

In the Red Cross and Red Crescent World

*NATIONAL RED CROSS
AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES*

THE RED CROSS SOCIETY OF PANAMA 1917-1992

A. Origins and development

In the years following independence, there were serious shortcomings in health care in Panama. This prompted Lady Matilde Obarrio de Mallet to approach the government, private bodies and other benevolent and concerned people with the idea of setting up a social-welfare organization. Her initiative resulted in the founding of the Red Cross Society of Panama, which was officially recognized by Executive Decree No. 34 of 1 March 1917.

One of the Society's achievements was to open the country's first day-care centres. It benefited from the professional support of Dr. Nicolás Solano in organizing voluntary services in Panama's first tuberculosis clinic. One of its top priorities has always been to look after the interests of children in difficulties.

In June 1925, the National Society was recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross and became a member of the International Red Cross, acquiring the right to use the emblem of the red cross on a white ground.

The Red Cross Society of Panama was constituted on the basis of the Geneva Conventions, which have served as a framework for its activities since the Republic of Panama became party to those treaties on 2 February 1967.

Following reorganization, the National Society adopted its present General Statutes in 1968, under Decree 1451. The Statutes state that the Red Cross Society of Panama is duly recognized by the government as an autonomous voluntary aid society auxiliary to the public authorities, in particular the armed forces, that it is the only National Society in Panama and that it extends its activities to the entire territory of the Republic.

The Society adopted its Internal Regulations in 1977-1978. The Regulations are in strict conformity with the 1968 Statutes. They list the Funda-

mental Principles of the Red Cross and describe the Society's objectives, its governing bodies and their duties, and its organization and structure.

With respect to organization, the Regulations clearly define the different levels, starting from the highest governing body at national level, the General Assembly, down to the smallest units, the local committees, of which there is one for each administrative area of the country.

The National Society has four volunteer sections with nationwide activities: Youth, First-Aiders, Women Volunteers and Legionaries.

The Society's current President is Mr. Carlos H. Ruíz Valdés, and the Secretary General is Mr. José A. Béliz.

The Red Cross Society of Panama also has the administrative staff required to plan, coordinate and carry out its activities in accordance with established policy.

B. Operational and technical structure

The operational and technical structure consists of two main departments, responsible for all the Society's projects:

- Administrative Services
- Operations and Services.

All activities are comprised in the health, assistance, community development, first-aid or training programmes; there is also a fund-raising programme.

1. Health

- **Assistance to rural communities.** Every month, National Society volunteers (doctors, nurses, paramedics and social workers) visit rural communities to provide medical services, which include the distribution of medicines and vaccination campaigns. The volunteers also distribute food, in particular for children, clothing, hygiene items and toiletries, and give instruction in maternal and child health care and preventive measures.
- **“Information and Community Action for Eradication of the Aedes aegypti Mosquito”.** Under this programme, run by the Red Cross Society of Panama with financial support from the Netherlands Red Cross and the American Red Cross, Red Cross brigades of schoolchildren are organized and teams of young people trained to help their communities exterminate *Aedes aegypti*, which transmits several diseases. The National Society has already trained about 400 *brigadistas* who are presently working in the provinces of Panama (San Miguelito, La Chorrera), Herrera, Los Santos and Chiriquí.

- **“AIDS Information and Prevention Programme”.** This project is sponsored by the Norwegian Red Cross and supported by the Ministry of Health. Its objectives are:
 - to provide a large number of young people from all parts of the country with advice, guidance and training in AIDS prevention;
 - to develop activities with the communities to heighten awareness of the problem among young people;
 - to give parents the opportunity to learn about AIDS prevention programmes.

2. Assistance

- **Child shelter.** This project aims to help abandoned and malnourished children, and those who have been physically or mentally abused. It was started by the Red Cross as a means of seconding the juvenile courts, which are responsible for child welfare. The shelter, which is open 24 hours a day, offers the children a place to stay, clothing, food, medical care, medicines and so on. It is run by qualified staff and provides a refuge for 20 to 25 children every year.
- **Day-care centres.** The purpose of this project is to help pre-school children whose mothers work and have a low income. The children are fed and cared for, and take part in activities conducive to their overall development.
- **Home for the elderly.** Under this project, the National Society provides homeless people who are 60 years of age or over with shelter, medical care, clothing, food and the possibility to participate in recreational activities.
- **Community assistance and disaster relief.** About 25,000 people around the country are assisted every year. Some receive clothing, footwear and medical services during visits by National Society volunteers to their communities, others are given relief supplies when disaster strikes (assistance was provided, for example, to 5,000 victims of the Bocas del Toro earthquake).

