

# Some logistical aspects of the assistance activities of the ICRC <sup>1</sup>

by A. Lendorff

## INTRODUCTION

I am very honoured and pleased to be given the opportunity to explain to you the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and some of the logistical aspects of its assistance activities. No doubt many of you know about the Red Cross in general but it might be of interest to you to hear about the special position and role of the ICRC in the Red Cross movement and among all the many other humanitarian organizations. I shall afterwards explain what are the logistical difficulties the ICRC must overcome in its assistance activities.

## I. THE ROLE OF THE ICRC

The ICRC is a private Swiss organisation, founded 119 years ago in Geneva, where it still has its head office. Though subject to Swiss laws and made up of Swiss citizens, the ICRC is independent of the Swiss or of any other government. Intervening mainly in times of war (whether it be an international armed conflict or a civil war), internal disturbances and unrest, its activities are based on a mandate defined in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. The seven Red Cross principles—Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality—constitute the guidelines for its intervention. The ICRC's main mission consists in giving protection and assistance to the victims of armed conflicts, the wounded, the prisoners of war, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Third European Logistics Congress in Amsterdam, 23 November 1982.

civilian internees, the people living in occupied territories, the displaced people, etc. Moreover, the ICRC visits political detainees, but this last activity is not regulated by the Geneva Conventions.

The ICRC is not the only member of the Red Cross family: there are the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies—a vast family whose members now number about 230 million people. These societies work within their own countries, as auxiliaries of the public authorities. They assist their own population and their services include health and nursing care, relief programmes, youth activities, spreading the knowledge of the Red Cross principles, blood donations, etc.

The League of Red Cross Societies is the World Federation of the National Societies and acts as their co-ordinating body for peacetime activities. In particular, the League organizes, at the international level, the dispatch of Red Cross relief following natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, etc. It also helps in the development of new National Societies.

Briefly, the League is primarily supplying aid in peacetime after natural disasters, while the ICRC is mainly concerned with man-made disasters and gives protection and assistance during and after the wars.

The ICRC main activities are in the fields of protection and assistance.

## **Protection**

Concerned with the plight of prisoners of war, political detainees and civilian internees, the ICRC tries to improve the conditions of detention. To do so, it sends delegates to visit places of detention or internment; if necessary it intervenes with the detaining power to carry out improvements and assure humane treatment.

The work of the ICRC Central Tracing Agency is also a part of the ICRC protection activities. It consists in tracing, centralizing and communicating all information on civilian and military victims of war, living or dead. The information collected in the course of this activity fills about 50 million cards of the Agency index card system in Geneva. The Agency moreover forwards family messages between separated relatives, transmits documents, traces missing persons, reunites dispersed families, repatriates prisoners, issues certificates of captivity, sickness and death.

## **Assistance**

Protection work is in many cases accompanied by relief operations, the scale of which is frequently beyond the possibilities of the ICRC. In

such a case, it appeals for international help, in particular to the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and to the governments for the necessary resources in personnel, material aid and funds.

In 1981, the ICRC had up to 400 delegates and medical personnel, in 43 delegations and subdelegations, in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. During missions of protection in 1981, ICRC delegates made some 5,000 visits to close to 500 places of detention, where they saw about 44,000 persons deprived of their freedom. In the same period, 2,3 million names were received and registered at the Central Tracing Agency. Over 800,000 family messages were transmitted and nearly 35,000 investigations were carried out to trace missing persons. With regard to assistance, people in about forty countries benefitted from material and medical aid by the ICRC, amounting to about 18,000 tons of relief goods worth 60 million Swiss Francs.

## II. LOGISTICAL ASPECTS

I am fully aware that I am addressing an audience of logistical experts—which I do not pretend to be. I can only give you a glimpse of some problems with which you, fortunately, do not usually have to cope, and which may also show you some of the logistical difficulties which can be encountered by the ICRC. I have listed ten of them, there may be more.

