

**PUBLIC RELATIONS :
POLICY AND PRACTICE OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE
OF THE RED CROSS**

by A. Modoux

For a long time it was considered at the ICRC, as in most other international organizations, that the function of an information service was to put out information on the institution's current activities and its general aims. No attention was paid to the true needs of those sections of the public who were at the receiving end, the only concern being the ICRC's short-term interests. This one-way process meant that the people to whom this flow of information was fed received it passively but there were no means of discovering what were their reactions, in other words, there was no feed-back.

For some years, however, the ICRC has been aware of the necessity to substitute for this "linear process" a circular one, where exchanges could take place. The cause of this development lies in the need for the ICRC, as for the other institutions, to adapt itself to its environment, which has continued to grow geographically and to change politically, economically and socially. Today, more than ever before, interchanges of views are a condition for a better understanding and wider acceptance of the ICRC by the international community and by the Red Cross family. The ICRC now belongs to a world which is interdependent and in which it must find its own place, a world where isolated zones are gradually disappearing and where compartmented areas are making way for a system of general communication.

The ICRC's credibility, a condition for its existence

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the only institution of its kind, and is paradoxical in more ways than one. Founded

in 1863 on the initiative of Henry Dunant and four other Swiss citizens of Geneva, the ICRC is a private association governed by the Swiss Civil Code and, in time of war or of internal disturbances or tension, works for the amelioration of the condition of civilian and military victims. While preserving its private character and remaining independent of governments, the ICRC acts on the basis of the international mandate clearly defined in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949—a treaty to which some 140 sovereign States are parties—and in the Statutes of the International Red Cross.

Although the ICRC is uninational, its membership being restricted to Swiss nationals, its scope of action is world-wide. While it is called upon to act in highly political situations, the ICRC holds to its neutrality and impartiality, failing which it would not be accepted by belligerents as a neutral intermediary. Its activities are almost always conducted discreetly even though the situations necessitating its intervention are in general the subject of world press headlines.

Although it has no resources or assets of its own, the ICRC's financial commitments run into tens of millions of Swiss francs every year, the money being voluntarily contributed by the States signatories to the Geneva Conventions and by National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies.

The ICRC, which has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize three times (in 1917, 1944 and 1963), has provided assistance and protection to millions of war victims throughout the world in the course of over a hundred years of activity. The utility of its work, at conferences as much as on the battlefield, is universally recognized. It is not invested with power of any kind, whether political, military, economic or financial, and its strongest asset is the confidence placed in it by the States and National Red Cross Societies, by international public opinion and by the victims themselves. Utility and confidence are the two pillars on which the institution's credibility rests.

The notion of credibility is a very subjective one; it varies in time and from place to place and is not something that, once acquired, remains constant and unalterable. The ICRC's utility is not uniformly appreciated in different parts of the world, and adverse circumstances may at any time erode its moral credit. In short, the ICRC's credibility is every day at risk. It depends on what has or has not been done by the ICRC for the victims, on the manner in which it has administered the funds entrusted to it, on the independence it demonstrates in the face of pressure group action, and on the way it applies the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Moreover, the ICRC's credibility is not only the concern of

its President or of its members.¹ It is affected by the attitude of ICRC senior officials in Geneva or of delegates in the field, and by the way its public relations policy is conducted. It is to this latter aspect that the following pages of this study will be devoted.

The public relations problem

The public relations of an institution working on a world scale, in a highly political context, and whose efficiency is so tightly linked to its credibility, are highly complex. The problems are related to the nature of the tasks incumbent on the ICRC in its role as a neutral intermediary between belligerents and also to the variety and the large number of target groups.

In order that the ICRC should be acknowledged as a neutral and impartial intermediary—an indispensable condition for it to be able to go to the aid of conflict victims—it must avoid all controversies of a political nature, even though today governments are increasingly inclined to couple humanitarian activities with political questions. This is a regrettable trend, because it has a direct influence on the efficiency of ICRC action. Furthermore, it might constitute a threat to the ICRC's credibility if its name or its operations are exploited dishonestly with the purpose of misleading or manipulating world opinion. The "politization" of humanitarian problems consequently compels the ICRC to proceed with the utmost care where information is concerned and, accordingly, to adopt a policy of discretion, a concept which is basic to "humanitarian diplomacy".

The rule of discretion is applied essentially to the findings made by the ICRC in the course of its "protection" activities, this being the expression given to action in aid of civilian and military persons (prisoners of war, civilian internees, political detainees, civilian populations in occupied territories, and so on) in the power of their adversaries. The ICRC says and shows what it does, but remains very circumspect as to what it sees and hears through its delegates. To gain and to retain the confidence of the authorities permitting its delegates access to victims in camps, prisons and occupied territories, the ICRC must observe continuously and uniformly the rule of discretion, and must resist all the pressures—which can be very strong at times—to get it to speak out and take sides.

¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross comprises two bodies: (a) the Assembly, which is the supreme policy-making body of the ICRC and is composed of 15 to 25 members, lays down principles and general policy and supervises all ICRC activities; (b) the Executive Board, which is responsible for the general conduct of affairs, exercises direct supervision over the administration of the ICRC, and comprises not more than seven members chosen from among the members of the ICRC.

There have been numerous cases where the ICRC could have gained some publicity for itself by adding its voice to the chorus of protests and accusations aimed at rousing international opinion.

This self-imposed rule of discretion is unquestionably a handicap where public relations are concerned. Some people have interpreted this policy as a way of cultivating a special taste for secrecy. This reluctance to give information causes others to view the ICRC with suspicion. It would be foolish to underestimate the significance of this sort of response, which is quite understandable in a world which considers that the right to obtain information must always prevail. Furthermore, it is obvious that to obtain the understanding and approval of all sections of the public, to get their moral, financial and material support, the ICRC must provide them periodically with substantial information. This requirement is acknowledged within the ICRC and considerable efforts are being made to improve the general information process. The main difficulty is finding the proper balance between these contradictory requirements: the discretion rule and the need to inform. This dichotomy has not always been understood outside the Red Cross, especially among the public at large. On the other hand, the ICRC's customary interlocutors such as the governments and the National Red Cross Societies, generally display greater understanding, though they might not necessarily acknowledge that, for the ICRC, the welfare of the victims is its paramount consideration.

Another major problem with which the ICRC has to contend is the variety and large number of people it seeks to reach. Universality being one of the characteristics of the mission of the Red Cross, the target groups are spread far and wide across the earth. We have classified them into four categories, not counting the ICRC's own staff (in Geneva and in the field):

- (a) the international community as a whole, more particularly the governments of the States signatories to the Geneva Conventions, the international and regional organizations (governmental and non-governmental) and the non-State political entities—like the liberation or independence movements—active on the world scene;
- (b) the Red Cross world, i.e. the recognized National Societies, their world federation—the League of Red Cross Societies—and a certain number of emerging Societies which have not yet obtained recognition;
- (c) the international mass media and, through them, international opinion or rather, more realistically, the different national public opinions;

(d) the Swiss population and authorities, who constitute a special case, in view of the historical ties linking Switzerland to the ICRC, given material expression in the form of a substantial financial grant (more than fifty per cent of the ICRC's ordinary budget).

The efforts made in the way of information and public relations action directed to these various target groups come up against obstacles which are not easy to surmount: economic, social and cultural differences, language barriers, illiteracy, different notions regarding the free flow of information, the unequal development of mass means of communication in different parts of the world and, last but not least, the inadequate resources available, so woefully small in comparison to the size of the work to be performed and the diversity and number of groups to be reached by the ICRC. But the truth is that the scarcity of money and men is not restricted to the ICRC's Press and Information Division; it is a problem which runs right through all its services. This is only to be expected, since the budget of the ICRC for 1978 amounts to less than 28 million Swiss francs, of which 1.8 million francs, or 6.5 per cent of the total, has been allocated to information and public relations work, an insignificant sum for an organization whose information activities have to cover the whole world. It is fortunate that the yardstick for the credibility of an institution such as the ICRC is not the strength of its financial resources. Otherwise, it would have been ruined long ago.

Finally, whilst still on the subject of the vast and diverse target groups, one should mention the problem of vulgarization. As an organization made up largely of university graduates who every day handle complex matters in the spheres of diplomacy, international law and political science, the ICRC naturally tends to address its various audiences in a somewhat esoteric language. If this style of expression is suited to official circles accustomed to "reading between the lines", it does not meet the needs of the public at large. Very often the ICRC, which is primarily active in Third World countries that have recently gained independence, comes up against a wall of misunderstanding or even distrust, which prevents it from functioning with the desired efficacy. It must therefore simplify to the level of the public at large, so that the principles of the Red Cross, the fundamental rules of humanitarian law and the nature of its work are known, understood and accepted. Times have changed since the days of Henry Dunant, when it was enough to convince a few princes and heads of State in order to get an idea accepted and immediately put into effect on the battlefield. The new kinds of conflict and the so-called "modern" forms of combat, which, unfortunately, as in the case of

Lebanon and southern Africa, scarcely make any distinction between combatants and non-combatants, today require that information be disseminated not only among leaders and heads, but also among combatants and the people.

