

Forty years ago: the Hungarian uprising and the Suez crisis

ICRC operations in Hungary and the Middle East in 1956

As ICRC research officer Françoise Perret points out in her article on the organization's operations in Hungary, 1956 was the year in which Khrushchev's famous report to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party triggered the process of destalinization — an event which changed the course of twentieth century history. The Budapest uprising in October of the same year followed as a direct result. In her study entitled "ICRC action in Hungary in 1956", Françoise Perret traces the organization's work during those days of such high drama for Hungary. Since then, history has changed course once more with the collapse of communism in 1989.

As shots rang out in Budapest, war broke out in the Middle East. In her second analysis, Françoise Perret describes the ICRC's activities within the context of the Suez crisis. Here again, the picture has altered radically since those days: in 1978 the Camp David agreement put an end to the long-standing conflict between Egypt and Israel and, almost 20 years on, the Oslo and Cairo accords have laid the foundations for a Palestinian State.

The second volume of ICRC history,¹ written by André Durand, closes with an examination of the immediate consequences of the Second World War, and the historical part of François Bugnion's work² is likewise confined to the period up to 1945. Thus, in publishing these two articles by Françoise Perret, The Review is helping to shed light on the ICRC's history during the second half of the twentieth century.

The Review

¹*History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, Henry Dunant Institute/ICRC, Geneva, 1984, 675 pp.

²*Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, 1994, 1438 pp.

ICRC action in Hungary in 1956

by Françoise Perret

A REVOLUTION CRUSHED

In Eastern Europe, 1956 was above all the year that marked the beginning of destalinization, following the submission to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (17-24 February) of Nikita Khrushchev's famous report on Stalin's crimes.

Khrushchev's revelations were soon to have repercussions, notably in Poland where thousands of political prisoners were released as early as April of the same year. Among them was Wladyslaw Gomulka, former Secretary-General of the Polish Communist Party from 1943 to 1948, who had been dismissed in 1948 for "*right-wing and nationalist deviation*" and jailed in 1951.

Seven months later, on 20 October 1956, Gomulka was elected First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party. The news caused a sensation in Budapest and on 23 October tens of thousands of Hungarians demonstrated in front of the statue of General Bem, the Polish hero of the Hungarian revolution of 1848.

The demonstration then moved towards the home of Imre Nagy, a former partisan of Béla Kun, who had been living in exile in Moscow before returning to Hungary with the Soviet troops in 1944. From that time on he had served successively as Minister of Agriculture, Minister of the Interior, President of the National Assembly and President of the Council until his dismissal in January 1955.

Seeing the size of the demonstration in favour of Nagy, the Hungarian leadership immediately appointed him President of the Council. That was

not enough to pacify the crowd, however: shooting broke out and the next day, 24 October, a general strike was declared. At 9 a.m. Radio Budapest announced that the government had proclaimed a state of emergency whereby anyone causing a disturbance was liable to the death penalty. In a subsequent announcement, the radio warned that "*pursuant to the Warsaw Pact, the authorities have called for assistance from the Soviet troops stationed in Hungary. In response to the government's appeal, Soviet troops are helping to restore order*". Numbers of Hungarian soldiers and officers, led by General Pál Maléter, went over to the insurgents and by the end of the morning it was clear that the Soviet troops could no longer count on any support except that of the members of the AVH (the security police). János Kádár replaced Ernő Gerő as First Secretary of the Hungarian Workers' (Communist) Party.

Fighting intensified in the next few days, with virtually unarmed insurgents assailing Hungarian government forces and Soviet tanks with Molotov cocktails, while revolutionary councils seized power in provincial towns.

On 28 October, Imre Nagy ordered a cease-fire by the government forces. He announced that agreement had been reached with the Soviet authorities on the withdrawal of their troops stationed in Hungary; he also declared the abolition of the one-party system and ordered the release of political detainees, including Cardinal József Mindszenty. The revolution appeared to have succeeded.

Most provincial towns were in the hands of the insurgents. Győr, where a provisional national council had been set up under Attila Szigethy, a member of the National Peasants' Party and a parliamentary deputy, became the insurgents' rallying-point.

