

ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

Continuing its series of articles on the activities of National Societies, the International Review publishes in this issue an article by Mrs. Véronique Ahouanmenou, President of the Red Cross of Benin, giving an account of her National Society as it now is, and in particular of its main activities and the policy it has adopted to speed up its development.

This article is a valuable supplement to the special issue of the Review of May-June 1988 on development and co-operation within the Movement.

*

* *

The Red Cross of Benin Its Development Strategy

The Red Cross of Benin was founded on 1 May 1963 and recognized by the Government of the People's Republic of Benin on 6 May 1963 as a society auxiliary to the public authorities. It was recognized by the ICRC on 22 August 1963 and admitted to membership of the League on 28 August 1963.

The Red Cross of Benin is subject to the tutelage of the Ministry of Public Health of the People's Republic of Benin and maintains excellent relations with all the other ministries and with the international organizations accredited to the People's Republic of Benin.

The National Society is directed by a National Bureau headed by a President and its supreme body is the General Assembly which elects its members every three years. Its structure also comprises:

— A National Council of the Red Cross of Benin composed of 33 members who elect from among themselves a President, Vice-President, Secretary General and Treasurer General who together make up the Steering Committee of the Red Cross of Benin. Three Counsellors chosen by the President for their experience also belong to the Steering Committee.

— The Steering Committee has formed 10 technical Departments: General Secretariat and Administration; Co-ordination of Local Committees; Finance, Accounts and Property Management; Information and Dissemination; First Aid; Youth; Projects and Mini-Projects; Primary Health Care; Social Affairs; and Management of the Djassin Training Centre.

The Red Cross of Benin takes its numerous activities seriously and has achieved excellent results in the spheres outlined below.

1. First-aid training

The principal object of this programme is to train adults, and particularly young people, to save lives in case of disaster or accident. Their training has been welcomed by the whole population, for applications are more numerous every year. The results obtained at the end of each training course are also very encouraging. First-aid training is given at schools, local committees, public and private enterprises and services, and at the National Youth Training Centre at Djassin (Porto-Novo). There is a separate programme for each level or category of training. Every three years an advanced course leading to a certificate as first-aid instructor is given at the National Youth Training Centre in Djassin. Statistics show that 1,200 first-aiders (adults and young people) are trained by the Red Cross of Benin every year, and from 60 to 90 first-aid instructors every three years. Training materials and equipment are this Department's main problem, which is to some extent hindering the satisfactory development of the programme.

2. Health education

Ever since the Alma Ata declaration on primary health care the Red Cross of Benin has made great efforts to give prevention priority over cure, in accordance with the Government's national health programme.

Close co-operation with the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Red Cross has enabled medico-social centres to be built. These are primary health care centres in the least accessible villages of Benin. The Red Cross National Health Education Programme is also carried out at these centres, at which hygiene and environmental sanitation are taught and patients are cared for. The centres also maintain a vegetable garden to improve the local inhabitants' diet and give mother and child care, vaccinations, etc.

The staff working in the centres are paid from the national budget and are often helped by a number of young Red Cross volunteers. The installation and functioning of a medico-social centre are an excellent example of the co-operation existing between the Red Cross of Benin and the Government of Benin.

Every year voluntary first-aiders are trained in these centres.

Their duties are to detect disease, give first aid and bring patients to the health centre. To enable the centre to replenish its stocks of medicaments, a project for the construction and installation of village pharmacies is under consideration with the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany.

3. The gift of blood

The Red Cross of Benin's blood donation activities are an integral part of a national programme. The motto of this service is: "I don't care who you are, I just want you to live".

In the course of many dissemination sessions or first-aid courses Red Cross of Benin volunteers do their best to encourage the public to give blood.

To make this programme a success there is a Red Cross blood transfusion centre at the Youth Training Centre at Djassin. This centre was built entirely by the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Government of Benin has appointed to it skilled technical personnel imbued with the Red Cross spirit. The centre serves peripheral hospitals. A provincial blood transfusion centre is being built at Parakou (435 km from Cotonou) with the help of the Red Cross of Bavaria (Federal Republic of Germany) and will very soon be in operation.

The centre has its problems. The gift of blood is unpaid and the blood is passed on without charge, but it is very difficult to get the necessary equipment (blood bags, tubes, reagents, etc.).

4. Assistance in case of need

Assistance in case of need takes many forms. The Social Affairs Department has accordingly drawn up an annual assistance programme comprising:

- visits to the sick and elderly;
- gifts of all kinds to lepers on World Lepers' Day;
- assistance to refugees and other displaced persons;
- gifts of tricycles to the physically disabled;
- visits to penal-law detainees in our prisons;
- assistance to women in confinement who have no means of support;
- assistance to triplets, quadruplets, etc.

