

An Important Year for the ICRC Telecommunications Service

The importance of the ICRC telecommunications service, which has its main station in Geneva, increased in 1970. Before setting out the information bearing witness to this fact, we would briefly recall the origin and development of this service.¹

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It would hardly be conceivable for the ICRC to discharge the complex duties incumbent on it today without a communications system which is both reliable and rapid, permitting instant connection between Geneva and the various places where the Red Cross is in action. Such a system is the only way for ICRC delegations not to be isolated. In all quarters of the globe they may keep in direct contact with the ICRC, informing it of their needs and receiving its directives. Although subject to restrictions, a Red Cross world-wide radiocommunications emergency network ensures the immediate transmission of messages and the effective organization of relief.

Since 1963 the ICRC has been operating from its headquarters a radiocommunications station manned by experienced professionals. Special frequencies have been allocated to the ICRC by the Swiss authorities and these have been confirmed by the International Telecommunications Union. Under the concession, the ICRC is authorized to establish its own radio links when called upon to intervene in the event of conflict, disaster or similar circumstances provided the public telecommunication network is unreliable because it is overloaded, damaged, disrupted or has no direct circuit to the place where the Red Cross has to intervene.

¹ In doing so we have referred to articles in previous issues of *International Review* (December 1964, January 1965 and March 1966).

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It was the installation and operation by the ICRC of a field hospital in the heart of the Yemeni desert which highlighted the essential role of radio connection among operational centres, delegations and ICRC headquarters. In January 1964 the mobile stations at Uqhd and Jeddah had recourse to radio connection with Geneva on a scale which increased daily. Subsequently other ICRC actions, in circumstances necessitating immediate humanitarian intervention, demonstrated the utility of a world-wide radiocommunications network which the ICRC could also make available to the League and National Societies in emergency.

The following is a summary of the telecommunications service activities in 1970.

EQUIPMENT

Main station in Geneva: This comprises three transmitting-receiving units:

Station 1: Although this came into service at the beginning of 1964 it is still in perfect running order and used for contacting amateur radio enthusiasts in view of its cheap operation. This station has two transmitting and two receiving sets.

Station 2: This was installed in 1969. It consists of professional equipment for round-the-clock operation. It transmits by telegraphy, telephony or radioteletype on frequencies between two and thirty megacycles.

Antennas: It is planned to transfer the radio station away from the ICRC headquarters in order to avoid the disturbances caused by the rather powerful electromagnetic field and also the electrical disturbances when messages are received.

The setting up of a new antenna presents no major problem.

Mission stations: Experience last year, with the constant connections with ICRC delegations in Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea and Dahomey, demonstrated that the new "RF-Controller" sets not only improved communications with the missions but were easier to handle. A doctor or delegate without any technical knowledge can soon learn to use these sets. The instructions are simple and

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non-specialized operators can use the equipment without difficulty to contact the ICRC or other Red Cross units by radiotelephony.

The following mobile sets are available at Geneva or are in use by missions:

20 RF-Controllers	RF-201	power 100 Watts
2 transmitters-receivers	SR 2000	power 2000 Watts
7 transmitters-receivers	SR-150	power 80 Watts
7 transmitters-receivers	SR-160	power 80 Watts
8 transmitters-receivers	SB-34	power 60 Watts

OPERATIONS

Yemen Arab Republic. — On 18 January 1970, connection with Sana'a was re-established after an interruption which had lasted for several months. This communication was by radiotelegraphy until the end of September since when it has been by radiotelephony. Radiotelephony between headquarters and the Sana'a delegation and the ICRC medical mission at Sada'a and later at Hodeida, was excellent even though it was not made by radio operators but by the doctors themselves.

Since October trials were made by radioteletype. They were satisfactory but showed that the equipment at ICRC headquarters was not entirely suitable for such a service, reception being affected by disturbance from numerous industrial sources.

Dahomey and Equatorial Guinea. — On 16 February 1970 the ICRC delegation left Cotonou where it had been for several months and connection with Dahomey ceased. Radiotelephony and radiotelegraphy with Umuahia ceased on 9 January. The Santa Isabel radio transmitted to Geneva for the last time on 23 February. Thus the considerable traffic which began in December 1967 was brought to an end.

Brazil. — A completely new operation in the history of ICRC telecommunications began in May 1970.

The ICRC sent a team to survey the conditions and needs of the Indian populations of the Amazon. The team, three doctors, an



Amman: receiving a message at the ICRC transmitting-receiving station.

Photos Gordon-Lennox





Photo François Martin, Geneva

Dacca: communicating with Geneva by the transmitting-receiving set lent by the ICRC to the League of Red Cross Societies.

ethnologist and an ICRC delegate, stayed in Brazil several months. In view of the great distance and the unreliability of transport in that area it was not possible for a radio operator to accompany the team.

The doctors were therefore taught to operate the transmitting-receiving set and to set up a unidirectional antenna on a telescopic mast. As they were in a region far from civilization they also had to take with them their own power generating set.

Their first radiotelephonic contact with Geneva was made, as planned, on 23 May 1970. Thereafter contact was regular.

The mission returned to Switzerland on 18 August and its last radio contact with Geneva was on 6 August from Brasilia.

Nigeria. — The ICRC operated a radiotelephony network in Nigeria, linking Lagos with several other towns. As part of the Nigerian Red Cross program, twelve transmitting-receiving sets were operated by an ICRC radio technician. The operation was brought to an end on 30 June 1970.

Middle East. — On 6 September 1970 two aircraft were hijacked and four governments entrusted the ICRC to act as a neutral intermediary. To discharge that duty a permanent and rapid link between Amman and Geneva was important, and the aircraft which conveyed an ICRC delegation to Amman on 7 September had aboard a radio technician and operator with a transmitting-receiving set.

The Jordanian authorities were understanding and without delay granted the ICRC a radio operating concession. On 8 September, at 10 a.m., the radiotelegraphic link was made and intense day and night traffic started.¹

The hostilities which broke out in Amman nine days later interrupted the contact which was resumed only on 22 September. This, and the wish to maintain direct connection between Amman and Beirut induced the ICRC to apply to the relevant telecommunications service in Beirut for a concession. This was granted on 25 September. The following day, the first link with Beirut was

¹ *Plate.*

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made and, simultaneously, the ICRC delegations in Amman and the Lebanese capital had their first radiotelephonic contact. The Damascus delegation was added to the network on 28 October after a concession was granted the ICRC a few days previously.

PERSONNEL

As in previous years, one of the major difficulties facing the telecommunications service was radio operator recruiting. We now need at all times three French and English-speaking operators who can send and receive in Morse and can from one day to another take leave from their employment in public or private enterprise in Switzerland and elsewhere.

Since 1963 we have had recourse to trained technicians and today we are training amateur radio enthusiasts to operate our station. We have also started negotiations with the Swiss postal authorities in order to give amateur radio enthusiasts regular training in Morse at our main station in Geneva.

TRAFFIC

From 800 in 1967, the number of radio messages rose to 4,387 in 1968 then dropped to 2,850 in 1969 and rose again in 1970 to 3,300, equivalent to about 165,000 words.

CONCLUSION

The ICRC radio telecommunications network is operated in a manner consistent with the most demanding professional standards, and efforts are being made to improve recruitment and training of temporary staff. The usefulness of the radiocommunications service is obvious, considering that through it the ICRC may contact rapidly and reliably its delegates in the far corners of the earth and the League may, as was the case recently in East Pakistan, contact a National Society.¹

¹ *Plate.*