

100 YEARS OF THE THAI RED CROSS SOCIETY 1893-1993

Origin and development

The year 1893 is a milestone in Thai history, marking not only Thailand's success in resisting imperialist threats, but also the birth of the Thai Red Cross Society. Like the original Red Cross, founded 30 years earlier by Henry Dunant in war-torn Europe, the Thai Red Cross began as the Thai nation fought, on both diplomatic and military fronts, to defend its territorial rights against the might of France. The men who fought for King and country along the Mekong River received very special assistance, thanks to the humanitarian spirit of Thanpuying Plien Pasakornwong, a lady of the royal court.

On 13 April 1863, Thanpuying Plien wrote a letter to Queen Savang Wadhana, expressing her desire to be of assistance to His Majesty the King and her concern for the men at the front:

"We have learned that external forces have threatened to seize part of our land.... It is thus necessary for His Majesty to protect us and fight to keep Siam a free nation. I believe that we women should support and serve His Majesty in this effort through contributions that will enable us to create a *Red Unalom Society*. The Society will provide medical care and support for the men in both the Royal Navy and the Royal Army and will take care of them through the provision of nurses and medical supplies wherever needed. In the city, the Society will set up a hospital of whatever size our resources and efforts allow. Should this idea prove acceptable to Your Majesty, we would like to humbly request that your Majesty take the Society under Royal Patronage...."

Thanpuying Plien's idea was readily accepted by the Queen and approved by King Chulalongkorn. So it was that through her efforts the *Red Unalom Society*, the forerunner of the Thai Red Cross Society, was born. In 1910, during the reign of King Vajiravudh, the Red Unalom Society became the Thai Red Cross Society and the Chulalongkorn Hospital, built as a memorial to King Chulalongkorn, was placed under the Society's management. The Society was formally recognized by the Thai Government in Act B.E. 2461 (1918) and Act B.E. 2463 (1920), as being based on the Geneva Convention,

to which Thailand was a party, and on the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross as formulated by the International Conference of the Red Cross. In 1920, the International Committee of the Red Cross conferred official recognition upon the Thai Red Cross Society, which was accepted as a member of the League of Red Cross Societies in 1921.

From the very beginning, when H.M. King Chulalongkorn graciously endorsed the initiative of Thanpuying Plien, the Thai Red Cross Society has enjoyed royal patronage over the years. It has a very special link with the present royal family, since H.M. Queen Sirikit is its President and H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn its Executive Vice-President.

The Thai Red Cross Society was born out of concern for men at war. However, it soon became involved in activities to promote health and prevent disease. Its main centre remains Chulalongkorn Hospital and the adjacent immunization services and blood bank. After World War II the Society had expanded to comprise 12 divisions, 12 regional stations, and provincial Red Cross chapters in all 72 provinces of the country.

Organization

The Thai Red Cross Society's activities are conducted by 12 separate divisions.

1. The *Central Bureau* exercises general supervision over all activities and is the Society's General Secretariat. It also supervises the activities of services such as Health in the Home Instruction, Refugee Relief Operations, the Tracing and Mailing Services Centre and the Rehabilitation Centre, which offers not only medical care but also job training programmes for the disabled. This 80-bed centre provides medical treatment for approximately 220 patients each year.

2. The *Chulalongkorn Hospital Division* is responsible for the treatment and care of the sick and wounded both in wartime and in time of peace. It has a capacity of 1,400 beds. The hospital also serves as a teaching facility for the Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Medicine. The hospital is well known worldwide for heart and liver transplant operations, *in vitro* fertilization techniques, and expertise on problems related to AIDS. Many of the nation's outstanding physicians and other medical personnel are on its staff.

3. The *Relief Division* is responsible for emergency disaster relief, medical services, health education, first-aid training, staff training for relief services, and stockpiling of supplies for emergencies. The Division also super-

vises eleven Red Cross health stations in different parts of the country. These carry out health promotion and disease prevention activities, provide prenatal, delivery and post-natal services, and conduct immunization programmes. They also take part in relief activities in the event of disaster. The Convalescent Home, which also comes under this division, provides care for convalescent patients and serves as a centre for public meetings and seminars.

4. The *Science Division* has its headquarters in the Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute, which was founded in 1922 by King Vajiravudh in memory of his mother. The main function of the Science Division is to manufacture biological products for use in normal as well as in emergency situations. These products include BCG vaccine, rabies vaccine and parenteral solutions. The Division also houses the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on Rabies Pathogenesis and Prevention, which is run by the Division's Assistant Director. The Centre is the first in South-East Asia to work specifically on problems related to post-exposure rabies treatment and rabies pathogenesis. There is a snake farm in the Division's compound. Here poisonous snakes are bred for their venom, used for the production of anti-venom sera and also for scientific research.

5. The *Red Cross Youth Division* was established with the following objectives:

- (a) To inculcate the ideals of peace among young people;
- (b) To foster healthy habits;
- (c) To develop among young people an awareness and understanding of their civic and moral responsibilities and to encourage participation in humanitarian services;
- (d) To promote international friendship and understanding among young people.