The role of “relay services”

One way of overcoming, at least in part, the different obstacles is by using the “relay services” of the international media, the information and public relations services of the National Red Cross Societies, and the ICRC delegations in the field. These relay services, whose work is often complementary, permit the dissemination of information in areas far from Geneva, and allow for its increase and adaptation to local realities.

The international media are fairly well represented in Geneva; over a hundred journalists are officially accredited to the European Office of the United Nations. The ICRC is in very close contact with most of them, and particularly with the representatives of the large press agencies. It is, however, to be regretted that the information media of the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are inadequately represented in Geneva and, moreover, on the various scenes of ICRC operations, for it is precisely in these developing countries that the organization would like to be better known and understood.

The information and public relations services of the National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies form a relay service which is invaluable to the information programme of the two international organizations of the Red Cross, the ICRC and the League. Unfortunately, not all of the National Societies, especially those of the Third World, have such a service yet; their possibilities of action are also very restricted by lack of resources and of permanent staff. Apart from that, it is obvious that in the countries where the National Society has a service that works normally, the dissemination of information by the ICRC and the League is made very much easier. Through their knowledge of their own national environment, these services are able to adapt the message that is devised and formulated in Geneva to local realities, such as language, culture, social and political system, level of economic and technological development, and so forth. The National Red Cross Societies are all the more ready to act as a relay service as this enables them to show national public opinion the international dimensions of the movement to which they belong. For many Red Cross Societies, this interdependence of image is the cornerstone of their public relations policy. This is why, through regional and international meetings, the

ICRC, like the League, tries to strengthen its connections with the information and public relations services of the National Societies.

The ICRC delegates in the field are, as is frequently said in Geneva, "the eyes and ears of the organization". Sometimes their role as spokesmen tends to be forgotten. It is true that their primary task is to bring protection and assistance to victims of conflicts, and to do this they have to negotiate with the established authorities. But they also have the task of making the principles of the Red Cross, the Geneva Conventions and the role and activities of the ICRC throughout the world known in various circles and particularly in armies and educational institutions. Although the rule of discretion restricts the information they may divulge, the delegates are also called upon from time to time to inform the press of the country they are visiting of the activities of the organization. This giving of information takes on particular importance in times of a major international crisis in which the ICRC is operational, often right from the start. At such times it is essential for the special envoys of the international press to be able to count on the co-operation of the ICRC delegates on the spot, and especially to be sure of receiving from a reliable source information on the extent of the humanitarian needs resulting from the crisis, the steps taken by the ICRC to deal with them, the way the action is being carried out, and the kinds of problems encountered. In these circumstances, the ICRC headquarters in Geneva normally sends one of its press officers to the field to speak for the delegation to the special envoys of the international press.

The role of the relay services varies considerably in different parts of the world, which makes for unequal circulation of information. In Africa, for example, where the ICRC has been active on a large scale since the beginning of the 70's, their contribution is extremely small. This situation results from there being no representatives of the African media in Geneva and from the fact that most of the National Red Cross Societies were created very recently, with the coming of independence. The absence of these two relay services prompted the ICRC to attempt, at the end of 1978, an experiment in southern Africa, this being the main scene of ICRC activities on the continent of Africa. Seeing that its work for the victims of the Rhodesian conflict was considerably hampered by a general lack of knowledge among the peoples of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the neighbouring countries about the Red Cross and its protective sign, the ICRC launched a large information campaign in that part of Africa, with the aim of making the mission of the ICRC, the role of its delegates, and the meaning of the protective sign of the red cross better known and understood. In Salisbury, Lusaka and several other towns of the region,

it set up its own information network made up of communication specialists, some of whom were recruited on the spot and had their own means of production. Priority was given to working with the local mass media, in particular radio which is alone in being able to ensure a wide distribution of information in the rural areas. Programmes were prepared not only in English, but also in the traditional languages of the area, such as Shona, Ndebele and Swahili. In addition, posters, calendars and cartoon strips were used to convey the message to schools and people living in refugee camps. It is still too early to assess the effect of this campaign but the first results are encouraging.

Means of communication

To reach its target groups, the ICRC uses a range of means incorporating the written and spoken word and pictures, devised and formulated by its Press and Information Division. Similar means are used in other international organizations.