1. The ICRC operates mainly in Third World countries, that is in countries situated far away from the ICRC head office, with difficult climatic, living and working conditions, with a great variety of languages, customs, religions and where great physical efforts are required from foreign personnel.

2. In most cases, these countries are, in one way or another, affected by a conflictual situation, which means

- ill or non-functioning of the governmental and administrative authorities,
- disruption or interruption of the economy, the social and the logistical infrastructure,
- security risks for both beneficiaries of the Red Cross assistance programmes and for ICRC delegates,
- most of the relief goods have to be sent from abroad to the final destination as the local market cannot be exploited, because, in

such situations, it is normally too weak and too vulnerable and risks being destabilized by purchases of medium to large quantities of food and other supplies.

3. Conflictual situations can very rarely be anticipated. Any previous long-term planning is therefore virtually impossible.

4. The ICRC is certainly benefitting from past experience, but we may say that each intervention differs nonetheless considerably in size, nature and political context from previous operations. In other words, application of standard procedures can only be utilized in a very limited scope.

5. The information flow is extremely restricted, as in most operations all means of communication are disrupted. This implies the setting-up of our own communication network. Just for your information, the ICRC radio network comprised, at the end of 1982, 19 stations linked to Geneva; 36 other stations are providing internal or regional links in the field. Let us add that the setting-up of such an independent communication system is very often subject to difficult negotiations with the authorities concerned, and not always possible.

6. The ICRC has to act rapidly. In many cases it may be a question of life or death that our medical and food supplies arrive in time. This means concretely that in such cases we may have to fall back on more expensive, but immediately available products, and to use more costly and reliable means of transport such as aircraft.

7. Most of the countries in which we operate have climatic conditions which do not favour the medium or long-term conservation of medical and food supplies.

8. Because of the general situation in the area, in very few cases can we benefit from local technical equipment to facilitate the flow of material; neither can we fall back on sufficiently trained local personnel.

9. The ICRC disposes only of limited emergency stocks, which means that, most of the time, rapid purchases must be undertaken, which again may put priority more on delivery time than on the most economic product. Let me explain. The financing of most of our operations is the result of an *ad hoc* appeal to donors for a specific intervention in a newly-created conflictual area. These donors—about ninety per cent governments and ten per cent National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies—provide the ICRC with the necessary funds

or donations in kind for any particular operation, limited in time and geographical scope. It is thus very difficult to raise funds in a similar way for the creation of emergency stocks consisting of goods which are not yet earmarked for a specific relief operation.

10. Success or even viability of our operations can hardly or not at all be assessed. We may provide statistics—I mentioned some of them in my introduction—but who can really tell or measure what impact our protection and tracing work has had, or who can statistically prove how many people have been preserved from severe malnutrition, illness or even death thanks to our medical and food assistance?

I mention these general and specific difficulties to give you some idea of the scope and complexity of the problems we are facing. There are unfortunately many more, in particular of a political nature: refusal to grant us access to prisoners or detainees, refusal by States contiguous to conflict areas of transit facilities or over-flying and landing rights for urgently needed supplies, and so on.

### III. EXECUTION OF RELIEF OPERATIONS

Practically, we distinguish three main phases in our operations: preparation, implementation, and disengagement, which is very often the most difficult part.

#### **Preparation**

We may assume that the ICRC is fairly well informed about the current political scene, latent tensions and potential conflict areas. This is achieved by being linked, by telex, to the main news agencies, having regular contacts with all Permanent Missions which represent their Governments in Geneva, keeping an ICRC office at the United Nations in New York and receiving continual reports from our delegations throughout the world.

The humanitarian consequences of any new conflictual situation have first to be surveyed by our own delegates. This is extremely important as we do not simply accept reports or requests from outside sources, since experience has shown time and again that such demands are often exaggerated, unrealistic and not suitable for the particular situation. The result of these surveys, carried out by medical and relief specialists, is a precise assessment of the prevailing conditions, the existing needs and a proposal for ICRC action.

