

The “Tracing and Mailing Services” in aid of the “Boat People”

In Resolution XVI (The role of the Central Tracing Agency and National Societies in tracing activities and the reuniting of families), the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, October 1986)... “recalling the role which the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) of the ICRC plays as a co-ordinator and technical adviser to National Societies and governments, as defined in the report presented by the ICRC and the League and adopted by the Twenty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross,”... and “recognizing that, in order to take effective action, the Movement must be able to rely on a sound network composed of all the National Societies’ tracing services and the CTA, in liaison, when necessary, with the League Secretariat,”... encouraged the CTA “to continue its efforts to co-ordinate activities, to harmonize operating principles and working methods, and to train responsible tracing personnel,” and requested “ all National Societies to carry out to the best of their capacity the role which they are called upon to play as components of the international network for tracing and reuniting families”.

To illustrate the CTA’s co-ordinating role and the work of the National Societies in tracing and reuniting families, the Review has chosen to interest its readers in the activities of the “tracing and mailing services” (TMS) created under the auspices of the CTA within several National Societies in South East Asia to help the Boat People who are the victims of the most tragic drama of our times.

This survey written by Pierre Ryter, deputy head of the CTA/Asia Sector, also bears witness to the excellent co-operation which exists between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the ICRC.

At the end of the 1970s international public opinion was brusquely made aware of the Boat People phenomenon; tens of thousands of these people risked their lives to leave Viet Nam and seek refuge wherever the winds and tides brought them. The urgent need for international action to help the survivors was very soon recognized and the purpose of this article is to describe the work of the ICRC and the National Societies of the various countries affected by this new type of migration.

ORIGIN OF THE TRACING AND MAILING SERVICES

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by its mandate, is the very organization to come to the aid of the Vietnamese Boat People (VNBP). It registers the people in the various camps in countries of first asylum, looks after the administration of these camps (in some countries in co-operation with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the League) and helps resettle the VNBP in countries of final asylum. These tasks are in complete accordance with the UNHCR's mandate, however the UN body is not geared to handle the innumerable VNBP tracing requests. The ICRC Central Tracing Agency (CTA) became engaged in this kind of work after the political changes in 1975 in Phnom Penh, Ho Chi Minh City and Vientiane. Having kept a delegation in Ho Chi Minh City at the time when Viet Nam was cut off from the rest of the world, the ICRC was one of the few remaining links for tens of thousands of families separated by the events. In March 1979 the CTA had an "Indo-China file" containing 400,000 to 450,000 card indexes, as well as a list of 130,000 Vietnamese evacuated by the United States upon the fall of Ho Chi Minh City. Therefore it is quite natural for the ICRC to consent to handle tracing activities as regards the VNBP. An agreement was signed in Geneva on 5 September 1979 between the UNHCR and the ICRC formalising the division of tasks between the two organizations.

It very soon became evident that it was impossible to answer quickly the tracing requests only on the basis of information collected in Geneva by the CTA. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the countries of first asylum were called upon to help in tracing the VNBP. Within the National Societies of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Macao during the summer of 1979 the CTA set up tracing units and a postal service which later came to be known as the Tracing and Mailing Service (TMS).

HOW THE TMS WORKS

The TMS "network" has a twofold purpose. It must enable VNBP who have just arrived in a country of first asylum to contact family members living in a country of resettlement, and must answer tracing requests from the latter who have heard that a

relative has left Viet Nam by boat and are without further news. For the Boat People, re-establishing family ties is often tantamount to finding a country of reception since family reuniting is the determining factor in the choice of refugees accepted by the immigration services of the host countries. The relief of asylum seekers residing in these countries is self-evident when they receive news of relatives who left Viet Nam by sea, especially when one bears in mind that only approximately 50% of the VNBP arrive safe and sound in a country of first asylum.

Each TMS office keeps a manual file with the names of people about whom tracing requests in the country have been made, the names of people passing through or having passed through the country, and the names of the ships on which they arrived (this information is supplied by the UNHCR on the spot.) In Geneva the CTA puts on to a central computer the information obtained by each national TMS together with tracing requests submitted to it (a total of 650,000 names).

