

*THE ICRC, THE LEAGUE AND THE REPORT
ON THE RE-APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE
OF THE RED CROSS (IV)*

**Planning for action in natural disasters
and armed conflicts**

Comments by the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies

Introduction

The Tansley Report stresses the importance of preparedness for natural disasters and armed conflicts in the following terms:

Red Cross at all levels should place greater emphasis upon pre-disaster planning, broadly defined (p. 74).

According to the Report the following will be characteristic of the future environment of Red Cross action:

- 1. Disasters are likely to occur with more frequency and with greater impact, particularly in the developing world;*
- 2. New types of disasters may be expected;*
- 3. Conflict situations are likely to increase (p. 58).*

Finally, in its conclusions, the Tansley Report states that:

For Red Cross, pre-disaster planning should be applied broadly to include:

- 1. natural disasters and conflicts;*
- 2. donor and recipient National Societies;*
- 3. the League and the ICRC (p. 75).*

The ICRC and the League share, to a very great extent, the Tansley Report opinions on this important question. Naturally, the planning for relief actions differs in some respects according to whether it is related to natural disasters or to armed conflicts. However, there are important common elements in this planning which merit development and joint study by the ICRC and the League.

It is clear that, in principle, the priority for Red Cross action in this field is in emergency situations. It is in the emergency phase that the resources of the Red Cross, in particular its volunteers, should be involved.

It is necessary to find a balance between the need to integrate Red Cross resources in an overall national or international plan and the need on the other hand to maintain the independence which is necessary to enable the Red Cross, nationally and internationally, to act without delay in an emergency and to do so in freedom from organisational or other restraints.

The Red Cross should not seek to maintain a monopoly but to develop its effectiveness, which is based on specific and limited mandates.

1. Natural Disasters

There is no detailed definition of the term “preparedness” in the Tansley Report, and in the interest of uniformity and in order to avoid confusion, we feel that it is necessary to give this definition.

The official definition is given in a joint publication of the League, of the World Meteorological Organization, and of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, supported by the United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO), and entitled *Guidelines for Disaster Prevention and Preparedness in Tropical Cyclone Areas*.

The definition reads as follows:

Disaster Preparedness may be described as an action designed to minimise loss of life and damage, and to organise and facilitate timely and effective rescue, relief and rehabilitation in cases of disasters.

Preparedness is supported by the necessary legislation and means a readiness to cope with disaster situations or similar emergencies which cannot be avoided. Preparedness is concerned with forecasting and warning, the education and training of the population, organisation for and management of disaster situations, including preparations of operational plans, training of relief groups, stockpiling of supplies and the earmarking of the necessary funds.

From this definition, it would follow that we will have to concentrate on the following functions:

- Legislation,
- Forecasting and Warning,
- Education and training of the population,
- Operation plans,
- Training of relief personnel,
- Relief supplies,
- Finances.

In addition to the listed functions there are two others, tracing and coordination, which are very important; they will be treated under “Training of personnel” and “Operational plans” respectively.

Legislation

The legal basis for all activities related to preparedness and operations on the national level should be found in the national law or in the form of a decree, or any other official government document. It is important that such a document defines emergency, responsibilities and the necessary delegation of authority to the various bodies carrying responsibilities in emergency situations. If such a document does not exist, the National Society, the ICRC and the League should use all possible contacts with the government to promote such legislation. The main responsibility remains with the National Society.

In natural disasters the Red Cross has the *Rules and Principles in Red Cross Disaster Relief*. They have the strength of being adopted by the International Red Cross Conference in which governments take part, and cover most of our needs for legal support when fully applied.

Forecasting and warning

Forecasting of disasters, in most cases, involves a highly sophisticated technology and demands very substantial resources: this is a task which falls within the responsibilities of governments and certain inter-governmental organisations, rather than the Red Cross. Warning of the population may take different forms in different countries depending on the development of communications. Red Cross may play an important role in countries where runners or messengers or even Red Cross radio networks exist.

Education and training of the population

This field gives responsibilities to all components of the Red Cross, and is one where Red Cross can offer substantial services. The National Societies supported by the League should increase their efforts in preparing the population to face natural disasters. It is important that these educational tasks are carried out in close cooperation with the national authorities.

Operational plans

Any National Red Cross operational plan should be an integrated part of a government national plan, based on the authority delegated to the Society. If such a governmental plan is not established, it should be the duty of the Society to influence the government to undertake this planning.

While it is the duty of the National Society to establish its own plan, it should be supported by the League and the ICRC in doing so, maintaining the principle that the plan should be written by people carrying responsibilities in relief operations.

Although it is usually practicable to establish a plan for natural disasters, it is naturally more difficult for a National Society to plan for internal disturbances. However, the fact that the National Societies have a plan, and trained personnel for certain relief functions in natural disasters, may well be useful in situations of conflict.

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In the field of *coordination* and cooperation with other organisations, we may make a distinction between the international level and the national level.

Internationally, the ICRC and the League maintain close cooperation with UNDRO (United Nations Disaster Relief Organisation). Training events have been jointly organised, and on relief operations contacts are permanent.

Contacts are maintained and expanded on a practical level with the other major UN Agencies active in disaster relief, such as WHO (World Health Organisation), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), WFP (World Food Programme), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), WMO (World Meteorological Organisation), and with certain regional organisations such as ESCAP (United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific) and PAHO (Pan American Health Organisation), among others.

Our co-operation and contacts with these organisations are satisfactory. However, with UNDRO, which is a coordinating body, much the same as the League but on a different level, a more systematic arrangement for coordination and procedures would be desirable. The Red Cross responsibility here lies with the ICRC and the League.

