

Handling the tragedy in Novye Atagi —The Norwegian Red Cross experience

In the following pages I will give an account on how the Norwegian Red Cross reacted to the tragic killing of six ICRC delegates in Chechnya in December 1996. Then was the time for action; now is the time for reflection.

For the Movement as a whole it is vital that we now focus on the security issue as it affects our Red Cross/Red Crescent workers. At the same time, we must never let evil acts like this paralyse our ability to operate in conflict areas.

The killing of six Red Cross workers in the hospital in Novye Atagi on 17 December 1996 was not only an attack on innocent victims. It was an attack on the community of humanitarian workers worldwide, on the ICRC, on the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, on the emblem and, finally, on the very idea of humanitarian action. Humanitarian work will never be the same after Novye Atagi; there will always be a “before” and an “after”. We have to think about security issues in an even more comprehensive manner than previously. Recent events in Rwanda only serve to underline this point.

The Norwegian Red Cross (NORCROSS) was hit particularly hard, as we lost two delegates, Ingebjørg Foss and Gunhild Myklebust. A third delegate, Tobias Bredland, survived the attack. The six delegates lost their lives in selfless service for the victims of the conflict in Chechnya. We will never — must never — forget what they did and the price they had to pay.

From 17 December, when the tragedy happened, NORCROSS has focused on a number of key concerns covering a wide range of issues. I propose to outline those concerns and discuss how they are being dealt with by the management of our National Society. I would like, in particular, to draw attention to the lessons learned with regard to personnel management during crisis situations.

Our key concerns were the following: informing and caring for the families; informing the public; informing NORCROSS staff and other delegates; cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and analysing the tragedy together with the ICRC.

Informing and caring for the families

The most immediate concern at NORCROSS headquarters on the morning of 17 December was to inform the immediate families and other

close relatives of the victims before we had to brief the media. Four other Norwegian delegates who had been working at the Novye Atagi hospital during the fall of 1996 were also informed during the morning.

The NORCROSS personnel office was given the task of caring for the families, in terms of providing them with information, extending invitations to come to NORCROSS headquarters, offering professional help from psychologists, ministers or counsellors, and shielding them from unnecessary pressure from the media.

Some family members were reached at their homes, some at work; and some called NORCROSS themselves when they were approached by news agencies. In line with Norwegian traditions, local ministers were also used to contact the families directly. Contact was also established with the family of the Norwegian delegate who survived. The families of both the victims were reached before any public confirmation was given by NORCROSS concerning the death and identity of the delegates concerned.

The time-lapse of four or five hours between the attack and the point at which the NORCROSS Secretary-General was informed should — ideally — have been shorter. That would have given us more time to inform the families. We have to acknowledge, however, that communication lines to Chechnya were difficult, and as it happened the delay created no particular problems for us. The experience demonstrated, however, that we have to maintain and strengthen the current system whereby key members of the NORCROSS management can be reached on a 24-hour basis, both from Geneva and from the field.

The need to keep in close contact with the families and to offer them support is a long-term commitment. Beyond bringing them the tragic news, we emphasized the families' right to know by giving them the opportunity to talk to the delegate who survived — and giving him the chance to talk to the families. This took place at the airport when the victims were brought home, during the memorial ceremony on the tarmac, during the private ceremony afterwards, at the NORCROSS memorial service on the next day, and in private meetings with each of the families in the days immediately following.

Accounts describing how the victims lived and worked at the hospital, their feelings, what they did together with other staff, what they talked about, how they were doing until the moment tragedy struck have been very important. The relatives have generally been more concerned with questions of what happened and how, rather than with the question of why it happened. For the Norwegian Red Cross it is of vital importance not

to forget the relatives of our Red Cross brothers and sisters. We must now focus on the long-term effects the killings will have on the families.

Throughout this difficult period we stressed that we — as much as the families themselves — want to find out what happened, and we have promised to keep them informed as details become available. This is a process which is not yet finished. The frustrating element, of course, is that little (if any) progress has been made of the police investigation conducted on the spot. On the other hand, we have provided information on the various initiatives taken by the ICRC in the aftermath of the events.

