

Co-operation between the Central Tracing Agency of the International Committee of the Red Cross and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society Tracing Services

by **Nicolas Vecsey**

*Doubt is the worst of all.
When a soldier goes missing,
doubt maddens those who loved him,
who love him still,
for they can't help hoping
that some day ... perhaps...*

Laurence Deonna
in "The two-voiced war"

The Central Tracing Agency (CTA) exists to clear away such doubt, and to do so it has fixed as its four main tasks:

1. to obtain, register, process and pass on all information that can identify persons whose case has been taken up by the ICRC;
2. to ensure exchanges of family correspondence where normal communications are interrupted;
3. to trace persons whose relatives have no news of them or who have been reported missing;
4. to organize the reuniting of families, transfers of persons and repatriations.

For these purposes the CTA has to rely on its correspondents all over the world, who give it information on victims and keep contacts going between members of dispersed families. These correspondents are links in the "humanitarian chain"; they vary according to the situation, but their basis is similar and their aim identical — that of alleviating mental anguish.

I The role of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA)

1. In an international armed conflict:

1.1 Persons concerned:

Prisoners of war, civilian internees, displaced persons, and members of dispersed families.

1.2 CTA action:

Registration of victims, passing on information, tracing, and re-establishing family contacts by forwarding Red Cross messages.

1.3 Principal correspondents:

● ***National Information Bureaux (NIBs)***

Each government party to a conflict is bound by the Geneva Conventions to set up NIBs to collect information on aliens detained in its country and pass such information to the CTA, which passes it on to those persons' country of origin so that their families' minds may be set at rest.

● ***The ICRC and its field delegates***

If governments fail to set up NIBs, the ICRC must in practice do the work of the NIBs so that it can re-establish contacts between victims and their families. ICRC/CTA delegates collect all possible information and pass it to the CTA in Geneva.

● ***National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies***

National Societies receive many tracing requests from families concerning prisoners of war and civilian internees, and make enquiries through the CTA or by approaching sister National Societies.

The National Societies participate in passing on mail and family messages.

In some circumstances they may obtain information on victims and pass it to the CTA.

2. The situation following a conflict:

2.1 Persons concerned:

● ***Members of the armed forces missing in action***

As part of the terrible aftermath of war for the population of warring countries, members of the armed forces are reported missing and their fate is not definitely known even by the end of hostilities. If their name is not on lists of prisoners of war or civilian internees, or (for lack of identity discs) on lists of the dead or wounded, there will have to be years of investigation with no certain hope of success.

The fate of some missing persons may never be known, but their families will always have a glimmer of hope that “some day... perhaps...” and that day sometimes comes years after the war.

● ***Missing civilians***

The hazards of war (such as bombardments of towns) also leave large numbers of missing persons. Civilian victims may be very hard to identify, for they do not wear identity discs. There are many common graves of victims who cannot be identified.

● ***Displaced persons***

One of the consequences of war is mass movements of populations.

- They may have stayed in the same town but moved to a different part of it;
- They may have left their home to avoid bombardments, and have gone to another part of the country for safety;
- They may have left the country because of the war;
- They may have become political refugees in another country.

Any of these situations result in families being separated.

2.2 CTA action:

Tracing, reuniting families, and family messages.

2.3 Principal correspondents:

- ***National Societies;***
- ***Possibly, the National Information Bureaux set up during the conflict;***
- ***Governmental or non-governmental organizations.***

II The role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Clearly, therefore, the National Societies' co-operation is essential in practically all the CTA's work.

But the National Societies' Tracing Services are not all equally developed. Many National Societies that were very active during the Second World War have a tracing service, but it follows its own principles and methods of work. Other National Societies, particularly recently recognized ones, have no infrastructure for tracing activities.

There are, however, millions of refugees scattered throughout the world; innumerable members of families have been separated from each other and there will consequently be innumerable attempts to trace and reunite them, often after several National Societies have worked on a single case. The close co-operation of the Agency's network is therefore necessary, and the "humanitarian chain" has to be co-ordinated by giving its various links—the CTA and its field delegates, National Societies and their local branches—equal strength so that they can follow the same principles and methods, or in short "speak the same language".

