College, were declared neutral zones under ICRC control, and gave shelter from the fighting to many civilians and casualties.

The first civilian aircraft to land at Dacca was the DC-6 which the Swiss Government lent the ICRC. It touched down on 25 December with an ICRC delegation and medical supplies. In the days which followed, medical teams supplied by several National Societies also reached Bangladesh and started working in various parts of the territory.

When hostilities ceased, the ICRC was able to discharge the duties incumbent upon it under the Geneva Conventions, such as the protection of prisoners of war and of civilians, the care of the wounded and the sick, the tracing of missing persons, the forwarding of family messages and the provision of assistance to the needy; in all a no mean task.

Situation at the end of January 1972

In December 1971, several ICRC delegates left for Dacca where, as mentioned in our previous issue, two delegates were already on the spot working in aid of the victims of the India–Pakistan conflict. The new arrivals found that, after the termination of hostilities, several humanitarian tasks had to be undertaken under the red cross emblem.

(1) *For prisoners of war.*—Before the transfer of Pakistani prisoners of war to India, the completion of which was effected about

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the middle of January 1972, the delegates visited several thousands of them and examined detention conditions.¹

(2) *Care of wounded and sick.*—At the end of December 1971, six medical teams, made available to the ICRC by the National Societies of Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, began operating in various parts of the country.¹ By the end of January they were performing a twofold task: surgical treatment for wounded soldiers on the one hand, and anti-cholera vaccination to prevent the outbreak of any epidemic on the other hand. At that date, some members of the Scandinavian medical teams decided to form together a surgical unit at Dacca Medical College, where the seriously wounded victims of the war would be treated.

(3) *Assistance to civilians in danger or in need.*—As soon as hostilities were ended, the ICRC took up the problem of minority groups who, fearing for their lives, were afraid to venture out of the districts where they lived. This situation created supply difficulties, and, in agreement with the authorities, the ICRC drew up a three-month plan to provide aid for those sections of the population most in need: 15 to 20 medico-social teams are to be sent out and 500,000 rations of 1,700 calories each distributed daily.

The ICRC delegation in Dacca turned its attention, moreover, to the civilian internees who also received from the Red Cross relief supplies in the way of food to meet their most pressing needs. At the end of January, nearly all those civilians were transferred to India, and it is the ICRC delegation in India that is continuing to provide assistance to the internees and prisoners of war.

(4) *Tracing service and messages.*—As soon as fighting had ceased, a very large number of family messages and enquiry requests began to reach the offices of the tracing service, which had already been set up several months beforehand in Dacca with the aid of the Central Tracing Agency representative, and in co-operation with the local Red Cross. Several persons, including two specially sent out from Geneva, are dealing with all the work there.¹

¹ *Plate.*

The Work of the Central Tracing Agency and Information Bureaux

When hostilities broke out, the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva was mainly receiving enquiries from Pakistanis in Europe and America regarding their family members in India or in Pakistan.

As hostilities became more widespread, nearly 20,000 civilian messages were received in Geneva. The messages came both from East Pakistan and West Pakistan and were immediately forwarded to the addressees. Most had been sent by civilians, but some of them were from Pakistani prisoners of war held by the Indians. Ever more numerous requests for information about missing people kept coming in. In each case, an enquiry was started at Central Tracing Agency headquarters and channelled to the regional tracing bureaux in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The bureaux themselves send enquiries on to the local Red Cross Society, which endeavours to obtain the desired information within the shortest possible time.

As regards information about prisoners of war, an ICRC delegate, on his return to Geneva, handed the Agency on 9 January 1972 the preliminary lists of Pakistani prisoners of war held by the Indians. The lists were immediately recorded and promptly forwarded to the Government of Pakistan through its Geneva representative.

Two days later the Agency received from the ICRC delegate at Islamabad a list of Indian prisoners of war held by the Pakistanis. This list, too, was recorded and handed to the Indian Permanent Delegation in Geneva for transmission to the Government of India.

It is worth mentioning that the information contained in the lists is indexed and recorded on tape. By means of this new working method it is possible to prepare different classification lists, alphabetical, numerical, etc. in a very short time. One may well imagine the amount of work involved and the specialized staff who have had to be engaged.

We might add that the lists were accompanied by about a thousand capture cards completed by Indian and Pakistani prisoners of war, and that they were dealt with in the same way as the lists. The Central Tracing Agency hopes to receive further cap-

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ture cards as they are completed by prisoners of war in the internment camps.

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This information was available at the end of January regarding the activities of the Central Tracing Agency in this sector. We shall now outline the tasks which the Tracing Agency has before it in the various places where it has regional bureaux, and regarding which we asked one of the senior Agency officials to supply us with information. It will be recalled that in its November 1971 issue the *International Review* published an article about the Tracing Service which Mr. Nicolas Vecsey organized on the occasion of his first mission to Dacca, in co-operation with the local Red Cross, with a view to finding missing people and putting them in touch with their families.

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It was with this same purpose that Mr. Vecsey went to India and Pakistan in December 1971. On arrival in New Delhi, he set about helping the National Red Cross Society establish a tracing service which at the outset was divided into:

a war section, to deal in particular with enquiries about missing soldiers and the transmission of prisoner-of-war mail. Apart from tracing requests, however, the mail of Indian and Pakistani prisoners is handled by the national information bureau provided for in the Geneva Conventions;

a civilian section, whose task it is, once a card index is set up, to prepare files on requests concerning refugees. All enquiries received from Geneva are indexed. On the other hand, neither the Central Tracing Agency nor the Indian Red Cross had by the end of December received any enquiries from the refugees themselves. They were, in fact, unaware of the existence of any tracing service.

It therefore became necessary to inform refugees in camps, and Mr. Vecsey made appointments with the Calcutta authorities as well as with the authorities in charge of the major camps on the outskirts of that city. He visited the camps with the director of

the National Society's tracing service and worked out with local authorities the following information system:

- (a) lists of persons whom it was desired to trace were to be posted at several points in the camps, to ensure that replies were made to the enquiries already received;
- (b) to enable refugees to trace missing members of the family, 250,000 enquiry and civilian message forms were distributed, while the local press and radio announced the proposed tracing method. Even though the refugees are gradually returning home, some of their relatives may be missing, and this will considerably add to the work at Dacca and New Delhi.

Mr. Vecsey then proceeded to Islamabad, where the ICRC delegation had been receiving several hundred enquiries a day about missing persons. It did not seem necessary, however, to start a large tracing agency since the Lahore chapter of the Pakistan Red Cross had just established one, and moreover the Ministry of Defence had set up a national bureau for information on servicemen. In addition, enquiries concerning civilians were referred to the efficiently run service of the Lahore chapter of the Red Cross, where more than 80 voluntary helpers are now at work.