On the national level, much remains to be done. It is on this level that most of the management problems in disaster assistance are met. It is therefore of utmost importance that the National Society coordinate its activities with other national agencies and international organisations active in disaster situations, in order to ensure the optimal use of available resources. If no such coordination is initiated by the government, the Red Cross, thanks to its special position, could play an important role in this field.

While the responsibility for National Red Cross planning lies with the National Society, the League should increase its support of such planning either by despatching planning delegates or with the necessary funds.

Training of relief personnel

This can be divided into two categories:

- training of personnel at the national level to perform particular tasks in the Society's operation plan, and,
- training of delegates and teams to be despatched to another country to assist in a disaster situation.

The first category is definitely the most important, and the one that will require the most numerous staff. A National Red Cross plan without trained personnel has no meaning. This training is primarily the responsibility of the National Society, but the League has a very important role to play in assisting such training either with instructors or funds. As the main problem today is at the national level, this training should have priority.

Training of delegates and teams (doctors, surgeons, nutritionists, etc.) will take place within Societies which are able to offer such assistance to disaster-stricken countries. Recent experience (Cyprus, Lebanon) has shown that such personnel is of equal importance to meet natural disasters as well as conflict situations. In this type of training the ICRC and the League should take a stronger lead with closer cooperation. In order to ensure that such training is harmonised to the best degree possible, a joint training group could be envisaged. It is in particular with training

of teams that this closer cooperation is required, as training of delegates is undertaken both by the ICRC and the League for their particular needs, but always in cooperation with the other.

One particular function which should be included in the training of personnel is that of *tracing missing persons*. This work, which is traditionally carried out on the international level by the ICRC, is also necessary in natural disasters. There is thus a need for personnel suitably trained in this special field within National Societies. It is clear, however, that the tracing of missing persons poses different problems and has different legal bases, depending on whether the persons concerned are missing as a result of a natural disaster or of an armed conflict.

Relief supplies

In the event of natural disasters, relief supplies may be provided by :

- National Societies,
- local purchases,
- purchases made in other countries,
- relief warehouses in other countries.

In principle, each National Society should have a stock of relief supplies sufficient to enable it to meet the first emergency phase of a disaster. However, many National Societies in disaster-prone countries are not themselves in a position to establish the totality of such stocks and they, therefore, need help from the League and sister Societies. This help can take the form of shipments of merchandise or gifts of money. Basic stocks can be supplemented in the event of disaster by local purchases in the affected country because, generally, all parts of a country are not affected by a disaster; for this the National Society needs to have reserve funds available. The League is in a position to act as a purchasing agent in other countries on behalf of a National Society, often in cooperation with the ICRC. Stronger cooperation in this field would be desirable. Finally, the use of relief warehouses in different parts of the world can be extremely useful provided that they are established and operated systematically.

Financing

Comments on the Tansley Report proposals on the financing of assistance activities, including preparedness, are given in the chapter "Assistance in the event of natural disasters"¹ and need not be repeated here.

¹ See *International Review*, May-June 1978, p. 157-158.

2. Armed Conflicts

Most of the preparations made by a National Society to deal with natural disasters can also be valuable in the event of armed conflicts: notably recruitment and training of personnel, the establishment of stocks and the creation of reserve funds. On the other hand, those preparations which have to do with warning and prevention of disasters are clearly not applicable in the event of armed conflict. It is obvious also that a national plan for relief in armed conflict is different from one applicable in natural disasters, and that therefore the role of the National Society during conflict is likely to be different.

It should be noted that in armed conflicts the *tracing of missing persons* is carried out on a different basis from that applicable in natural disasters. In fact, there are several categories of persons (prisoners of war, civilian internees, detained persons) of whom the parties to the conflict are obliged to provide information. There are precise rules about this in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and also in the two additional Protocols which were adopted in June 1977 by the Diplomatic Conference. National Societies will find in these texts the legal basis and authority for their activities in this field.

With regard to the best ways of planning relief activities in times of international armed conflicts or internal conflicts, reference can usefully be made to the conclusions of a seminar held in Geneva in August 1963 on Red Cross activities for victims of armed conflicts. Even though it is now fifteen years old, this document¹ and its conclusions remain very largely applicable and can be re-read with advantage. In addition, the ICRC in collaboration with the League is in the process of preparing a practical manual containing guidelines for National Societies in their preparations for situations of conflict.

Conclusions

While it is evident that the International Red Cross has made, and is making, an effort in the field of disaster preparedness, there is scope for improvement and enlargement of these activities.

In the legislative field the National Societies should pursue the establishment of national disaster laws/decrees, supported by ICRC/League.

¹ *Seminar on the activity of the Red Cross on behalf of the victims of armed conflicts, Geneva-August 1963, Geneva 1965.*

On forecasting and warning, the National Societies should concentrate their efforts on warning and on the training of volunteers as a part of their operation plan. In the training of the population, the Red Cross, due to its massive membership, is in an excellent position to take the lead. The ICRC and the League should make a joint effort in cooperation with National Societies in this field.

Operational plans should be made flexible in such a way that the plan and its organisation, while being prepared for disasters, may also be useful for other situations.

Training of relief personnel to perform within their national plan must be given highest priority.

The ICRC and the League should harmonise and coordinate their training efforts on the international level, in particular with reference to training of relief teams. The ICRC and the League should train people in each National Society to ensure that each Society has a nucleus of trained staff for tracing activities. In the field of relief supplies it seems clear that closer cooperation between ICRC and the League would benefit the disaster-prone countries.