An assessment of the needs always comprises:

- Geographical situation,
- Number and categories of beneficiaries,
- Nature and quantities of relief items required,
- Length of intervention,
- Priorities,
- Local market situation,
- Logistics, i.e. detailed assessment of the existing infrastructure and needs for additional transport means, technical equipment and personnel,
- Justification of programme.

The last item, the justification, is of the utmost importance for the decision-making process at the headquarters.

The following criteria have to be fulfilled:

- Urgency, which can be defined as follows: there is an urgency as long as the vital needs of the victims are not satisfied.
- The people to assist must be the victims of a conflictual situation.
- Unicity, which means: no other reliable and impartial source exists to provide assistance.
- Control, which means: the ICRC does not intervene if control of distributions is not possible.

This proposed action programme is transmitted to Geneva, discussed, modified, calculated and put for decision in the form of a budget to the ICRC Executive Board. Its acceptance simultaneously releases on the one hand the official appeal for funds to all donors and on the other the second phase, its implementation.

### **Implementation**

The obvious aim is to become operational within the shortest possible time. We can distinguish two basically different situations: conflictual areas with existing ICRC delegations and areas in which the ICRC has no representatives. In the first instance, we only have to reinforce the existing infrastructure, while in the latter case everything has to be set up entirely from scratch. In both cases, we strongly rely, however, on the support of the local National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society.

Most important are, as you can imagine, matters related to personnel. In June 1982 the ICRC increased its expatriate staff in and around the Lebanon, within one month, from seven delegates to close to a hundred. How did we go about this? We dispose of about 10-15 specialists in various fields at our headquarters who can be freed practically within twenty-four hours. They are experienced delegates, specialized in the rapid setting-up of a new operation. Some other delegates have to be withdrawn temporarily from the delegations and this unfortunately results in a certain weakening of these delegations. Last but not least, we can fall back on the human resources of various National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which provide us, at very short notice, with technical personnel such as medical teams and relief specialists.

Second most important are of course all the logistical matters related to the nature and origin of the relief goods, external and internal transport, warehousing, distribution and reporting.

The range of the relief goods has been limited on purpose. Given our mandate which is just to cover the most vital needs of the victims, the ICRC concentrates on a few carefully selected medical, food and non-food relief items. Experience has shown that programmes are more effective if the implementation can be done in the form of prepacked standardised "units". I explain: distribution in bulk is very often unpractical, slow and less controllable. We have therefore worked for many years—in particular in the medical field—with "units", such as dressing, front, pediatric, hospital or dispensary units, containing medicaments and equipment covering the most essential medical needs for a limited period of time. As regards food relief likewise, we work more and more with "family units" containing basic food items covering the requirements of an average family of five persons for one month. Other units consist of kitchen utensils, blankets, tents, etc.

\*

The origin of these relief goods varies widely.

An initial period can be covered with our emergency stocks in Geneva. This essentially concerns the medical supplies.

Other relief items should ideally be purchased in the affected region itself so that the economy of the country concerned can also benefit from such an operation. In addition, locally procured food is often better adapted to the food habits of the beneficiaries. We may be confronted, however, with the fact that such purchases destabilize the local market, which obliges us to procure goods either in neighbouring countries or abroad. Some of our donors wish that their funds should be

used for purchases in their own countries, an obligation which is certainly understandable, but which does not necessarily facilitate our task.

The ICRC also frequently utilizes the resources of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies which have emergency stocks. These supplies are either received as donations in kind or replenished later out of ICRC funds; in other words we use these societies as a kind of supplier.

\*

With regard to external transport, that is transport up to the country where the relief action is conducted, the ICRC has to utilize to a large extent air transport. Various formulas are chosen.