In Budapest, however, the withdrawal of Soviet troops dragged on; most of the insurgents refused to lay down their arms and the hunt for AVH members began.

The situation took a new turn on 31 October when Soviet troops occupied all Hungarian airports and encircled Budapest. In response to that manoeuvre, Imre Nagy, who had taken over the foreign affairs portfolio, proclaimed Hungary's neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. János Kádár disappeared. The Soviet military authorities agreed on 3 November to discuss matters with representatives of the Hungarian armed forces, including General Maléter, the hero of the insurrection, but the Hungarian negotiators were arrested during the talks. The following day, Imre Nagy announced on the radio that Soviet troops were attacking Budapest. That was to be his last public statement; he took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy while Kádár and three former ministers

issued an “open letter” announcing that they had formed a “*revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ government*”, which had appealed to the Soviet forces for help.

On 4 November the United Nations Security Council met in an emergency session, but the USSR vetoed the adoption of a draft resolution supported by nine Council members and calling upon Moscow to withdraw its forces immediately. That veto was to paralyse any UN attempt to intervene in Hungary.

Bitter fighting broke out between the insurgents, on the one hand, and the Hungarian police and Soviet army on the other. In a matter of hours Soviet forces held the key strategic points in Budapest and, in the days that followed, they occupied the rest of the country. Documents published by the Hungarian authorities at the time reported 2,700 dead and 20,000 injured; in Budapest itself, 8,000 dwellings were totally destroyed and 35,000 badly damaged, mostly by artillery fire.

On 22 November Imre Nagy left the Yugoslav Embassy; he was arrested, condemned to death and executed in June 1958.

The crushing of the Hungarian uprising was followed by a wave of arrests, deportations and executions, as well as a mass exodus of Hungarians to Austria and Yugoslavia.

ICRC ACTION

Dispatching delegates and relief supplies

On Saturday 27 October 1956, as street-fighting raged in Budapest, the ICRC received an appeal from the Hungarian Red Cross, requesting blood plasma, transfusion equipment and dressings.

With the help of the Swiss Red Cross it immediately put together an emergency relief consignment, and the following afternoon an ICRC-chartered aircraft loaded with supplies was already on its way to Budapest with two delegates, Herbert Beckh and René Bovey, on board.¹

The plane flew straight on to Vienna to pick up the goods that were pouring into the Austrian capital. It was to make six shuttle flights between

¹ Minutes of the ICRC Assembly’s plenary meeting of 1 November 1956 — ICRC Archives. English-language supplement to the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (hereinafter *Supplement*), Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, p. 205.

Vienna and Budapest before Soviet troops closed the airport on 31 October.²

Upon their arrival in Budapest, the ICRC delegates contacted the Hungarian Red Cross and handed over their cargo; they decided that René Bovey would take charge of the ICRC operation in Budapest while Herbert Beckh tried to get to Győr to hold discussions with Attila Szigethy, one of the main insurgent leaders.³

Public concern over the Hungarian uprising was such that relief supplies continued to flood into Vienna; indeed, humanitarian aid was the only practical demonstration of Western support for the insurgents. The ICRC therefore decided to send out specialized delegates to coordinate the forwarding of the aid to Hungary with the Austrian Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies).⁴

Appeal to all combatants

When Hungary's airports were closed by Soviet troops on 31 October, the ICRC immediately backed the efforts of its delegates in Hungary by regularly broadcasting the following appeal over the Swiss short-wave service on its own wavelength:

At a time when the International Committee of the Red Cross, in conjunction with the principal National Red Cross Societies, is endeavouring to give Hungary, so sorely tried, the charitable aid the country requires, it wishes to recall several fundamental principles contained in the Geneva Conventions by which all peoples are bound.

(1) All those who take no part in the fighting must be respected. The taking of hostages, in particular, is forbidden.

(2) It is prohibited to kill or wound an enemy who gives himself up. Prisoners must be treated humanely. In no case can any sentence be passed on them without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly constituted court.

² ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary, Geneva, ICRC, 1957, p. 6.