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has realized the vital importance of this co-operation ever since the 1970s, and with the active encouragement of the ICRC/CTA and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (LRCS) encourages National Societies to strengthen their tracing services.

- Thus in November 1972, the LRCS held a meeting in Geneva on National Societies' tracing services in the event of disaster. The document prepared at this meeting was approved by the Board of Governors at its Thirty-second Session (Tehran, 1973).
- In March 1978 the LRCS held a Round Table in Geneva attended by 20 National Societies and the CTA. One of its recommendations was that the CTA should help the National Societies in setting up their own tracing services and training their staff.
- At the Twenty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross (Manila, November 1981) the participants appointed the CTA to act as "technical adviser and co-ordinator to National Societies", on the basis of the report submitted by the ICRC/CTA.
- At the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, November 1986), Resolution XVI emphasized the mandate entrusted to the CTA by the Twenty-fourth Conference and requested all National Societies to carry out to the best of their capacity the role which they are

called upon to play as components of the international network for tracing and reuniting families.

Encouraged by the confidence of the international community, the CTA does everything possible to fulfil the mandate entrusted to it, but its tasks are concerned mainly with situations of conflict and their aftermath. On the other hand, National Societies' tracing services often have a wider radius of action, namely.

- tracing in the event of a situation of conflict, and obtaining information on victims;
- transmission of family messages, in the event of conflict and otherwise;
- social welfare tracing;
- tracing in the event of natural and/or technical disasters;
- preparation for reuniting families (studies to ascertain social conditions, contacts with the authorities, etc.).

The CTA considers that the technical processing of cases in all the above-mentioned situations is practically identical. Therefore, the Guide for National Societies which it published and distributed in 1985 to all National Societies should provide a working basis common to them all, with any necessary adaptation to national and local conditions.

The Guide also serves as a basis for the training courses given by the CTA to members of the National Societies' tracing services. The CTA has been giving this training since the 1980s. It comprises:

- a training course in Geneva for heads of tracing services. The CTA generally holds two courses every year, one in French and the other in English, each attended by five or six staff members of National Societies;
- training of tracing service personnel in National Societies (for example, the Tracing and Mailing Services (TMS) in the countries of South East Asia);
- participation in the courses given by National Societies to members of their local branches;
- meetings, seminars, Round Tables, and workshops for people in charge of tracing services, including:
 - the 1982 Geneva Seminar attended by 53 participants from all over the world;
 - the 1987 Regional Workshop for Europe and North America, held in Budapest and attended by 43 participants;
 - the 1988 Regional Workshop held at Singapore and attended by about 30 Asian National Societies.

III CTA objectives for the future

It will be clear from the above that there is already effective co-operation between the Central Tracing Agency and National Societies; but to ensure continuous development in future years the following action has to be taken:

- The CTA has to ensure that each National Society has at least one person with the necessary technical training to do tracing work.
- National Societies must be encouraged to train members of their local branches for tracing work, for the local branches, being in direct touch with the victims and/or their families, are the first and/or last links in the chain.
- Regional meetings should continue to be held regularly for representatives of National Societies, so that they co-operate closely with each other and the CTA.
- Governments must continue to be encouraged, with the help of National Societies, to institute their NIB in peacetime, in order for it to fulfil its task as soon as possible at the outbreak of an armed conflict, as stated in Resolution XIV of the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, November 1986).
- A Guide to instituting NIBs must be published.
- The CTA must co-operate in establishing guidelines for tracing in situations of natural and/or technical disasters.
- Co-operation in computerization must be further developed, with particular reference to the means of transmitting information by computer between National Societies and the CTA.

The Central Tracing Agency (CTA) hopes that by such means, and in co-operation with National Societies, it will be able to alleviate the mental anguish of millions of victims of conflicts, strife and tension all over the world.

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