May 1996: the ICRC opens a new Web site,
this time in French

The ICRC on Internet

A large number of international and non-governmental organizations supply the public with information on the Internet *World Wide Web* network, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is no exception. It is ever more widely represented on this network, with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), about fifteen National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to date and their International Federation, as well as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum and the Henry Dunant Institute.

The ICRC decided early in 1995 to make this new medium an integral part of its communication policy and opened a site on 1 September of that year, a few months before the opening of the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

The objectives

The objectives of a Web site are the same as those of conventional communication media, namely to bring about a better understanding of the humanitarian problems associated with conflict situations and of the role, mandate and activities of the various components of the Movement, particularly the ICRC; to promote knowledge of and respect for international humanitarian law; and to foster a humanitarian attitude in situations of tension and conflict.

The ICRC's principal contacts are States, the National Societies and their Federation, the media and military, medical and academic circles. The Internet network is one means of reaching these different audiences, many of them already familiar with new technologies, and can also be used to enter into contact with people who have hitherto been left outside the scope of the ICRC's communication efforts.

For example, in the large-scale campaign that the ICRC is now conducting against the use of anti-personnel mines, Internet is one of the means of reaching public opinion worldwide.

The speed with which information can be sent is another great advantage. During the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, in December 1995, the various documents produced during the proceedings (press releases, speeches, daily bulletins, etc.) were available a few hours after their publication.

This new means of communication helps to increase the impact of the message, since the information is circulated quickly and widely and the user is given a coherent set of data, as well as an opportunity to respond via e-mail.

Contents of the site

On its Web site, the ICRC circulates the most recent information through its press releases and its weekly "ICRC News" bulletin. The site also enables users to find out what the ICRC is, how it works and what it does, by type of activity (relief, health-related activities, visits to detainees, restoration of family links, dissemination of international humanitarian law, etc.) and by country or region. It can be consulted for the full text of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols and for a list of the States party to those treaties. Several subjects of particular concern to the ICRC are described there, such as *blinding weapons, water and war, women and war* and, above all, the issue of *anti-personnel mines*. Much space is devoted to the Movement, and links have been established with sites developed by some of its members.

The documents made available are press releases, public reports, brochures, articles and other publications, especially all the articles that have appeared in the *International Review of the Red Cross* since 1995 in English and since 1996 in French. Most of the documents and their illustrations, such as maps, graphics and photos, are accessible in full. The various items presented (publications, CD-ROMs, photos, video clips, etc.) can be ordered directly from the site.

A link has been established with the server of the BBC *(British Broadcasting Corporation)*, which publishes lists of persons reported missing in the former Yugoslavia: this is the Radio Link service, set up in cooperation with the ICRC.

Languages

The ICRC server was first designed in English, except for the section covering the "26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent", which was prepared in three languages — English, French and Spanish.

The French version of the server which the ICRC will launch in May 1996 will be a mirror image of the English version, except for several documents which have not been translated. It is proposed to add a simplified Spanish version containing the "News" and several basic texts later in the year.

Promotion of the server

Promotion plays an essential part in launching a new Web site, and subsequently becomes a continuous task.

When the ICRC site was opened, an announcement was sent not only to the above-mentioned audiences, but also to the Web's main directories, indexes and browsers.

These browsers enable network users who are unaware of the existence of the ICRC server to come across it "by chance": while looking for "refugee", "mine" or "Rwanda", you obtain a series of replies from different servers, including that of the ICRC.

The address of this server henceforth appears together with the postal address and fax number on all ICRC publications and, where possible, on staff members' visiting cards.

The ICRC has also asked other organizations present on Internet to set up links with its site. Similar approaches have been made to international law and medical faculties, the media, libraries and international and non-governmental organizations. About a hundred links have been indexed to date.

The users

Consultation of the ICRC server is currently increasing at the rate of about 10% a month, and some 160,000 cases of access were recorded in February 1996. The users mainly come from the Anglo-Saxon world and Switzerland, but also from the four corners of the earth — Spain, Croatia, Israel, South Africa, Mexico and the Republic of Korea, to cite only a few examples.

A "visitors' book" has been opened to receive comments and to get a better idea of who the users are: these people come mostly but not exclusively from circles customarily in contact with the ICRC. It is unfortunately difficult to obtain accurate information about the users, since many do not leave any indication who they are.

Prospective developments

It is proposed to make the following accessible on Internet:

— data on persons missing in connection with the conflict in the former Yugoslavia;

— some 80 texts of instruments of international humanitarian law (IHL), also available on a CD-ROM produced by the ICRC;

— data on national measures for the implementation of IHL, collected by the ICRC Advisory Service;

— the catalogue of the ICRC library, which contains a large collection of works on IHL and the Red Cross.

The addition of animated sequences and sound tracks will gradually make the site more attractive.

Finally, a search function will offer an alternative mode of access: it will be possible to find a document directly, without having to track it down through the ramified structure of the various headings.

Christine Franquet
Public Information Division
ICRC

Address of the ICRC *Web* site
English: http://www.icrc.org
French: http://www.cicr.org

The *Review* now has an electronic address on Internet
enabling readers to communicate with the editor:
irrcreview.gva@gwn.icrc.org