³ Report by Herbert Beckh, dated 15 November 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (65).

⁴ Minutes of the ICRC Assembly's plenary meeting of 1 November 1956 - ICRC Archives.

(3) The wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for without discrimination. The ICRC appeals to all concerned for the principles of these Conventions, which Hungary ratified in 1954, to be strictly respected.

The ICRC also sent a memorandum to the Hungarian and Soviet authorities, asking them in particular to grant its delegates in Hungary every facility in their humanitarian work. In taking these steps, the ICRC expressed no opinion as to the status of the conflict in legal terms, its main concern being to protect and assist the victims insofar as it could and was allowed to do so.⁵

Visit to prisoners held by the insurgents

Herbert Beckh made contact with the insurgents on 1 November, and when he got to Győr a group of doctors handed him a list of the region's needs. He then spoke for over an hour with Attila Szigethy, who formally undertook to order his troops to afford humane treatment to any adversaries who fell into their hands, in accordance with the principles of the Geneva Conventions. As a result, the insurgents were persuaded not to execute about 300 prisoners they were holding. Back in Vienna the next day, however, Beckh learned that some insurgents had carried out executions in Budapest. He therefore returned to Győr, where the insurgent leaders suggested that he speak in person on "Radio Liberation"; this he did, calling upon all combatants to treat wounded or captured enemies humanely. His appeal was also broadcast by insurgent-held Radio Budapest. Before returning to Vienna, Beckh went to the border town of Sopron where, with Soviet troops only 12 km away, he visited 29 prisoners still being held by the insurgents, the remainder having been released.⁶

The fall of Budapest

On 4 November Soviet troops took over Budapest and the Hungarian Red Cross made a last telephone call to the ICRC, requesting it to intervene in order to ensure the protection of victims of the fighting, in accordance with the rules of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the

⁵ *ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary*, p. 7. Internal note by Jean-Pierre Maunoir, dated 19 September 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (65).

⁶ *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, pp. 205-206. Report by Herbert Beckh, dated 15 November 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (65).

protection of civilians.⁷ All communications with Hungary were then cut. Two ICRC delegates, René Bovey and Jean de Preux, who had just joined him, were trapped in Budapest; they were unable to make contact with the Soviet military authorities until 9 November, when they were given the assurance that Red Cross convoys would be allowed to enter Hungary.⁸

For its part, the ICRC in Geneva again called upon the Hungarian and Soviet authorities to ensure the application of the provisions of all four Geneva Conventions.⁹ In addition, various radio stations in Central and Eastern Europe were asked to broadcast the following appeal in both Hungarian and Russian:

The International Committee of the Red Cross makes a solemn appeal to commanders and combatants in Hungary: The International Committee of the Red Cross is informed that combats are still raging in Budapest, and that numerous wounded have not yet been collected and cared for. It makes an urgent appeal to commanders and combatants to call a truce by mutual agreement in order that the wounded may be collected and evacuated. The present appeal is made by the ICRC in accordance with the provisions of Article 15 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.¹⁰

On 8 November the ICRC telexed Professor Mitereff, President of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR, and urged him to intervene personally with a view to obtaining details on the current situation in Budapest and to inform the ICRC accordingly.

The operation continues from Vienna

From the very outset of the Hungarian uprising, relief had been flowing into the Austrian capital and the number of refugees was increasing daily,¹¹ so a clear distribution of tasks between the various Red Cross

⁷ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1956, p. 14. Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meeting of 4 November 1956 — ICRC Archives.

⁸ *ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary*, Geneva, 1957, p. 8. Telegram from the ICRC delegation in Vienna, dated 7 November 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (65). Mission report by Jean de Preux, dated 12 December 1956 - ICRC Archives, file No. 225 (65). Discussion of 25 August 1988 between Jean de Preux and Françoise Perret.

⁹ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1956, p. 14.

¹⁰ *ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary*, *op cit.* (see footnote 8), p. 8.

