

Development of the ICRC Radio Station

It was in 1959, at the Administrative Conference of Radiocommunications in Geneva, that the need was recognized to provide the International Red Cross with an autonomous system of radiocommunications that would allow contact to be established in a minimum time between its various bodies (International Committee of the Red Cross, League of Red Cross Societies and National Societies).¹

For the co-ordination of Red Cross action at international level and for relief operations to be carried out more efficiently, direct and rapid contact between the ICRC (or League) and the Red Cross Societies of the countries concerned had to be ensured. Such links are necessary when public telecommunication systems are overloaded, damaged or even completely destroyed, as very often may happen in emergency situations requiring immediate assistance. In addition, radiocommunications are useful when it is desired to exchange messages with a country lacking direct communications with Switzerland.

National Societies and all countries members of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) were invited to facilitate measures for setting up such a network. In 1963, the Swiss telecommunications administration granted the ICRC a concession whereby the latter was authorized to set up and operate a radio station in Geneva.² This station came into operation at the end of 1963, when its first link was with the field hospital at Ugd in the midst of the desert wastes of Yemen.

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¹ See *International Review*, January 1971.

² *Plate*.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

Since 1963, the ICRC radio station has reached a high professional standard, establishing contact as the need arose with various Red Cross missions. At present, it operates daily links with the transmitter-receiver stations of five ICRC delegations in the field:— Amman (Jordan), Islamabad (Pakistan), Dacca (Bangladesh), Phnom-Penh (Khmer Republic) and Caracas (Venezuela). The Amman station can, in addition, get in contact with the delegation at Beirut, Damascus and Jerusalem by an internal network, which can also be linked direct with Geneva. In Bangladesh, 15 local stations are linked with Dacca.

Every week, amateur radio enthusiasts from all over Switzerland are trained by the ICRC, through special transmissions, to practise picking up Red Cross messages with their own sets. These members of the “ International Missions Group ” (IMG), whose seat is in Berne, are ready to go on mission for the Red Cross, when needed, as radio operators.

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The provisions in the concession granted to the ICRC stipulate that the stations (at Geneva and elsewhere) must only be utilized for transmitting International Red Cross messages for purely humanitarian purposes.

Messages are usually sent in French or English. The station is equipped to transmit in telegraphy (morse) or telephony (conversations as with the telephone, but sent by wireless and via a cable). However, the former is the system mainly employed, as it is quicker and technically better. It is also possible to send radioteletype (telex) messages, though this method, requiring a professional operator, is only used in exceptional cases for communicating with National Societies which are also equipped with this particular kind of installation.

The ICRC radio station has four 1-kW transmitter-receivers and two antennae, one of which is directional and can be rotated in the direction of the country with which contact has to be made, and the other is omnidirectional through 360 degrees and can be used in all directions simultaneously.

Times of transmission vary with wave-length conditions and places. Frequencies allotted are in the 10, 15, 20, 40 and 80-metre bands, in the immediate neighbourhood of the radio amateur wave-bands. In case of need, Red Cross messages may easily be picked up by these radio amateurs who, in the field, can provide valuable assistance in that they often have sensitive sets and more powerful antennae than those with which the portable transmitter-receivers are equipped. On several occasions, when the ICRC delegate was on mission in Bolivia, he was able to communicate with Geneva through a Swiss radio amateur living in La Paz, who had obtained permission from the Bolivian authorities to transmit for the ICRC.

It is in this way that the voices of men coming, through the Red Cross, to the assistance of those in distress, are carried swiftly and efficiently over the air.

Relief Section Activities

During the third quarter of the year, the ICRC's Relief Section despatched the following consignments.

To Africa: 298 kgs of medicaments to a value of 17,000 Swiss francs were sent by air in July to Burundi. In the same month, 10 first-aid kits (1,900 francs) were sent to each ICRC regional delegation at Yaoundé and Addis Ababa, for distribution to various National Societies.

To Latin America: In July two consignments sent by sea, one to Venezuela, the other to Paraguay, comprised mainly medical supplies for detainees visited by the ICRC, valued at 13,000 Swiss francs. In August, 42 kgs of medical supplies, worth 2,300 Swiss francs, were sent by air to Bolivia for distribution by the ICRC doctor-delegate during his visits to prisons. The ICRC also sent