

**HOW ICRC FIELD ACTIVITIES SERVE  
TO PROTECT THE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**

*The ICRC was represented at the second World Conference on Human Rights which took place in Vienna from 14 to 25 June 1993. (See under the heading "Miscellaneous", pp. 319-324 the article on the work and Final Declaration of the Conference, including the address by the President of the ICRC.)*

*On that occasion, the ICRC drew up and distributed to all the delegations a report entitled: "Human Rights and the ICRC — International Humanitarian Law". The first part of the report deals with international humanitarian law as a body of rules aimed at curbing violence and safeguarding the fundamental rights of human beings in time of armed conflicts. The second part looks at the implementation of humanitarian law and the third part entitled: "How ICRC Field Activities Serve to Protect the Victims" describes the institution's numerous efforts to solve present-day humanitarian problems.*

*In its last two issues (March-April and May-June 1993), the Review concentrated on examining the legal aspects of IHL and human rights law<sup>1</sup> and then went on to examine the problem of internal strife.<sup>2</sup>*

*In response to a request by many of our readers, this issue of the Review contains several extracts of the above-mentioned report, with stress being placed on the ICRC's presence during current armed conflicts and situations of violence.*

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<sup>1</sup> See "Humanitarian law and human rights law — alike yet distinct" by Jacques Meurant, "International humanitarian law and human rights law" by Louise Doswald-Beck and Sylvain Vité, and "Implementation of human rights and humanitarian law in situations of armed conflict" by David Weissbrodt and Peggy L. Hicks, in *IRRC*, No. 293, March-April 1993, pp. 89-138.

<sup>2</sup> See "Action taken by the International Committee of the Red Cross in situations of internal violence" by Marion Harroff-Tavel and "Humanitarian standards for internal strife — a brief review of new developments", in *IRRC*, No. 294, May-June 1993, pp. 195-226.

## 1. The ICRC's work in present-day armed conflicts: some examples

Over the past five years the ICRC has been active in most of the armed conflicts that have been raging in various parts of the world.

### **Activities for prisoners of war**

During the American intervention against General Noriega's government in Panama, the ICRC visited 1,352 prisoners of war and civilian internees. Its delegates provided the country's hospitals with the surgical materials they needed to treat the wounded.

During the Iran/Iraq war the ICRC played a unique part in the protection of the prisoners of war taken by both sides. In the ten years of the war its delegates registered 56,925 Iraqi POWs held in Iran and 39,588 Iranian POWs held in Iraq. Upwards of 13 million Red Cross messages were exchanged between the prisoners and their families. After the war was over, the ICRC organised the repatriation of over 80,000 POWs. Because the ICRC had carefully and systematically registered all the family messages exchanged, it is presently in a position to state that numerous POWs are still being held in both countries.

In Chad, the ICRC supervised the repatriation of 250 Libyan prisoners of war in 1990.

### **ICRC activities for civilians in occupied territories**

In the territories occupied by Israel, the ICRC monitors compliance with the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of civilians in time of war. For 25 years delegates have been providing protection and assistance to all the victims of the situation. They make representations to the Israeli authorities urging them to ensure that detainees and the populations in the occupied territories are treated in accordance with the rules laid down in the humanitarian treaties.

## **The Gulf war: using force to implement UN resolutions**

As soon as the conflict broke out between Iraq and Kuwait, the ICRC let it be known that it wished to take steps to ensure compliance with humanitarian law. When the coalition forces went into action in January 1991, the ICRC, in keeping with its mandate, launched an operation to bring impartial and independent assistance to all the victims of the war.

Moreover, as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC sought by its presence and its work, to ensure that the suffering of the victims would be given due consideration at a time when political passions were running high.

Before the hostilities broke out, the ICRC called on all the parties to the conflict, reminding them of their treaty obligations to use force discriminately and to respect the rights of non-combatants.

More than once the ICRC solemnly appealed to all the belligerents, "in the name of all civilian and military victims", to show respect for the latter and to treat them humanely.

The ICRC visited 88,221 Iraqi prisoners of war held by the coalition forces; in the months following the end of hostilities it distributed medicines and medical supplies worth over 20,500,000 Swiss francs in Iraqi hospitals, and used trucks to deliver 250 million litres of drinking water throughout the country, the supply system in many towns having been damaged. Almost forty ICRC engineers helped repair a score of water treatment plants in southern Iraq and in Baghdad.