¹¹ *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 11, November 1956, pp. 193-194.

organizations working in Vienna — the ICRC, the League of Red Cross Societies and the Austrian Red Cross — was essential. On 2 November the League and the ICRC reached an agreement whereby the League was to receive and coordinate in Vienna all consignments from National Societies, while the ICRC was to forward them to Hungary and distribute them together with the Hungarian Red Cross. In addition, the agreement provided that the Austrian Red Cross would be responsible for assisting refugees.¹²

Since Soviet troops had been occupying the airports since 31 October, however, the ICRC plane shuttling between Vienna and Budapest could no longer land there and the delegates had to find an alternative overland solution.

An initial convoy of 65 vehicles, carrying relief supplies and including a medical unit, left Vienna on 9 November with delegates, doctors, nurses, interpreters, drivers and mechanics on board. The ICRC had notified the Hungarian and Soviet authorities of the departure of the convoy, requesting them to facilitate its crossing of the border. After a day's delay at the Sopron border post the column was allowed to continue its journey on to Budapest, where it arrived on 12 November. There Jean de Preux and René Bovey, the two ICRC delegates who had remained in the Hungarian capital, took charge. After that, ICRC trucks regularly carried consignments of food and medicines from Vienna to Budapest, and the delegates organized other relief transports by rail and by barge on the Danube.¹³

Agreement with the Hungarian Red Cross

On 16 November, a delegation made up of the new Hungarian Red Cross leadership — a spontaneously-formed body of professors — travelled to Vienna and signed the following agreement with the ICRC:

(1) The International Committee of the Red Cross assumes the control of the distribution in Hungary of relief supplies for the Hungarian population which have been or which will be entrusted to it by national Red Cross Societies, either directly or through the intermediary of the League of Red Cross Societies.

¹²ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary, p. 9.

¹³ICRC Annual Report, 1956, pp. 15-17. Supplement, Vol. X, No. 3, March 1957, pp. 42-48; Vol. X, No. 4, April 1957, pp. 67-73; Vol. X, No. 5, May 1957, pp. 95-99; Vol. X, No. 11, November 1957, pp. 205-221.

(2) *The International Committee of the Red Cross will also assume the control of the distribution of donations made on behalf of the Hungarian population which have been or which will be entrusted to it either directly or through the intermediary of the Secretary-General of the United Nations organization acting in agreement with the Hungarian Government.*

(3) *The distribution of these supplies through the neutral intermediary of the International Committee of the Red Cross shall be carried out in accord with the fundamental principles governing its action, that is to say, strict impartiality and without any discrimination whatsoever other than that of the needs of the persons to be assisted.*

(4) *Towards this end the International Committee of the Red Cross shall, in agreement with the Hungarian Red Cross, draw up various programs for assistance which shall be carried out progressively according to the urgency of the needs to be met and function of the available supplies. As an example, it has already been foreseen that assistance should in the first place be given to the sick, the wounded of all kinds, infants, expectant mothers, the aged and the infirm.*

(5) *All facilities shall be given to the International Committee of the Red Cross in order to enable it to set up a delegation in Hungary immediately, which shall include the following personnel required in order to:*

(a) *draw up, in agreement with the Hungarian Red Cross, the programs for assistance mentioned above,*

(b) *assure the protection and the management of the warehouses which the International Committee of the Red Cross will set up in the principal distribution centres,*

(c) *assure the transportation of supplies to or from these warehouses,*

(d) *assist in the actual distribution of supplies and in reporting back to the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva on these distributions for the information of donors.*

This personnel, mainly consisting of Swiss citizens, shall be placed under the orders of a Delegate-in-Chief, with Headquarters in Budapest, who will be acting in close liaison with the representatives designated by the Hungarian Red Cross for this purpose.

(6) *In order to allow the efficient execution of the strictly humanitarian action of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Hungarian Red Cross and the Hungarian Government shall see that in the exercise of its functions, the Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Hungary receives all aid and protection from all authorities civil or military.*

(7) *The general dispositions of the present agreement shall be completed by a technical plan of operations drawn up in agreement between the representatives of the Hungarian Red Cross and the Delegate-in-Chief of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Budapest.*

(8) *The sole object of the present agreement being the distribution of relief supplies to the Hungarian population it cannot be interpreted as restricting the other humanitarian activities which the International Committee of the Red Cross may be called upon to exercise in Hungary in conformity with the statutes of the International Red Cross or the provisions of the Geneva Conventions.¹⁴*

The Hungarian Minister in Vienna ratified the document the very same day, by authority of the Hungarian government.

