

FROM JULY TO OCTOBER 1969

THE ICRC ACTION DURING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR

I. ORIGIN OF THE CRISIS

The opening of hostilities was preceded by minor incidents at first, then followed by more serious ones notably at the two football matches between the national teams of Honduras and Salvador which took place in June, the one in Tegucigalpa and the other in San Salvador.

On 24 June, Mr. F. J. Guerrero, Minister of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, informed the ICRC by cable of the message he had sent to the Chairman of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in Washington. This message and the various press agency despatches (AFP, Reuter, IPS) mention the expulsion of Salvadoran nationals from Honduras and violations of human rights in Honduras.

Although it did not first of all appear to be a question of troubles characterized by political motives, the ICRC decided to send to Honduras its Delegate-General for Latin America, Mr. S. Nessi, then on mission at Bridgetown (Barbados). The ICRC delegate went first of all to San Pedro Sula then to Tegucigalpa from 29 June to 2 July to examine the situation on the spot with those in charge of the Honduran Red Cross (HRC).

On the eve of his arrival in Honduras a 7-point agreement had been drawn up between the National Red Cross Societies of Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua on the measures to be taken to come to the aid of persons affected by the events. Following on

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

this agreement, concluded in Managua (Nicaragua) on 28 June, a tracing and information office was set up in Tegucigalpa for all Salvadorans resident in Honduras. A similar office was opened in San Salvador. It is worthy of note that these two offices were to remain open and were extremely active until October and that the exchange of correspondence between the two countries at war was effected by the Red Cross Societies whose first-aiders met twice a week at the frontier post of El Amatillo.

On his return to Geneva on 7 July, the delegate of the ICRC informed the ICRC of the situation in Honduras and gave it details of the agreement made between the Red Cross Societies.

Since 15 June, however, large numbers of Salvadorans resident in Honduras continued to arrive at El Amatillo, frontier post between the two countries on the Pan American Highway, where they were cared for by the Salvadoran Red Cross (SRC). This National Society set up an improvised reception camp at San Miguel, where some 18,000 refugees, including women and children, were given assistance until 10 July.

Events then moved apace. On 14 July, the armed forces of Salvador penetrated Honduran territory at several points. From 15 to 17 July, the Salvadoran forces advanced into Honduras to a depth of 10 to 20 km mainly on two axes: northwards to Nueva Ocotepeque which was entirely occupied, eastwards on Nacaome. Bombing also took place in Honduras and Salvador.

On 16 July, the ICRC called the two National Societies asking them for information on the situation, military and civilian victims, prisoners of war and aid requirements. The HRC replied to the ICRC the same day requesting it, as a matter of urgency, to send two delegates to help in having the Geneva Conventions applied.

The ICRC decided on 18 July to send two delegates to the spot and informed the two Red Cross Societies accordingly, as well as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries.

II. THE VICTIMS OF THE CONFLICT

On the arrival of the two ICRC delegates Mr. S. Nessi and Mr. E. Leemann on 21 July, the situation was as follows:

Since 19 July there had been no troop movements. A cease-fire arranged by the Organization of American States (OAS) had already taken place, but was not put into effect until 22 July.

1. Military victims

During the course of the hostilities, which lasted about 100 hours, there were amongst the armed forces of both countries some 300 dead and 500 wounded, all of whom were evacuated to first-aid posts and hospitals in the interior of Honduras and El Salvador.

2. Prisoners of war

The Honduras army captured 28 Salvadoran NCOs and other ranks who were first interned at Las Casitas, 9 km from Tegucigalpa, then in the capital's Penitentiary.

The Salvadoran army, for its part, captured 2 Honduran officers and 56 NCOs and other ranks, all interned in the Penitentiary at San Vicente.

3. Civilian victims

Amongst civilian victims of the war one should distinguish the following:

- Salvadoran civilians interned in Honduras
- war displaced Hondurans in Honduras
- Honduran refugees in Guatemala and Nicaragua
- Salvadoran refugees in Salvador and Guatemala
- detained Honduran civilians in Salvador, captured by the armed forces of El Salvador in occupied territory.

a) *Salvadoran civilians interned in Honduras.* Following on calls on the Salvador radio, inciting its nationals residing in Honduras to rise, a large number of Salvadorans were interned in improvised internment camps.

On 21 July there were over 5,000 Salvadorans interned in half a dozen camps. This figure was increased by 23 August to a little over 10,000 in 32 internment camps.

The exact number of internees during the conflict has never been established. The Honduran authorities themselves do not

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

know it and the census started by the OAS has never been completed.

b) *War displaced Hondurans in Honduras.* From the opening of the conflict, large numbers of civilians fled the fighting areas and took refuge in the interior of the country. The exact number of these refugees has never been definitely established either. According to certain sources there were said to be 19,454 on 25 July, exceeding 30,000 two days later and amounting to over 50,000 by the end of the month.