3. Community development

In recent years, the Red Cross Society of Panama has paid special attention to projects for needy communities, with emphasis on direct participation by the community concerned. The projects are detailed below.

- ***Agricultural project.*** The National Society has farms in Colón and La Chorrera. Their purpose is twofold: to create jobs by developing agricultural activities, poultry raising and egg production, and to improve the nutritional status of the population, especially children. The project is sponsored by the Spanish Red Cross.
- ***Occupational training project.*** The Society's Women Volunteers offer low-income housewives courses in skills allowing them to supplement the family earnings. The classes are free. The participants can learn to paint on sweaters, arrange flowers, decorate hairpins, hairbands and combs, make *piñatas* (pots for sweets), sew and cook.
- ***Fisheries project.*** With the participation of the indigenous community in Kuna Yala and the financial support of the Netherlands Red Cross, the National Society has set up a traditional fisheries project to provide those taking part with a source of income and the volunteers of the local Red Cross chapter with a stable activity.

4. First aid

- ***Ambulance and first-aid services.*** The Red Cross Society of Panama is the only national institution to offer round-the-clock ambulance services free of charge. The service, which is staffed by volunteer doctors, paramedics, nurses and first-aid specialists, receives financial support from the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Spanish Red Cross and the National Societies of the Nordic countries. The National Society also runs first-aid services during major national events, and in summer the country's beaches are patrolled by trained lifeguards.

All first-aid and rescue services are coordinated by the national Emergency Operations Centre.

5. Training

The National Society's First-Aid Training Centre provides in-service training for volunteers, to encourage full participation in the Society's activities. The classes available — first-aid, swimming, lifesaving, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and disaster relief — are also open to the general public.

C. Red Cross activities during the armed conflict of December 1989

Not only did the American invasion of December 1989 take a peaceful people unawares, it also caught by surprise a National Society with no previous experience of large-scale, perilous relief operations apart from the participation of a few of its members in similar activities run by sister Societies. Nevertheless, the humanitarian work carried out by the Red Cross Society of Panama demonstrated that its volunteers are well prepared to carry out relief operations in compliance with the Fundamental Principles. It should be added that the National Society's image was greatly enhanced by its activities in connection with the conflict.

During and after the events of 20 December 1989, the Red Cross Society of Panama assisted 1,017 civilian and 850 military casualties, escorted 500 foreigners to the airport so that they could return to their countries, and took 129 bodies to hospital morgues. The conflict left 14,000 people homeless; they were looked after by the National Society, the government, the United States Agency for International Development and other organizations. The Albrokee refugee camp was managed by Red Cross personnel until November 1991. Through its tracing programme, the National Society ascertained the whereabouts of 1,513 people.

The International Committee of the Red Cross set up an office in Panama during the conflict. At present, the ICRC regional delegate based in Costa Rica comes to Panama to visit persons detained as a result of the invasion.

D. Looking to the future

In the words of one high-ranking international delegate who visited us, the Red Cross Society of Panama is a small Society which is developing in a big way. Thanks to the support of the Federation, the International Committee and various sister Societies, we can celebrate 75 years of activity in the knowledge that we have brought hope to those in need and honoured our Movement's Fundamental Principles.

With a view to its further development, the National Society has drawn up a Five-Year Plan for 1992-1996 along three main lines: protection-dissemination, assistance, and health and social welfare. Our objectives are as follows:

- to carry out a comprehensive programme for the dissemination of knowledge of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and of international humanitarian law;

- to restructure the Emergency Plan at the national level with a view to increasing operational capacity;
- to extend community work to all parts of the country;
- to increase the number of trained volunteers working on a permanent basis in National Society programmes;
- to step up fund-raising in order to achieve financial independence at national level;
- to extend and develop Red Cross Youth programmes both in and outside schools;
- at the end of the five-year period, to have a coordinated structure in all chapters throughout the country.

José A. Beliz
Secretary General
The Red Cross Society of Panama