To carry out this formidable programme successfully the Red Cross of Benin relies on its Finance Department (for fund-raising) and its Information and Dissemination Department (for publicity and information). The Red Cross of

Benin also maintains excellent relations with the international organizations accredited to the People's Republic of Benin.

Thus the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has entrusted the Red Cross of Benin with settling Chadian refugees on an agricultural site at Kétou (150 km from Cotonou). Volunteers of the Red Cross of Benin have spared no pains to carry out this task successfully, but our Chadian brothers on this site are still having problems in adapting themselves. To reintegrate them into society the Red Cross of Benin has opened two sewing workshops, one at Parakou (435 km from Cotonou) and the other at the Djassin Training Centre for physically disabled persons. At the end of their apprenticeship they are given a sewing machine and materials without charge so that they can set up in business.

The Red Cross of Benin sends representatives to all disaster areas (floods, technical accidents in factories, railway accidents, etc.) to give assistance to those in need.

5. Community activities

In order to initiate young people of the Red Cross of Benin into production leading to food self-sufficiency, the Djassin Training Centre has a chicken run and vegetable garden, both of which are kept in order by teams of young people who come regularly for that purpose.

Similarly, in imitation of the work done at the Djassin Centre, young people from local Committees do community work of various kinds. At the Parakou Local Committee young people raise turkeys and grow onions.

As part of our Red Cross Society's assistance to those in need, an orthopaedic centre for the manufacture of prostheses and orthoses for physically disabled persons has been opened at the Djassin Centre. There too the staff are paid by the Government, but the great difficulty lies in supplying the Centre with raw materials.

6. Information and Dissemination

Information is upstream and downstream of every human enterprise. The Red Cross of Benin has accordingly always given pride of place to its Information and Dissemination Department and it is therefore in the forefront of our National Society's development.

Since 1983 that department has been working on a very carefully prepared programme with ICRC co-operation. Its main features are:

- publication of a newsletter (*Le Courier*);
- support for all Red Cross activities by radio and television and other means;

- production of radio programmes and documentary films on the Red Cross;
- the publication of pamphlets, strip cartoons and other material in support of Red Cross activities;
- a new approach to fund-raising so that the National Society shall become self-financing.

The second part of the programme relates to dissemination of international humanitarian law (IHL). Why IHL? Because the rudiments of the law of war must be made known to everybody, especially members of the armed forces, so as to save lives in case of conflict.

The target groups have been clearly defined and programmes have been adapted to each target group: young people at school, the general public, students, and members of the armed forces.

IHL was introduced into the National University of Benin as a discipline in October 1983, and since 1986 some students have chosen it as the subject of their thesis for a master's degree.

These students are the future leaders of the nation. To help them to improve their knowledge of IHL by more detailed research, the Red Cross of Benin held an international IHL seminar in 1987 at Cotonou with ICRC co-operation. It was attended by students and eminent professors of law from the surrounding French-speaking sub-region. A project for the construction of an IHL Documentation Centre is under consideration and the National Society is doing its utmost to find funds to finance it.

The Red Cross of Benin has also made documentary films which have won prizes at the Varna Film Festival.

To reach these objectives and succeed in all these tasks the Red Cross of Benin uses trained staff and trained permanent volunteer members, all of them energetic and imbued with the true Red Cross spirit, but it cannot do without the assistance and aid of sister Societies, either now or in future.

*

* * *

In conclusion we would mention that the Red Cross of Benin has built up many international contacts with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, whose constant valuable support it appreciates, and with the ICRC, the Henry Dunant Institute and specialist organizations and institutions doing humanitarian work. The fruitful co-operation between the Red Cross of Benin and the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany has enabled a fine Red Cross Youth Centre to be built at Porto Novo, at which disabled young persons are given rehabilitation treatment and training courses are constantly held for our leaders and young first-aiders.

Certainly these achievements are not wholly satisfactory, for we aspire to give the Red Cross of Benin more modern infrastructures that will enable us to promote the interests of our working masses more effectively.

The greatest desire of the Red Cross of Benin in the People's Republic of Benin is to make the Red Cross of Benin a National Society that can act promptly in any way that can alleviate distress, disasters and suffering, and bring joy, peace and happiness to the family and the community.

At its General Assembly on 10, 11 and 12 December 1987 the Red Cross of Benin therefore considered at length, and proposed to the Steering Committee, ways and means of reaching some of these priority objectives in the medium term.

With these aims in view, we have to make our population even more aware of our need for support and step up our exchanges of co-operation and friendship with sister National Societies, who have never spared their efforts to help the Red Cross of Benin.

Lastly, we appeal urgently to all the people of Benin, men, women and young people, to join in the Red Cross of Benin's offensive against poverty and underdevelopment.

The Red Cross of Benin