Following the signing of the agreement, the ICRC dispatched another delegate to Budapest, who was specifically entrusted with the task of drawing up plans for the most urgently needed assistance, in cooperation with the Hungarian Red Cross; he was also asked to prepare a list of requirements in Budapest and the provinces. In June 1957, however, the body of professors heading the Hungarian Red Cross was dissolved and replaced by government appointees. The ICRC sent additional delegates to back up its staff in Vienna, where relief supplies were arriving without any prior coordination, thus causing considerable confusion.¹⁵

On 4 December the President of the ICRC concluded a further agreement with the United Nations Secretary-General whereby the ICRC assumed responsibility for the distribution in Hungary of relief supplies provided by the United Nations.¹⁶ Since the UN General Assembly had

¹⁴ Agreement of 16 November 1956 between the ICRC and the Hungarian Red Cross — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (65). Zoltan Csillag, *Data about the activity of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Hungarian Red Cross in 1956-1957*, Hungarian Red Cross, 1992.

¹⁵ Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meeting of 22 November 1956 — ICRC Archives.

¹⁶ *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, pp. 217-219.

condemned the Soviet intervention, the Organization was forbidden access to the country and the ICRC, in its neutral capacity, was the only body authorized by the Soviet authorities to take action on Hungarian soil. The agreement read as follows:

(1) The Committee, at the request of the Secretary-General, agrees to use any funds as may be transferred to it by the United Nations for the exclusive purpose of providing immediate aid to the population of Hungary, in particular by furnishing medical supplies, foodstuffs and clothing. The responsibility assumed by the Committee in this respect will commence upon receipt of any such funds and will terminate after the distribution of relief supplies to the Hungarian population or, in the event of cessation of the programme, upon return to the United Nations of any unused portion of such funds or of supplies purchased with such funds.

(2) The Committee will undertake responsibility for the distribution of such supplies as may be furnished by the United Nations. The Committee may indicate to the United Nations the types of relief goods regarded as most appropriate for the purpose of the programme.

(3) In accordance with the principles of the Red Cross and in the spirit of the Geneva Conventions, the Committee will distribute relief under this programme without discrimination and on the basis of need alone.

(4) While making every effort to carry out this programme as rapidly as possible, the Committee will retain responsibility for the schedule (French "cadence") of distribution of relief supplies. In the event of difficulties or obstacles arising in the execution of the programme, the Committee will, if necessary, report to the United Nations but it will be solely responsible for taking appropriate measures.

(5) The Committee will supply all organizational, supervisory and technical personnel, services and equipment required for the operation of the programme.

(6) The United Nations will defray such administrative and operational costs of the Committee attributable to the performance of the United Nations relief programme as may be agreed between the United Nations and the Committee.

(7) The Committee will be the sole agency to carry out the relief programme on behalf of the United Nations with the contributions

made pursuant to resolution 399 adopted by the General Assembly at the Second Emergency Special Session on 9 November 1956. This shall not be construed to limit the right of other United Nations agencies to carry out assistance programmes in accordance with their terms of reference and in agreement with the Hungarian authorities.

(8) The United Nations recognizes the Committee as an independent and autonomous organization which undertakes to perform the services envisaged in this agreement. The performance of such services will not in any way place the Committee in a subordinate position towards the United Nations, and the Committee will not be required to carry out any other task than those set forth in this agreement.

(9) The Committee will submit to the Secretary-General monthly operational reports and financial reports of costs incurred in the performance of its responsibilities under this agreement.

(10) The United Nations and the Committee will act in close collaboration in regard to the planning and the implementation of the programme. In particular, the Committee will extend full co-operation to any representative who may be sent to Hungary by the Secretary-General in connection with the programme.