These objectives are pursued through camps and various public service projects, including participation in activities abroad.

6. The *Red Cross Volunteers Division* supervises the men and women who volunteer their services in the event of emergency as well as in peacetime. Their main activities include giving advice to outpatients, making up packets of comfort items for patients, taking care of orphans, visiting wounded soldiers and policemen, and raising funds for the Thai Red Cross Society.

7. The *National Blood Centre*, established in 1969, provides blood and blood derivatives for the whole country. It meets needs for blood transfusion, carries out blood grouping and supplies plasma for the prevention of hepatitis B. It assists provincial Red Cross chapters in setting up National Blood Centre branches in all 73 of the country's provinces and some branches in hospitals in Bangkok. Such branches are managed under the supervision of the National Blood Centre. At present the blood supply is not sufficient and campaigns urging people to give their blood continue.

8. The *Somdetch Hospital* is located in Sriracha, a seaside resort on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand, some 117 kilometres from Bangkok. It has a capacity of over 400 beds and provides medical services to more than 120,000 outpatients a year. The hospital is in the process of expanding to meet the rapidly growing demand for such services with the development of the eastern seaboard region.

9. The *Fund-Raising Division* is entrusted with the task of finding ways and means to increase the financial resources of the Thai Red Cross Society. Fund-raising activities take place all through the year with special emphasis on the Annual Red Cross Fair and the Diplomatic Wives' Bazaar, which raise substantial sums every year.

10. The *Finance Division* manages the Society's finances. It was previously under the authority of the Central Bureau but was recently upgraded to division status owing to the scope of its responsibilities.

11. The *College of Nursing* is a teaching institution offering a four-year course leading to a bachelor's degree in nursing and a one-year course in practical nursing. About 200 nurses and 70 practical nurses qualify every year, providing staff for Red Cross hospitals and stations.

12. The *Personnel Division* is responsible for the management of the Society's 7,000 staff members. The Thai Red Cross Society also supports the Eye Bank, which serves all hospitals and clinics where cornea transplants are performed.

Recent programmes and activities

Today the Thai Red Cross Society plays a major role in providing health care for the Thai people in general and stands ready in the event of crisis

to meet the needs of those affected. Some of the programmes and achievements of the past few years are briefly described below.

Modern medical technology

Chulalongkorn Hospital has kept abreast of new technologies in the medical field and is considered to be one of the leading medical institutions in Asia. In 1987, the first heart transplant was carried out on a young man who is still alive and well today. Since then, more than 20 heart transplants have been performed with a 100-per-cent success rate. The demand for heart transplants is high but there is a shortage of donors. To solve this problem, the Thai Red Cross Society is setting up a project to locate potential donors and match them with patients.

In vitro fertilization is another technique which has been used successfully with a number of patients finding difficulty in having children. In 1990, for instance, a woman gave birth to triplets, three healthy baby girls, thus ending the anxiety and frustration of herself and her husband who were rewarded three fold for their long wait.

Recently, a new technique using an artificial sac covering for gastroschisis was awarded a gold medal by the British Royal College of Surgeons. The method uses nylon fabric as a substitute for the more expensive silastic sheets or prolene mesh currently used for the surgical correction of gastroschisis in neonates, thus enabling doctors to rely on local materials at a much lower cost.

Blood Centre

The Society's Blood Centre is the main source of blood supplies in the country, having provided around 250,000 units in recent years. It also performs a number of procedures requiring advanced technology, such as the production of purified albumin and immunoglobins using the chromatography technique. In view of the AIDS epidemic, it is very concerned with blood safety and has established stricter screening procedures. Each unit of blood donated is tested for HIV antibody. The Blood Centre is now a leader among ASEAN countries in the provision of blood transfusion services, supplying neighbouring countries as well as local hospitals.

Eye Bank

The Thai Red Cross Eye Bank was set up to serve hospitals throughout the region. Public awareness campaigns are launched to encourage cornea pledges and donation, making cornea transplant surgery possible whenever

needed. Some 194,471 cornea pledges have been made to date, and 2,232 patients have received cornea transplant surgery.

Programme on AIDS

Since the first diagnosis of AIDS in Thailand, carried out by Dr. Praphan Phanuphak of the Thai Red Cross in 1985, HIV infection has become a major epidemic with the number of infected persons estimated at around 500,000 in 1993. The Thai Red Cross Society has remained a leader in the struggle to control this deadly disease. By the end of 1985 an AIDS Clinic had been set up in the Thai Red Cross hospital and more than 3,000 patients have been provided with services since. In January 1990 the Programme on AIDS was established within the Science Division of the Society. Its activities are both biomedical and psychosocial. Along with patient care, drug trials and development of the new diagnostic tests, it offers counselling, education and outreach support and conducts psychosocial and behavioural research. On 4 July 1991 the first anonymous testing centre in Thailand was established on the grounds of the Thai Red Cross Society in Bangkok, to cater for people who wanted to be tested without fear of having their identity revealed. The clinic receives an average of 50 persons per day. This has encouraged the Ministry of Public Health to establish similar services in all provinces of Thailand. One important feature of the testing centre is that all patients are required to attend pre- and post-test counselling sessions.