Donor governments may put at our disposal aircraft for shorter or longer periods of time. This is obviously the solution in which the ICRC is most interested, as it is the most economical one.

Smaller consignments are sent by normal commercial air freight. In some cases, we benefit from the IATA Resolution No. 200, which allows free transport or reduced rates for emergency relief consignments.

The third, often unavoidable option is the chartering of cargo aircraft. Detailed studies have been made in the past as to whether the ICRC, perhaps together with other humanitarian organizations, should purchase its own aircraft. The result of these studies has been discouraging, as the utilization would be too irregular and the various demands as to the type of aircraft would be too diversified.

The bulk of our supplies is however transported by ship to its final destination. It is during the initial stages of an operation that we may have either to fall back on the local market or fly in urgently needed supplies. Shipping by vessel, especially towards Africa, however, is still today an often hazardous matter. In addition, very long forwarding inland transport by truck or railway from the port to the place of distribution or utilization means that we frequently have to reckon with up to four months from the placing of an order until arrival of the goods to the affected area, delays which are hardly compatible with an urgent intervention.

\*

The problems of internal transport from ports or ICRC central warehouses to the actual places of distribution usually have to be solved in the initial stages of the operation with the available local means of transport. It may be necessary, however, to bring in trucks either from neighbouring countries or from abroad. As our intervention periods are relatively short, we face the same dilemma in each operation: rental



or purchase of vehicles? This question can only be answered case by case, as the situations generally differ considerably from each other.

\*

Warehouses are difficult to find everywhere, but especially in our intervention areas. Several attempts though have been undertaken in the past to use large-size tents or even prefabricated lightweight structures, consisting of steel frames and plastic-sheet covering. Our experience has been, however, rather negative as they are not secure enough. One may think that this security problem could be solved with the hiring of guards. There again our experience has been disillusionment. The result is that we require solidly built, burglar-proof warehouses, which are thus also acceptable to our insurance companies.

\*

This leads us to the distribution of goods, often a very delicate process, which therefore needs to be prepared well in advance. The first phase is the registration, done in the form of listing the recipients, or "clients" as we sometimes call them. On these occasions we distribute vouchers enabling them to collect their share at a given date, hour and place. We have elaborated various forms of vouchers, such as distribution cards, coupons, bracelets as used in hospitals for identification of newly born babies, indelible marking ink, and so on. It is further essential that the beneficiaries are beforehand clearly informed about distribution dates, hours, places and content. This was our main problem in 1980 at the Thai-Kampuchean border where we had to feed a hundred thousand people at a time, coming to our distribution points from as far away as 80 km. Any delays in dates resulted in our being confronted with large groups of people waiting for days or weeks in an insecure war zone without any shelter, food or water. The last phase of the distribution procedure is what we call monitoring. This means the verification that firstly the most vulnerable groups (children, pregnant women and older persons) have really received their share and secondly that our rations have not been received twice or several times by the same recipients. To control this we usually apply the same systems as for the registration, supplemented by random checking by our delegates.

\*

The last phase of the operation is reporting. In order to co-ordinate a relief programme we require continual and up-to-date information from the field. In the present operation in the Lebanon, for example,

the headquarters were in the initial stage daily, later weekly, provided with all data concerning arrivals, distributions and stock position of medical and relief goods. This information is immediately fed into our computers, enabling us to have thus at any given moment a complete image of the supply situation. Monthly, more detailed statistical reports allow us to follow each relief item from its departure until its final distribution. We are therefore capable of furnishing precise reports to all donors concerned, how, where and in favour of whom their funds or donations in kind have been utilized.

\*

I hope these few words have given you at least some glimpses of our activities, logistical problems and limits. Having to deal with man's inhumanity to man, with wars and conflicts, factors which, regrettably, do not favour the smooth functioning of logistics, we nonetheless do our best to improve the living conditions of our fellow men in difficult situations.

**Andreas Lendorff**  
*Head of ICRC Relief Division*