(11) Nothing contained in this agreement will affect any of the other activities which the Committee already is carrying out or may carry out in Hungary in the performance of its traditional role.

(12) This Agreement may be terminated by either party on one week's notice subject, if possible, to prior consultation. The termination of this Agreement will not affect the responsibilities of either party under the Agreement with respect to the completion of the distribution of supplies still outstanding at the date of termination.

Together, the two agreements enabled the ICRC to conduct a large-scale relief operation for the Hungarian population up until October 1957, when it closed its delegation in the country. In its *Annual Report* for 1957, the ICRC estimated the total value of relief supplies sent to Hungary under its operation at over 80 million Swiss francs, covering mostly food, clothing, medicines and hospital equipment.¹⁷

¹⁷ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1957, p. 15. *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, pp. 217-219.

Activities on behalf of detained or deported insurgents

At a meeting in Vienna with the new leaders of the Hungarian Red Cross, the ICRC delegates asked what had become of insurgents who had been imprisoned or deported. They were told that the arrests had been carried out by the Russians and that the Hungarian authorities had practically no information on the subject. The ICRC took the view that a direct approach to the Soviet authorities would have little chance of success and might even jeopardize the relief operation itself; it therefore instructed René Bovey, its delegate in Budapest, to take matters up with the Hungarian authorities when he felt the time was right. During a mission to Budapest in January 1957, however, Roger Gallopin, Executive Director of the ICRC, found that the representations made by René Bovey had all proved in vain; the Hungarian Red Cross leaders begged him to refrain from taking any action regarding the issue of detainees for fear of placing the entire relief operation at risk.¹⁸

Assistance to refugees in Austria

Following the intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary, the exodus of refugees rapidly assumed such proportions that an amendment had to be made to the agreement concluded between the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies on 2 November, under which the Austrian Red Cross was in principle responsible for receiving refugees; the National Society was soon overwhelmed, however, so on 27 November the ICRC and the League signed a new agreement whereby the ICRC undertook not only to transport relief supplies and distribute them in Hungary but also to handle, in Vienna, all material aid for the operation. In addition, part of the relief arriving in the Austrian capital would go to Hungarian refugees, and the League would continue, in liaison with the Austrian Red Cross and government authorities, to direct all activities on their behalf.¹⁹

The exodus of some 200,000 Hungarians tore numerous families apart, as people fled to different countries and most separated relatives had no means of coming together again. To help them reestablish contact and where possible reunite, the ICRC started by establishing their

¹⁸ Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meetings of 22 and 29 November 1956 and 17 January 1957 — ICRC Archives.

¹⁹ *ICRC report on the relief action in Hungary, op. cit.* (see footnote 8), p. 9. Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meeting of 22 November 1956 — ICRC Archives. *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, pp. 208-210.

identities and then arranged for them to exchange messages with each other. On 13 November it started broadcasting over the Swiss short-wave service and on its own wavelength the names of refugees seeking news of their relatives.

At the same time the ICRC drew up a register of Hungarian refugees; from early 1957 this enabled it to respond to the many tracing enquiries it received from dispersed family members.

The problem of family reunification obviously did not affect only Hungarians scattered in different countries but also — and more acutely — those with relatives who had remained in Hungary. This was the case of numerous children who had crossed the Yugoslav or Austrian borders by themselves, and of parents whose children had been left behind. The Hungarian government therefore requested the ICRC to draw up a plan for bringing these families together again and, in April 1957, the institution submitted a draft agreement providing for separated relatives to be reunited at the place of residence designated by the head of the family, and for reunification to be organized on an individual and voluntary basis. The ICRC was to help both with repatriation to Hungary and exit from the country; exit visas for persons to be reunited with close relatives were to be granted by the authorities concerned under an accelerated procedure different from that generally applied for emigration purposes. All reunification operations were to be placed under the supervision of the ICRC.