Informing the public

While not compromising the privacy of the victims and their families, the public has a legitimate right to know. We have therefore tried to work actively with the media, basing our approach on the following principles:

openness, coherence, close coordination with the ICRC, avoiding speculation about motives, rumours or unconfirmed “facts”, avoiding discussion of details which would give rise to such speculation, protecting the families, emphasizing the tasks and the mandate of the ICRC, the reasons for being in Chechnya, and the needs of the most vulnerable.

This is important, so as to place the tragedy in the proper perspective. “Security” in the absolute sense is impossible when the task and the mandate is to assist the victims, but it was tremendously important to stress that every possible step had been taken to protect the lives of the delegates.

Overall, this information strategy has worked well. There has been relatively little speculation in Norwegian news media. There has been almost no negative media coverage. The families have not been particularly targeted by the media. Family members have chosen to forward most questions to NORCROSS. Only two or three people at NORCROSS have been given permission to make statements on Chechnya to the media. We were, of course, at an advantage since NORCROSS staff had first-hand knowledge of the hospital, its establishment and its operations up until 17 December. End-of-mission reports had been filed and could be checked for facts and opinions, etc.

Informing NORCROSS staff and delegates

There was an immediate need to inform the four delegates who had recently served in Chechnya, and to bring them to Oslo. They were given a chance to discuss their own experiences in the light of what had

happened. They were also encouraged to provide additional written information on events that took place during the fall of 1996, as an input for our own discussions and for the analysis undertaken by the ICRC.

From the first day, however, we were also concerned about the 45-50 NORCROSS delegates scattered around the world on various missions — for the ICRC, for the Federation or in bilateral projects. Their access to accurate information on the events was likely to be limited. Many of them were working in contexts potentially as dangerous as Chechnya was assumed to be before 17 December, and they might easily feel that they had been “forgotten” when so much attention was being focused on the tragedy in Novye Atagi.

So all NORCROSS delegates were called up or otherwise contacted by their desk officers in Oslo in the following days. The aim was to provide information, but also to establish a personal contact showing that NORCROSS takes responsibility for each and every one of them and is standing by to deal with any problem, large or small, with which they may need assistance. This was done, of course, with due regard to the operational procedures applying within the respective delegations.

As a matter of general personnel policy, NORCROSS is placing increased emphasis on briefings and debriefings of delegates, and on maintaining informal contacts while they are on mission. NORCROSS guidelines for recruitment, selection and follow-up of delegates are being reviewed and updated.

The bottom line is that when a tragedy such as the one in Novye Atagi occurs, the (participating) National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society concerned will have to answer a number of difficult questions and will have to be certain that it did take its share of responsibility for its delegates. This should in no way be interpreted as detracting from the operational responsibilities of the ICRC or the Federation. We are talking about complementary action rather than competition.

Cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Working relations between NORCROSS and the Ministry are generally close, sound and professional, both at the administrative and at the political level. In this particular case, the Ministry had a special interest, as it had partly funded the hospital in Novye Atagi, the rest of the funding being provided by NORCROSS.

An open line to the political leadership was established from the moment the news came in, the Ministry recognizing that NORCROSS

would play the “lead role”, maintaining full control of all information and policies in the aftermath of the tragedy. The Ministry was kept informed by the ICRC directly through the Norwegian Embassy in Geneva and through the ICRC liaison group in Moscow, but also by NORCROSS. Issues relating to the future of the hospital were handled by NORCROSS in consultation with the ICRC, and the Foreign Ministry has communicated with the Russian and Chechen authorities as needed.

Analysing the tragedy

Access to accurate information on the events in the hours and days following 17 December was essential.

It should be added here that NORCROSS was in a privileged position from the outset, since we had delegates on the spot when the hospital was first established, we contributed to the hospital and we had several delegates working there throughout the fall of 1996. This enabled us to retrieve the relevant information for our own immediate review of the history of the project. Additional information that became available over time served primarily to confirm our basic perceptions about the history of the operation, the challenges it faced, the incidents that had occurred and the measures taken by the ICRC.