In those parts of Iraqi Kurdistan held by the Peshmerga, the ICRC delegation in Baghdad stepped in in late April 1991 to provide impartial protection and assistance to all the victims. It set up a field hospital to treat the wounded in Naopares, and brought help to 200,000 displaced people. ICRC delegates distributed urgently required supplies to over 4,000 Iraqi soldiers and officers held by Kurds and later facilitated their release and their return to their families.

## **The ICRC in Bosnia: mediation and protection for the civilian population**

In Bosnia-Herzegovina the combatants' chief objective is to drive out of the areas they control all persons belonging to another ethnic

group. The ICRC's main objective is therefore to protect all civilians in the power of a group which is hostile to them.

The ICRC launched its operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina when hostilities broke out in April 1992. It still has great difficulty in doing everything it should, but has obtained recognition by all the parties to the conflict of its specific role as a neutral and impartial intermediary.

On several occasions, for example, it has been able to bring plenipotentiary representatives of all three belligerents to the negotiating table to discuss humanitarian issues. On 1 October 1992, an agreement was signed for the unconditional release of all detainees. Over 9,000 detainees have since been freed, more than 5,500 of them under ICRC auspices.

In May 1993, the ICRC, whose political neutrality is not questioned, is the only international agency still working in the Banja Luka area (controlled by the Bosnian Serb forces). Its delegates carry out protection and assistance activities for the civilian population, urging the combatants not to ill-treat ethnic minorities, distributing relief supplies to displaced and vulnerable individuals and delivering surgical supplies to hospitals.<sup>3</sup>

## **In Somalia: ICRC relief operations carried out in exceptionally dangerous conditions**

In January 1992 the ICRC launched one of its largest food relief operations ever: in a little over one year it distributed 180,000 tonnes of food and 1,680 tonnes of seed, vaccinated over 500,000 head of cattle and provided medical aid on a large scale.

The war has reduced Somalia to a shambles. The ICRC has therefore had to negotiate the safety of its food convoys and their protection from bandits with the many rival clans.

Thanks to its political neutrality, the ICRC won the confidence of all the clans, who came to an agreement on guaranteeing the safety of the institution's humanitarian activities.

From the far north to the south, travelling under the escort of different armed groups made up of members of the main clans, ICRC delegates acted with complete impartiality, distributing the supplies required to meet the most urgent needs. The most vulnerable people,

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<sup>3</sup> Since the conflict broke out the ICRC has visited 13,000 detainees, forwarded over 700,000 family messages, distributed surgical materials worth 8,360,000 Swiss francs and provided half a million people with 25,000 tonnes of relief supplies.

in particular members of the weakest clans, were thus also able to benefit.

Somalia may have ceased to exist as a functioning state, but the country's medical facilities were nevertheless able to continue providing certain services thanks to an extensive ICRC support programme. Until March 1993, ICRC surgeons and anaesthetists were operating with Somali doctors at Keysemey hospital (northern Mogadishu). A mobile surgical team operated on request in all functioning medical centres. The hospitals and dispensaries in several towns received regular consignments of medicines and surgical supplies.

Over 250 wells were sunk in spots throughout the country around which groups of vulnerable people had gathered.

### **In Sri Lanka: food convoys bound for Jaffna protected by ICRC neutrality**

The Jaffna peninsula, at the northern tip of Sri Lanka, is home to almost 900,000 people. It is connected to the rest of the island by a narrow strip of land. The Tamil insurgents have made it their stronghold, and the belligerents have been unable to reach an agreement on the opening of an overland supply corridor. The peninsula is therefore subject to a *de facto* total blockade.

Shortages of food and medicines could have threatened the survival of the civilian population. For humanitarian reasons, the ICRC asked both parties to allow it to bring supplies into the region.

That agreement having been obtained, the ICRC chartered three ships which, every month for the past two years, have been ferrying in 7,000-10,000 tonnes of essential goods (food and medicines) supplied by the authorities in Colombo. The ships are loaded and offloaded under ICRC supervision, thereby guaranteeing that their cargo is used strictly for humanitarian purposes.

Thanks to these monthly shipments, the civilian population, totally cut off from the rest of the island by the conflict, has been able to survive.

ICRC delegates based in Jaffna also use the ships to evacuate people who are wounded or seriously ill.

## **The former Soviet Union: the ICRC's impartial humanitarian work in Tajikistan**

In December 1992, the unstable situation brought about by the internal conflict in Tajikistan led to the internal displacement of almost 500,000 people (10% of the population).