However, the ICRC delegates are of the opinion that there were never more than 15,000 persons displaced in Honduras. The problem of the war displaced was in fact resolved very rapidly with the evacuation of the occupied territories, when the great majority of displaced persons were able to return to their villages.

c) *Honduran refugees in Guatemala and Nicaragua.* The bombing of Choluteca and the advance of Salvadoran troops towards Nacaome led to an exodus of the civilian population from the outskirts of Choluteca to nearby Nicaragua where 2,000 Hondurans took refuge in the frontier town of Somoto.

With the occupation of Nueva Ocotepeque in Honduras, several hundreds of Honduran nationals took refuge in Guatemala in the town of Esquipulas where 5,000 refugees were cared for by the Guatemalan Red Cross.

These two groups of refugees were aided on their arrival by the authorities and National Societies of the two receiving countries. The Honduran refugees were repatriated by the two respective Red Cross Societies at the beginning of August.

d) *Salvadoran refugees in Guatemala and Salvador.* Salvadorans living in the northern part of Honduras (Departments of Atlantida and Cortés) had already taken refuge from 3 July in Guatemala through the frontier post at El Cinchado. More than 1,300 Salvadorans were thus received and assisted by the Guatemalan Red Cross in improvised camps at Puerto Barrios and Izabal.

The most massive exodus of Salvadorans, however, took place to Salvador itself. From 28 June to 23 July, 21,300 Salvadorans,

and by the beginning of October over 36,000 Salvadorans, of whom several thousands of women and children (the latter sometimes of Honduran nationality), returned to El Salvador, often destitute.

Most of these refugees crossed the frontier at the El Amatillo post, in the East of the country on the Pan American Highway and at El Poy in the North on the Nueva Ocotepeque-San Salvador road. At these two frontier posts the Salvadoran Red Cross checked the refugees' arrival, gave them medical aid and food, and channelled them to reception camps at Santa Tecla, Chalatenango, San Miguel, San Vicente and La Unión.

The refugees who passed from Honduras to Guatemala returned to Salvador from the West and were received in camps of the Salvadoran Red Cross at Santa Ana, Ahuachapan, Sonsonate and Ciudad Arce. These refugees did not stay in these camps, whose capacity was about 200 to 300 persons, longer than 24 to 48 hours on the average. They were registered and then sent to their own villages or else to relatives or friends. Most of these persons were engaged in agriculture or worked temporarily on new public works projects started by the Salvadoran Government.

e) *Detained Honduran civilians in Salvador.* 478 Hondurans, including 71 women and 86 children, were captured by the armed forces of El Salvador, mostly in occupied Honduran territory; they were incarcerated in several prisons in Salvador.

Women, children and some aged persons were temporarily interned in two camps supervised, fortunately, by the Salvadoran Red Cross, one in Cafetalón at Santa Tecla (133) and the other at Red Cross headquarters at San Miguel (62).

Ten other Honduran women, arrested in Salvador, were held in the women's prison at Ilopango.

The other detainees, all men, were incarcerated in the following prisons: Penal centre at Cojutepeque (133); Penitentiary at Santa Ana (50); Penal centre at Zacatecoluca (25); Penal centre at Sonsonate (25); National Police central headquarters (31); Guardia Nacional central headquarters (3).

To those should be added 3 detainees, held in the Rinaldi College, and 3 others interned in the Don Bosco College, both located in San Salvador.

III. ICRC ASSISTANCE TO THE VICTIMS OF THE CONFLICT

The task of the ICRC delegates was both dual and complementary:

— first, to examine with the respective Governments and Red Cross Societies all problems connected with assisting the victims;

— secondly, to see to the application of the 1949 Geneva Conventions by the Honduran and Salvadoran authorities at all levels. Both these countries are Parties to the Conventions of 1949, El Salvador having ratified them in 1953 and Honduras having acceded to these Conventions in 1965.

1. Interned Salvadorans (application of the Fourth Convention)

In order to observe the real situation and the internees' needs, the delegates of the ICRC visited the following internment camps in Honduras from 21 to 25 July:

In the Department of Cortés:

Agas camp (2,500 internees), at San Pedro Sula,
Castle of San Fernando de Omoa (220) at Omoa

In the Department of Atlantida:

Tela Penitentiary (890) at Tela

In the Department of Yoro:

El Progreso camp (750) at El Progreso¹

In the Department of Francisco Morazán:

National Stadium (450) at Tegucigalpa

In the Department of Valle:

Nacaome Penitentiary (95) at Nacaome.

