

LAGOS

ICRC Tracing Service

In June we received from Miss Cécile M. Ringgenberg, Tracing Officer at the ICRC Tracing Service in Nigeria, an article which will no doubt interest our readers, as it describes an unspectacular but very humanitarian activity prescribed in the IVth Geneva Convention.

The Nigerian civil war like all armed conflicts has disrupted many families whose members live on both sides of the frontline. In many cases the family members to be contacted have become refugees and can only be found after long and complicated tracing efforts. It is one of the tasks of the ICRC Central Tracing Agency in Geneva, of which the Lagos Tracing Office is a branch, to help these people to locate each other and to re-establish family ties broken through the war.

The first tracing requests reached the ICRC Delegation in Lagos in September 1967. These requests came mostly from National Red Cross Societies and concerned nationals of their countries who were cut off in the former Eastern Region through the conflict. All these requests were sent to the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva which forwarded them to the ICRC Delegation in the East for investigation. Slowly, Nigerians began to contact the ICRC, inquiring about the fate of their relatives in the East. On the other hand, tracing requests came through the Central Tracing Agency from the East regarding people in the Federal Area. Also, in many cases, people in the Federal Area requested the Delegation to obtain news from their families living in zones previously secessionist and now in federal hands.

During the first year of tracing activities, about 300 requests reached the Lagos Delegation. However, only nine months later, by

the end of May 1969, this number had increased to 3587, more than ten times the total for the first twelvemonth. The particularly rapid increase during October 1968 led to the establishment of a special Tracing Office within the Delegation which was first opened by a Tracing Officer and a Secretary: later a second Secretary joined the staff ¹.

Of the 3587 persons sought, 493 have been found so far. The difficulty of locating persons who, in many cases, have changed their domicile several times due to the progress of the war explains the relatively small number of people traced. Also, many people who have been traced successfully in the Secessionist Area will now require to be traced all over again after they left their homes or camps, in view of the latest changes at the war front.

Sometimes inquirers do not only wish to trace their relatives but also to evacuate them and to be re-united with them. For example, a husband may request that his wife and children separated from him through the war may be brought back through the ICRC. At present the ICRC is studying the possibility of arranging such family reunions.

All tracing requests are written on ICRC Message Forms (Form 61) which allow inquirers to write a message of personal or family nature of up to 25 words. Many inquirers call in person at the Office. The requests are card-indexed at the Office and the development of the search is carefully noted on the card. The routing of these forms is extremely difficult, due to the fact that the small villages in which people have to be traced can very often not be located on the maps available.

As mentioned above, the Lagos Tracing Office is responsible for on-the-spot tracing of persons sought in the Federal Area. The task demanded the set-up of an extensive network in the Area. The work was first handled by the different Red Cross teams in the field under the supervision of the Area Coordinator concerned. However, it was not easy for the teams, whose main task is feeding and medical care, to handle tracing as well. Also, the team members who were mostly expatriates at the beginning, were unfamiliar with

¹ *Plate.* — Lagos: The ICRC Tracing Service.

the area, had no knowledge of the language spoken and the migration movements which had taken place. Therefore, the ICRC late last year approached the Nigerian Red Cross with a view to its taking a greater share in tracing activities in the field. Now the Nigerian Red Cross is actively cooperating in tracing in all relief areas and, as a consequence, the proportion of answers to requests has greatly increased for the Federal Area.

Besides tracing people, the local Tracing Offices are also receiving more and more requests concerning other parts of the Federal Area or the Secessionist Area. The following quotation from a report by the Nigerian Red Cross Area Tracing Officer in Uyo adequately shows the need for the local Tracing Offices:

“ . . . When the news of this type of ICRC traditional task was known in the Uyo Urban alone, people poured in, in large numbers at any time, anywhere and even at night at my house, asking for assistance to hear or talk to relatives they have not seen or heard of since the outbreak of the Civil War . . . I was then forced by the circumstances to attend to them at any time, to relieve the anxiety and ease the anguish of not knowing whether their relatives were alive or not.”

As the war-affected areas of Nigeria gradually return to normal life, the size and scope of the work of the Tracing Office—and the efficiency with which it serves those who need its help—will most certainly increase; and as the need for this service may well continue for months, if not years, after the end of the present conflict, it will do much to bring the ethics and principles of the Red Cross into the minds and hearts of the people of this country.