The Programme on AIDS has been at the forefront of efforts to eliminate discrimination against HIV-positive individuals through campaigns in the mass media, discussions, publications and educational programmes. Training activities, workshops and conferences are conducted on a regular basis both in Bangkok and in the provinces.

Disaster Relief

Thailand enjoys a temperate climate and experiences relatively few major disasters. However, it is subject to seasonal crises such as floods and droughts which seriously affect the lives of subsistence farmers. Through its eleven stations in various parts of the country, the Society provides disaster relief and emergency medical care as well as health education services. The relief division is always ready to carry out health promotion and disease prevention programmes.

In the event of large-scale disasters such as the severe floods of 1988 and typhoon Gay in 1989, both affecting areas in the south of the country and leaving ugly trails of devastation and human suffering, the Society enlists the support of various organizations at home and abroad. The Society even set up a new Red Cross Health Station in the south to cope with the consequences of

those disasters and to serve as a treatment centre for the 14 provinces of southern Thailand.

At times of internal political unrest leading to violence, as in recent years, the Society's volunteers go into the affected areas, braving all the dangers involved, to provide care for the wounded.

Assistance to refugees

For almost 50 years now, Thailand has faced the problem of refugees pouring in from neighbouring countries: first in 1945, Vietnamese fleeing their country ravaged by a war of independence; then in 1975, Laotians seeking freedom from the communist regime; and in 1979, Kampuchean running away from their war-torn country. In all, more than half a million people have crossed the borders into Thailand. While the United Nations has played a major part in assisting these refugees and seeking to resettle them in third countries, the Society has been involved in the supervision of various programmes to meet their basic needs. Such programmes include medical services, provision of medicines and relief supplies, and tracing and mailing services. During the period 1979-1986, a total of 1,856,501 outpatient consultations were given and 2,127 surgical operations performed. The Society has also assisted Thai people living along the borders of countries affected by war, as they have suffered in many ways from this influx of refugees. During the same period the Society has given these Thai villagers 967,146 outpatient consultations and performed 3,122 surgical operations.

Youth programme

Training programmes for youth members, leaders and instructors are organized all year round by the Red Cross Youth Division in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. There are about one million Red Cross Youth members, for whom various activities are organized to promote health and teach them the Red Cross principles and the basics of humanitarian law.

Young people out of school have also benefited from vocational training and income-generating programmes. For instance, a camp for illiterate youngsters was organized in the Thai-Khmer border area to give 80 young people an opportunity to learn about the humanitarian principles of the Red Cross and basic health and social matters such as drug addiction, AIDS, first-aid, health care, community services, agriculture and Thai culture.

Every four years, Asia and Pacific Red Cross Youth camps are organized for up to 3,000 participants to promote international relations. Each camp focuses on an issue of common concern, such as protection of the environment, and on humanitarian matters.

Thai Red Cross Children's Home

In 1987 the Society opened a home for abandoned or orphaned children. While providing a nurturing environment for these children, in many cases it also seeks to locate their natural parents and to reunite them with their families. Where this is not possible, attempts are made to place them in foster homes.

International activities

In a spirit of universal brotherhood and solidarity, the Thai Red Cross Society has contributed relief supplies to victims of major natural disasters or political strife in countries such as Jordan, Iran, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China and Cambodia.

Every year the Thai Red Cross Society receives a large number of distinguished visitors. At the same time, members of the Society, and especially the staff of Chulalongkorn Hospital, actively participate in international events, conventions and seminars.

Conclusion

The Thai Red Cross Society was born out of patriotic ideals in time of war. It has grown into a national movement to upgrade the quality of life of the Thai people and to provide assistance in times of crisis. It has installed highly sophisticated medical facilities in its main hospital in Bangkok and in many programmes such as the Blood Centre. In connection with the AIDS crisis it has developed a number of medical and psychosocial strategies. In times of political upheavals, whether internal or in neighbouring countries, the Society has provided relief services for the victims, especially the large number of refugees who have crossed the border into Thailand.

Possibly the best indicator of the success of the Red Cross movement in Thailand is the degree to which the Thai people themselves have become involved in its activities. Services are provided out of humanitarian concern by all sorts of people, such as Red Cross volunteers and Red Cross Youth. The public also gives the National Society financial support: donations are made all through the year and fund-raising efforts culminate with the Thai Red Cross Fair, which is attended by over a million visitors. Another example

of this active participation is the Blood Centre's roster of hundreds of thousands of blood donors. In each of Thailand's 73 provinces there is a Red Cross chapter which encourages this popular contribution to the realization of the goals and principles of the Red Cross.

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