In January 1993, the conflict lessened in intensity everywhere except in the eastern Garm valley, where government troops and opposition forces continue to clash.

In view of the number of displaced people and their urgent need for medical help and relief supplies, the ICRC decided to expand its activities in Tajikistan, where it had been present since October 1992. It concentrated on providing assistance in areas directly affected by the conflict: Dushanbe and southern Tajikistan, under government control; and the Garm valley, controlled by the opposition.

During the first half of 1993 the ICRC conducted a relief operation for 150,000 particularly vulnerable people among the displaced population, enabling them to survive the winter.

In spring 1993 the displaced people started heading back to their homes. The ICRC, again with agreement of all the parties, provided relief supplies along the way.

On several occasions the ICRC appealed to the parties to the conflict to comply with humanitarian rules, and in particular not to take hostages, and to protect the civilian population, the wounded and prisoners. Combatants were asked to respect the red cross and red crescent emblems.

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In all the above situations, the parties to the various conflicts recognised the ICRC's special role as a neutral intermediary between victims and combatants.

But compliance with humanitarian rules cannot be taken for granted. Serious breaches of the Geneva Conventions have occurred, and the ICRC must be tireless in its efforts to spread its message, renegotiate agreements and convince the parties to respect humanitarian principles.

## 2. The ICRC and multinational forces

The end of the Cold War heralded an upsurge in multinational political and military initiatives.

In Liberia, the ECOMOG regional forces are acting as a buffer between the warring factions. In Somalia, peace-keeping forces are trying to restore peace and order to the country. In Cambodia, UN forces are overseeing the application of the peace agreement signed in Paris. In Bosnia, the mandate of the UN soldiers is to safeguard the humanitarian convoys of the High Commissioner for Refugees and demilitarized and protected areas.

These multinational forces have been deployed not to make war but to prevent it. Their mandate often includes humanitarian duties.

Their mandate to restore and maintain order nevertheless occasionally obliges them to resort to force. Casualties are inevitable. In that event, the presence of a humanitarian organisation able to ensure the protection of any such victims and to act as a neutral intermediary between them and combatants is required.

*Here again, the ICRC is qualified to assume this role.*

In Liberia and Cambodia, ICRC delegates recently started visiting persons captured by the peace-keeping forces.

## 3. The ICRC's work in situations of internal violence: a few examples

In situations of internal violence, the ICRC may decide to offer its services as a politically neutral and impartial organisation that is able, by means of its activities for the victims, to ease tension in the country concerned.

### **In South Africa: the ICRC's role in situations of internal violence**

South Africa's moves towards political change have been accompanied by tension and disturbances: armed attacks, demonstrations, arrests, states of emergency.

The Government recently agreed to allow the ICRC into police stations and prisons to ensure that detainees arrested in connection with the events are treated properly.

During the first three months of this year, ICRC delegates had private interviews with 2,916 detainees. Confidential reports on the detainees' treatment have been sent regularly to the authorities in charge, with requests for the appropriate improvements.

In the townships rocked by periodic outbreaks of violence, the ICRC is working in cooperation with the South African Red Cross Society. At each demonstration, ICRC delegates and SARCS first-aiders stand ready to step in at the first sign of violence and treat the wounded.

As a non-political organisation, the ICRC maintains an ongoing dialogue with all groups. It acts as a neutral and impartial intermediary between the victims of acts of violence and those who commit them. In so doing, it seeks to have a moderating influence on the demonstrators, who are sometimes tempted to give way to anger and brutality.

## **Malawi: another situation of internal violence**

Malawi has been ruled since it gained independence in 1963 by a one-party regime. Many opponents to the regime have been arrested and incarcerated in the country's prisons.

In spite of an amnesty proclaimed in 1992, the determination of some sections of the population to see a multiparty system installed has led to renewed tension and a fresh wave of arrests.

In 1992 the ICRC obtained the authorities' permission to visit, in accordance with its standard procedures, prisoners being held in all places of detention in the country.

The purpose of the visits is to make sure that those interned because of their actual or alleged opposition to the existing government are not subjected to discriminatory treatment: disappearances, physical or psychological ill-treatment, inadequate material conditions of detention.

The ICRC delegates based in Malawi periodically send the authorities confidential reports on their findings. The purpose of the reports is to prompt the authorities to take all necessary measures to solve the problems observed.