

## A NEW VENTURE

*The Press and Information Division of the ICRC issued, in September 1971, the first number of a profusely illustrated periodical, under the title Aspects. It is primarily intended for circulation among the Swiss people, who support extensively the ICRC by their donations, and will appear twice yearly, in French and German.*

*The aim is to present a wide coverage of ICRC activities and to throw light upon the work it accomplishes for the benefit of victims in war-time. A number of examples of such work are published in this first issue, as may be seen from the variety of the articles listed in the table of contents, varying from the description of the duties of an ICRC delegate in the Laos jungle to the role of the ICRC in Africa. Our readers will certainly be interested to read what Mr. Ch. Ammann, Head of the ICRC Logistics Division, has written on the initial stages and development of a relief action.*

Severe fighting has broken out, and large numbers of wounded are coming in, but hospitals are disorganized, the medical staff cannot cope with the flow of casualties and stocks of medicaments have all run out. Appeals for aid have been sent to the International Committee of the Red Cross. How will it organize its emergency relief action?

For more than a hundred years now since delegates of the ICRC have been going forward to the scene of battle, they have come to know what are the most urgent needs. Blood plasma or blood substitutes must be swiftly sent out, together with blood transfusion apparatus, antibiotics, various drugs such as spasmolytics, narcotics and sedatives, dressings and surgical instruments.

If no list of requirements is sent to the ICRC by any of the parties to the conflict, the ICRC prepares standard relief consignments by means of which at least about a hundred seriously wounded persons can be treated.

To be really efficacious, such a consignment should be sent together with a doctor-delegate or better still, a medical team. The team dispatched to the scene by the ICRC, with the authorization of the parties to the conflict, usually comprises a surgeon, an assistant, an anaesthetist, a nurse (either male or female) and a theatre nurse. In the early stages, needs must be estimated on the spot and an initial evaluation of the situation sent to Geneva. As might be expected, the whole situation is very often in a state of confusion by reason of changing events taking place in the midst of violence, and it is not always easy to know which hospitals may still be operational, and on what kind of local medical structure the ICRC is able to count. Will the Red Cross teams be obliged to work in roughly installed wards, or should fully equipped autonomous field hospitals, including a surgical operating unit with its material, personnel, and even a fortnight's rations, be sent out immediately?

This preliminary work takes time: it is difficult to obtain news, to assess the number of wounded and the needs in medicaments, and also to send all this information back to Geneva. All the same, the ICRC waits for its reconnaissance team's first report to come in before drawing up a definite plan of action.

The scale of suffering sometimes exceeds the powers of the ICRC. It then launches appeals to the general public through the channel of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Telex messages from the ICRC are transmitted in a continuous stream and, some hours later, stocks of relief supplies pile up in numerous countries and medical personnel is mobilized. The links in the chain are steadily forged and quickly a large-scale relief action, under the co-ordination of the ICRC, gets under way. It might last for a period that could vary in length; it could be centered on medical care or on the distribution of foodstuffs, or, perhaps, on the provision of shelter or clothing for victims. Depending on the indications flowing in, it is possible for each National Society to let the ICRC know what it intends to contribute: a Society may offer to make available medico-social teams to the ICRC, others send administrative staff, or transport experts, or again radiocommunication technicians.

In its appeal, the ICRC gives technical and practical details to all its "correspondents". For instance, the food that must be provided for the hapless inhabitants must be chosen according to their local eating habits and the personnel must be briefed on the way they must present their aid so as to be in keeping with local conditions.

Consignments are just as meticulously prepared: instructions are given as to addresses, packing, method of transport (by air, sea, rail or road). The indication "Red Cross" must not be omitted, for, through it, customs duty exemptions, reductions in carriage costs and priorities for import formalities are obtained. A plan of action is drawn up on the basis of the information received; in Geneva, the work is pushed forward night and day. During that time, the ICRC delegates in the field are also active. Concurrently with the action proper, the protection of the teams and the organization of the work to be done must be attended to. For this, it is necessary to get in touch with civilian and military authorities and to conclude with the parties to the conflict agreements whereby all relief activities will be submitted to the rules laid down in them. The distribution of food supplies, for instance, may be regulated in schedules signed by all the belligerents. It is in such fashion that the ICRC moves from the emergency phase to that of the co-ordination of a relief action that could be long drawn out or that may last for only a short period.

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