

## **The ICRC action in the Middle East**

Until the autumn of 1968 the ICRC's work in the Middle East in connection with the Israeli-Arab conflict was as follows.

After having completed its action on behalf of the wounded (First Geneva Convention) and of prisoners of war (Third Geneva Convention) originating from various States parties to the conflict of June 1967, the ICRC is now working for the protection of civilians in territories occupied by Israel. Twelve delegates are pursuing this humanitarian mission in Tel Aviv, in Jerusalem for Jordan West Bank territory, in Gaza for Egyptian territory in Gaza and Sinai and in Kuneitra for Syrian territory in the Golan.

Furthermore, the ICRC has four delegations in the neighbouring Arab States, in the United Arab Republic, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon which, working together with those countries' National Societies, arrange for the reuniting of families as well as for a large number of repatriations, ensure the transmission of family messages and do everything possible to help the many victims of the conflict.

Whilst carrying out their mission these delegates naturally maintain close touch with their opposite numbers in Israel and in the occupied territories. A co-ordinating meeting, moreover, takes place every three months in Nicosia, directed by ICRC representatives from Geneva.

Basing its action on the principles of humanity and the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the ICRC has so far received a certain number of practical facilities from the Israeli authorities upon which its delegates can act on behalf of civilians in the occupied territories.

In broad outline the ICRC's action consists first of all in organizing several relief actions for needy persons, mainly on the Jordan West Bank and in Sinai. In this way, more than 40 tons of powdered

milk, provided by the ICRC and National Societies, have been despatched to these occupied territories and are in the process of distribution. Medical supplies have been donated to various hospitals. In addition, several thousand articles of warm clothing, blankets, tent covers supplied by the same donors, were distributed by the delegates during the cold winter of 1967-1968.

The ICRC also despatched two consignments to Sinai, the first of 75 tons and the second of 300 tons of food from the Red Crescent of the United Arab Republic. These food supplies were distributed to the inhabitants of North Sinai, notably in El Arish.

Furthermore, the delegates of the ICRC have obtained permission from the occupation authorities for most of the Red Crescent branches in West Bank territory and the Red Crescent branch at El Arish in Sinai to continue their work. The ICRC has attempted to intensify and extend their field of activity by bringing financial and material aid with the help of a number of National Societies.

Finally, the ICRC delegates regularly visit the Arab detainees numbering about 1,800 held in ten prisons in Israel and the occupied territories. They have obtained improvements in their detention conditions.

It is not necessary to go into detail here regarding the direct aid given by ICRC delegates to the civilian population in arranging for the exchange of family messages, the many reunions of Arab families dispersed by the conflict, assistance to large numbers of individual cases, etc.

As can be seen, the activities briefly outlined above are important, and the ICRC is attempting to pursue and extend them by constantly adapting its action as events develop.

However, on the legal level, whilst the International Committee of the Red Cross has always maintained that the Fourth Convention was applicable overall in the three occupied territories, the Israeli Government, in spite of the ICRC's persistent representations, has declared that it wished "to leave in abeyance for the time being" the question of the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention in the occupied territories, preferring to act on a pragmatic basis by granting delegates practical facilities.

## INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the Geneva Conventions are treaties drawn up between States and that consequently the governments signatories to the Geneva Conventions are alone responsible for their strict application. The International Committee of the Red Cross, however, which has never been requested to act as a substitute in the absence of a protecting Power, neither by the Powers whose territories are occupied nor by the occupying Power, is attempting to pursue its action in accordance with the general principles of humanitarian law, as laid down in the Fourth Geneva Convention, and within the limits of the practical facilities granted by the Government of Israel.