The follow-up to a tracing request can be quite complex. For example, on the basis of information supplied by the enquirer, the American Red Cross might channel a request to the Malaysian TMS; after checking in its file, the latter might send the request on to the Philippine TMS which, if unable to find the person sought, would forward it to the CTA in Geneva for final handling. Clearly, co-ordination between each TMS and the CTA is of prime importance. Precise standard working procedures, developed in the light of past experience, must be defined and brought to bear. Every year representatives from each TMS and from the CTA meet to assess the state of the network. At the 1986 workshop in Jakarta the participants decided that, since the network was running so smoothly, the advisability of having a meeting in 1987 would be discussed during the current year.

TMS PROBLEMS

The fact that the network is running smoothly in no way means that there are no problems. From a purely technical point of view the Tracing and Mailing Services in South East Asia are working in perfect co-ordination with the CTA in Geneva. Difficulties can arise when an enquiry from a TMS must be handled by the tracing service of a National Society. The help of some Red Cross Societies is crucial in answering tracing requests by VNBP in countries of

resettlement. (In 1986 approximately 70% of the total number of enquiries opened had to do with this kind of request.) Many VNBP desperately try to find relatives who have already been resettled and could thus sponsor them. The tracing services of the asylum countries' National Societies often can no longer cope with the flood of tracing requests. Since the people sought are mostly former refugees, these services turn to the immigration services as an initial source of information. The latter are in turn overwhelmed with enquiries and, perhaps deciding to curb the inflow of migrants, are slow in replying. The VNBP who have submitted the enquiries remain without any news and keep continually contacting the TMS which has forwarded their enquiries to the National Society concerned. Eventually they become discouraged and in the long term this can result in a loss of credibility for the TMS network; unable to influence the immigration services policy in certain countries of asylum it is powerless to improve the quality of its own services.

Clearly, in this context the overall problem of tracing cannot be dissociated from the more general problem of resettling Vietnamese refugees. The Boat People phenomenon has lasted now for more than seven years. Just as legal immigration from Viet Nam under the auspices of the UNHCR, after a promising start (29,184 people in 1984), is tending to slow down (no more than 18,418 departures in 1986), VNBP departures for resettlement are also declining (24,431 in 1986 as against 32,801 in 1984). The Boat People exodus, caused by the Vietnamese conflict has become less sensational, but even though the number of VNBP arriving in countries of first asylum is tending to decrease (19,575 arrivals in 1986 as against 24,865 in 1984), their migration goes on. If the number of legal departures continues to be so low, then the Vietnamese may yet be seen heading out again to sea in an attempt to force the hand of destiny.

TMS — OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The five Tracing and Mailing Services which still exist in South East Asia (Singapore and Macao left the network in 1983) still have a considerable volume of work (4,000 VNBP sought in 1986, 310,000 letters forwarded) and this workload is unlikely to diminish appreciably in the immediate future. Nevertheless, the question already arises as to what to do with this patiently installed infrastructure when refugees no longer set out to sea. It would be a pity

not to make use of the experience and motivation of some of the 75 Red Cross and Red Crescent employees presently employed by the TMS in other Agency activities. Already some TMS are assisting victims other than VNBP (for example, the Hong Kong TMS plays a large role in re-establishing family ties between the Chinese in the People's Republic of China and the Chinese in Hong Kong). These people's experience could well be used one day to help trace people at times of natural disasters or any other event which results in families being separated.

As regards the know-how gained within the TMS network, although the technical success cannot be disputed (since 1979, 1,200,000 letters have been forwarded and 70,000 people sought, 28% of whom were found) and although co-operation between the ICRC, the National Societies and the UNHCR is exemplary, care must be taken not to lapse into blissful self-satisfaction. As we have seen, the results of enquiries submitted to the National Societies in countries of immigration are disappointing and everything must yet be done to enable the existing TMS to remain operational once the flow of Boat People arrivals has come to a definite halt.