The plan proved unacceptable to the Hungarian government, however, as it would not agree to its nationals leaving the country to join family members who had fled to the West. In November 1957 the controversy was brought before the 19th International Conference of the Red Cross in New Delhi. The Conference endorsed the ICRC's position in its Resolution XX, which called upon all National Societies and all governments to "*facilitate by every means the reunion of persons, both adults and children, with their families in accordance with the wishes of [...] the recognized head of the family no matter where domiciled*". Yet the Hungarian government continued to hamper emigration of its nationals and the ICRC had to process the cases referred to it on an individual basis.²⁰

²⁰Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meeting of 18 April 1957 — ICRC Archives. Meeting of 2 May 1989 between Nicolas Vecsey, former Deputy Head of the ICRC Central Tracing Agency, and Françoise Perret. François Bugnion, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, 1994, pp. 903-908.

CONCLUSION

The ICRC's relief operation for the Hungarian population was carried through in spite of the obstacles that arose in its path, thanks to the organization's swift response in sending delegates to the country and to the initial consignments of relief supplies dispatched in the few days during which the borders stayed open. The delegates remained in Hungary throughout the Soviet intervention and managed to obtain the necessary authorization for the passage of humanitarian aid convoys. A large-scale assistance programme was launched to help the population of Budapest through a particularly harsh winter in the partially destroyed Hungarian capital, and provided them with food, clothing, medicines and other medical supplies, building materials, window panes, coal and other essential items. The operation came to an end in October 1957, when the situation in the country no longer called for emergency action.

An ICRC delegate managed to visit detainees in the hands of insurgents in the Győr region. On the other hand, the delegates based in Budapest were never allowed to visit imprisoned or deported insurgents, nor did the ICRC succeed in its efforts to set up a programme to assist families split up by the events, since the Hungarian government refused to allow its nationals to join relatives who had fled to the West.²¹

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²¹ Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meetings of 17 January and 18 July 1957 — ICRC Archives. Minutes of the ICRC Assembly's plenary meeting of 3 December 1957 — ICRC Archives.

ICRC action during the Suez crisis in 1956

by Françoise Perret

WAR OVER THE CANAL

With tension mounting between Israel and its Arab neighbours, the British troops stationed in the Suez Canal zone pulled out of Egypt on 18 June 1956, in accordance with an agreement signed between that country and the United Kingdom in October 1954.

One month later, on 19 July 1956, the United States informed Egypt that contrary to expectations it was withholding a loan of over 50 million US dollars for building the Aswan high dam; the very next day, the United Kingdom and the World Bank also refused Egypt a loan.

On 26 July Colonel Nasser, the Egyptian Head of State, nationalized the Suez Canal and assumed leadership of the Arab nationalist movement.

In late October 1956 the events in Hungary were the focus of world attention. That situation changed abruptly on 29 October, however, when, by agreement with the United Kingdom and France, Israel attacked Egypt and its troops entered the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula; the governments in London and Paris issued an ultimatum on 30 October threatening to occupy the canal zone.

With the Israeli army continuing its advance and pursuing Egyptian troops in the Sinai, the French and British air forces started bombing Egyptian airports.

On 5 November the Israelis occupied the Gaza Strip and the Sinai as far as Sharm el Sheikh. Meanwhile, French and British troops landed at Port Fuad and Port Said and were advancing along the canal.

In waging that war against Egypt, Israel hoped to put an end to attacks by Palestinian groups whose main operational bases were in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai. For the French, the main aim was to deprive the Algerian uprising of Egyptian support, while the British were seeking to stem the mounting tide of Arab nationalism and wrest back control of the canal.

On 2 November, however, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire and, on 5 November, voted for the creation of an emergency force to impose and supervise a cessation of hostilities. Under pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, the belligerents agreed on 7 November to a cease-fire providing for the replacement of French and British troops by a United Nations emergency force; the handover was completed on 24 December, but Israel hung on to its position in the Gaza Strip and the Gulf of Aqaba until March 1957, when its troops withdrew and were replaced by a UN contingent.

During the fighting the Israelis took more than 5,000 Egyptian prisoners of war; Egypt, which held four Israeli military personnel, expelled thousands of Jews and many foreigners — mostly British nationals — residing in the country. The civilian population of the territories occupied by Israel also suffered from the consequences of the war.