Information aimed at very varied audiences relies basically on the printed text. Thanks to the combination of text and image, and also to its ready availability and ease of storage, the periodical or brochure is still unrivalled. The other advantages of the printed text are the wealth of information it contains, its moderate price and the ease with which it can be distributed. The main publications of the ICRC are:

- the *International Review of the Red Cross*, the official organ of the International Red Cross. It is sent to the various ministries of the States signatories to the Geneva Conventions, to the National Red Cross Societies, to universities, libraries, etc. With a circulation of 5,200 copies, the *Review* is published once every two months in French, English and Spanish. There is also an abridged version in German;
- the *ICRC Bulletin*, which comes out on the first Wednesday of each month. It is intended primarily for the media and for the National Red Cross Societies with the aim of conveying regularly as broad a picture as possible of the activities and the life of the organization. It is also sent to the diplomatic missions. With a circulation of 6,750 copies, the *ICRC Bulletin* is published in French, English, Spanish and German;
- the *Annual Report*. This is a reference work intended primarily for the traditional interlocutors of the ICRC, that is, the governments, the National Red Cross Societies and the mass media. With a circulation of 4,200 copies, the *Annual Report* is published in French, English, Spanish and German;

- the *press releases*. In French, English, Spanish and German, they aim to give immediate information on a current operation, and to publicize a standpoint or a decision. They are sent by telex to the Swiss and international media, and by post to the governments (ministries, diplomatic missions in Geneva and New York), to the National Red Cross Societies and to the international organizations;
- the ICRC also issues a number of ad hoc publications, such as situation reports, monographs and other general information brochures.

While the printed text is today, and will remain tomorrow, the principal means of communication of the ICRC, it can nevertheless be expected that audio-visual means will gain ground in the coming years, especially with the introduction of the video-television into the Red Cross world. Unlike the printed text, audio-visual messages require the receiver to be equipped for their reception. This necessity naturally restricts the number of people who can be reached by these means. It is therefore not surprising to see that, apart from radio programmes, the audio-visual productions of the ICRC are destined almost exclusively for the industrialized countries. Among the principal audio-visual productions are:

- the radio programmes on the *Red Cross Broadcasting Service (RCBS)*. They are prepared in conjunction with the Information Bureau of the League of Red Cross Societies in the ICRC studio in Geneva, and are broadcast on the short wave in French, English, Spanish, German and Arabic by the Swiss Administration and directed towards Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. RCBS also produces monthly programmes in Portuguese for the Portuguese-speaking countries in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. RCBS also prepares ad hoc magazines for some National Red Cross Societies and radio-broadcasting companies especially in Africa. These programmes are recorded on magnetic tape and sent by post; they are then broadcast on the medium wave;
- *photographs*. Some 15,000 black and white photographs and slides are filed in the photograph library of the ICRC. As historical and current records of the life and activities of the organization, these photographs are in great demand from the National Red Cross Societies, the press, specialized reviews, etc.;
- *films*. For understandable financial reasons, the ICRC can only produce a limited number of 16 mm films. They are used mainly by the National Red Cross Societies and television channels;

— *video-television*. The ICRC, in conjunction with the League of Red Cross Societies, acquired, at the end of 1978, the technical equipment required for the video production of educational and informative programmes on $\frac{3}{4}$ " video-cassettes. A plan has been devised to increase the use of the video-television in the Red Cross world in the 1980's.

Other means of transmitting information are press conferences, exhibitions, visits to the organization's headquarters, personal contacts, etc.

The role of the ICRC public relations service

One must remember that public relations concerns all levels of the ICRC, all the staff members in Geneva and in the field as much as the members of the Committee. Each person in his own social and professional milieu is duty bound to make the ICRC better understood and to cultivate a climate favourable to it. The Press and Information Division does not have the monopoly of communication; its primary function is to ensure the continuity of relations between the ICRC and its target groups by a regular multilateral information operation through the various means listed above.

Moreover, like ICRC delegates in the field, the division is a sort of antenna attuned to the world. Its task is to gather and process information on the current international scene and especially to analyse systematically the despatches, news and commentaries published by the large press agencies, newspapers and periodicals which are considered to reflect the different contemporary trends of thought.

The division also has to trace and evaluate the attitudes of the ICRC's target groups, to study their scales of values, and to interpret their aims and policies, not only so as to keep them better informed and to make communication easier, but also to provide the directing bodies of the ICRC with information and evaluations likely to help in the making of decisions.

This circular process of communication becomes very important in matters involving the credibility of the ICRC. Through its observation of the outside world, the Press and Information Division should, as far as possible, anticipate the reactions of its target groups. It should try especially to gauge how they will receive ICRC decisions and imagine the best way to inform them of these decisions.

In sum, by participating in the decision-making process, the division can not only help the directing bodies by shedding light on problems and

events under discussion, but also take into account in its function of external dissemination the reasons underlying decisions. This is the circular process of communication: an inward flow of information, followed by its integration in the decision mechanism, its dissemination to the target groups, and finally the feed-back of reactions.

The Press and Information Division is subordinate to the Executive Board of the ICRC and its President. It thus has direct access to the decision-making body responsible for directing operations. This allows the division to act as a knowledgeable intermediary between the ICRC and its target groups and to give helpful advice to the directing bodies which decide ICRC aims and policies.

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