A close working relationship was rapidly established between the top management of the ICRC and of NORCROSS in terms of reviewing the facts, analysing the context, discussing the consequences and follow-up. We were also given the opportunity to become involved in discussions on security-related issues in general.

As it happened, NORCROSS had already planned to hold an international conference entitled “Humanitarian Action in Internal Conflicts”, which took place in Oslo on 31 January 1997. Naturally, a number of the speakers, who included both the President of the ICRC and the Secretary-General of the Federation focused on the tragedy in Novye Atagi. The conference thus provided an ideal forum for further reflection and exchange of views on issues relating to the events in Chechnya.

Conclusion

A tragedy on this scale and of such intensity creates extremely heavy demands, first and foremost on the families who suffered directly, and secondly on the National Society involved.

One major lesson is that, owing to the enormous media pressure generated by such crises, the Society’s entire personnel management

policy is immediately scrutinized and analysed in public, and any faults and weaknesses are exposed. This underlines the need for a consistent and carefully worked out personnel policy. No aspect of our system of personnel management — recruitment, information, briefings and debriefings, follow-up of delegates in the field, etc. — should be handled lightly or left to chance, if a National Society wants to hold its head up when a disaster strikes in the most unexpected circumstances.

A second lesson is that close ties should be established and nurtured between a National Society which seconds delegates to an operation and the agency which is operationally responsible in the field, be it the ICRC, the Federation or an operating National Society. A constant dialogue in terms of information and analysis must be maintained if a National Society is to recruit delegates for difficult missions. To be shown as lacking essential information would be devastating for the National Society should it be put under pressure by the media, and not only in the event of an accident or a serious crisis.

Difficult times are also times for reflection and learning, with a view to improving performance in the future. I have focused mainly on the ability of NORCROSS to handle a very severe crisis for our organization, but what happened in Chechnya concerns the future operational approach of the whole Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Tragedies like the one in Chechnya illustrate the fact that the Movement is facing the challenge of a new pattern in the conflicts emerging after the Cold War. We are no longer dealing with a situation where two different ideologies and systems are confronting each other in the quest for world dominance and thus influencing all conflicts, whether national or international. In that “old system”, it could be argued, everybody — both the warring parties and the humanitarian organizations — knew the rules and to a large extent applied them. What we have seen over the past decade, on the other hand, is a growing number of conflicts opening up old “wounds”, not healed by but hidden by the Cold War, and these conflicts are marked by unspeakable atrocities against the civilian population. The killing of humanitarian aid workers is a feature of this new pattern.

The changed situation after the Cold War has also had a positive effect in that it has in many ways made people rethink their values. Cultural, ethical and religious affiliation, and being part of a national group, have given many people a feeling of common identity. Belonging to a certain culture or religious group with a set of ethical rules can be a basis for tolerance towards other cultures, ethnic groups or nations. It is only when

people, for whatever reason, experience a strong feeling of dissatisfaction and insecurity in their lives, that ethnic, cultural and national identity can be turned into a negative force which can ultimately lead to such atrocities as we have seen in many of today's conflicts.

We are faced with the challenge of how to respond to this new situation, how to bring protection and assistance to the victims, how to protect our own personnel and how to make the parties to such conflicts accept humanitarian action. It is a challenge because we see people suffering, people needing help, and we want to help.

These few points made with regard to post Cold-War conflicts should indicate that our future discussions must focus on how to use the unique strength we can draw from the diversity of our Movement. There are 171 National Societies representing a diversified perception of the concept of humanitarian values. Each of these Societies is by definition the most important adviser to any operation on their territory, the key factor in rising to the new challenge.

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Providing support for Red Cross volunteers and other humanitarian workers following a security incident or a disaster

In the early hours of 17 December 1996, six members of the Red Cross team working at the ICRC hospital in Novye Atagi, Chechnya, were murdered in their sleep by a group of masked men using weapons fitted with silencers. A seventh delegate was wounded but managed to escape with his life.

Providing support in the aftermath of the Novye Atagi tragedy

On the morning of 17 December 1996 an ambulance plane took off from Geneva, bound for the northern Caucasus to pick up the wounded