In co-operation with the delegates of the ICRC the HRC then made distributions, in camps where needs were greatest, of tents to protect internees from the seasonal torrential rains, plastic plates and other cooking utensils, disinfectants for water purification in order to ward off all risks of epidemics, and anti-influenza and anti-diarrhoea medicines (antibiotics).

¹ *Plate.* — Honduras: During the Honduras-Salvador conflict in 1969 ICRC representatives visit Salvadoran civilians interned at El Progreso.

In the Agas camp at San Pedro Sula, the local Red Cross early on set up a small dispensary and a canteen where volunteers prepared three meals daily with food collected from the inhabitants of the town.

For prophylactic purposes, anti-tetanus vaccinations were also given in this camp.

To come to the aid of the Salvadoran internees, a telegraphic appeal was made on 23 July by the League of Red Cross Societies, in agreement with the ICRC, to 12 National Societies of the American continent.

In addition to relief given by sister Societies, two consignments were despatched direct from the League to the HRC. They consisted of vaccines (DPT and anti-tetanus) and medicines (penicillin sulfamides, anti-asthma and anti-diarrhoea).

The ICRC, for its part, despatched as a matter of urgency on 25 July to the HRC, 25 boxes of plasma, 1 box of antibiotics, surgical kits and bandaging equipment.

The relief supplies sent by the League and the ICRC constituted aid additional to the considerable amount already received by the "Comité Cívico Pro Defensa Nacional" responsible for ensuring distributions from foreign organizations, mainly from USAID, Caritas, Care, Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, Pan American Development Foundation and the Pan American Health Organization.

Several Governments (Brazil, Chile, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Venezuela, etc.) made donations (vaccines, medicine, rice, etc.).

In these conditions, it appeared unnecessary to the ICRC delegates to launch a general Red Cross appeal. They preferred to ask Geneva for a certain amount of medicine and vaccines to provide for all eventualities. All the relief in fact received by Honduras was sufficient to meet the needs of the victims of the conflict, as well as a large section of the population for several months.

On 30 August, the OAS obtained from the Honduran authorities the complete evacuation of the internment camps. This evacuation, started on 30 August, ended in mid-September and contributed considerably to the increase in the exodus of Salvadorans.

2. Prisoners of war (application of the Third Convention)

In Honduras and El Salvador permission to visit prisoners, talk with them without witnesses and bring them aid was immediately granted to the ICRC delegates. Regular visits were made and on each occasion emergency aid (matting, blankets, underclothes, medicine, reading matter, clothes, soap, toilet articles, cigarettes and biscuits, etc.) was brought to the prisoners.

After making several representations, both verbal and in writing, to the governments and military staffs of Honduras and El Salvador, and thanks to the negotiations carried out at the same time by the OAS, the delegates of the ICRC obtained agreement from both parties for the release and repatriation of prisoners of war.

In the evening of 3 August, Salvadoran troops finished withdrawing to positions occupied before the outbreak of the conflict, a withdrawal which was imposed by the 13th Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the OAS in Washington, and accepted by El Salvador on 30 July.

On 12 August there took place the exchange of prisoners of war. This was carried out at the middle of the bridge linking Honduras with El Salvador at the frontier post at El Amatillo, in the presence of the two ICRC delegates and the Presidents of the Honduran and Salvadoran Red Cross Societies. The POWs were taken in charge by the two National Societies who arranged transport to the respective capitals.

It should be noted that this exchange took place exactly twenty years after the signing on 12 August 1949 of the Third Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war and whose article 118 stipulates that POWs shall be repatriated without delay after the cessation of hostilities.

3. Honduran detained civilians (application of the Fourth Convention)

The 478 Honduran civilians, detained in 11 different places of detention, were regularly visited by the ICRC delegates.

Each visit was the subject of a report immediately forwarded to the ICRC in Geneva. All visits, as is customary, were of a strictly



Rome — In the name of the ICRC, of which he is the president, Mr. M. A. Naville (*on left*) receives the Antonio Feltrinelli Gold Medal, at the Accademia nazionale dei Lincei.

Honduras — During the Honduras-Salvador conflict in 1969 ICRC representatives (*left*, Mr. Nessi, delegate-general, *centre*, Mr. Leemann, delegate) visit Salvadoran civilians interned at El Progreso.



humanitarian character and were restricted to the examination of detention conditions.

With the co-operation of the SRC, the delegates of the ICRC brought to these detainees regular assistance consisting of medicine, food, clothing and cigarettes and, where necessary, obtained the possibility for them of daily physical exercise in the open air, as well as authorization to receive and regularly send mail.

Following on an agreement concluded between the El Salvador authorities and the delegates of the ICRC and in application of articles 49, 77 and 133 of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war of 12 August 1949, the Honduran civilian detainees were released and repatriated to Honduras in different stages.

The repatriation of the last of those civilians, on 6 October 1969, terminated the ICRC's action in El Salvador and Honduras.