ICRC ACTION

ICRC delegates in the Near East

Because of constant strife in the Near East since the end of the Second World War, the ICRC had an honorary delegate in Cairo by the name of Edmond Müller.

When tension rose throughout the region in October 1956, the ICRC decided to set up a permanent regional delegation in Beirut covering, *inter alia*, Israel. David de Traz was appointed to run the delegation and travelled to Israel as soon as hostilities broke out.¹

Appeal to the belligerents

Egypt, France and Israel were bound by the 1949 Geneva Conventions when the fighting started, but the fact that the United Kingdom had not yet ratified them meant that they did not apply in Egyptian-British

¹ ICRC Annual Report, 1956, pp. 23-24.

relations. To try and remedy the problem, the ICRC cabled the British government on 31 October with a request that it ratify the Conventions by means of an accelerated procedure. It based its representation on the third paragraph of Article 2 common to all four Conventions, which reads as follows: "*Although one of the Powers in conflict may not be a party to the present Convention, the Powers who are parties thereto shall remain bound by it in their mutual relations. They shall furthermore be bound by the Convention in relation to the said Power, if the latter accepts and applies the provisions thereof.*" British Prime Minister Anthony Eden informed the ICRC the following day that his government could not comply with the organization's request but that it intended to apply the provisions of the Conventions, should the occasion arise.²

On 2 November the ICRC appealed to the governments of the four countries involved in the hostilities - Israel, Egypt, France and the United Kingdom - to take all necessary measures to ensure the application of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. It also stated its readiness to assume the duties entrusted to it under the Conventions, particularly by sending delegates to visit prisoners of war and arrested or interned civilians and by providing aid to these people if need be. The ICRC further drew the four governments' attention to the existence in Geneva of the Central Prisoners-of-War Agency, which collected the names of captured members of the armed forces and arrested or interned civilians, transmitted such information to the governments of belligerent countries, and arranged for the exchange of correspondence between prisoners and their families. It therefore called on the four governments to provide it with the full particulars of military personnel captured by their own forces and of arrested or interned enemy civilians.³

Within the next two days, France and Israel informed the ICRC that they were prepared to apply the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The ICRC dispatched two representatives, Professor Paul Carry and Melchior Borsinger, to London to liaise with the British authorities and the British Red Cross. William Michel, the ICRC's resident delegate in France, was entrusted with a similar mission to the French government and the French Red Cross.

²Telegram of 31 October 1956 from the ICRC to the British government and telegram of 1 November 1956 from the British government to the ICRC — ICRC Archives, files Nos. 041 and 201 (152). English-language supplement to the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (hereinafter *Supplement*), Vol. IX, No. 11, November 1956, p. 195.

³ICRC offer of services of 2 November 1956 — ICRC Archives, files Nos. 200 (43) and 201 (152).

The ICRC also broadcast over Egyptian radio the following message in several languages, to inform all combatants of the core principles of the Geneva Conventions for the protection of war victims:

The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva wishes to recall that the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 for the protection of war victims are applicable to the armed conflict which is now taking place on Egyptian soil. These Conventions impose on all combatants duties which may be summarized as follows:

1. The wounded and the sick, whether members of the armed forces or civilians, friends or enemies, shall be collected and protected and shall receive without delay the treatment their condition demands.

2. The following may never, under any circumstances, be attacked, but should always be respected and protected by the combatants: fixed or mobile medical establishments, namely hospitals, ambulances, vehicles used for carrying the wounded and the sick (i.e. hospital trains, hospital ships, medical aircraft) and the members and the equipment of Army and Red Cross or Red Crescent Medical Services responsible for treating the wounded and the sick.

3. To permit the enemy to recognize their medical status, such establishments, vehicles and personnel are authorized to clearly display the red cross or the red crescent emblem on a white background; this emblem must always, and under all circumstances, be respected and never be employed for any other object whatsoever.

4. Every enemy soldier, non-commissioned officer or officer surrendering, or otherwise captured, must be treated as a prisoner of war, and may not, therefore, be killed, or molested in any way; he must be treated as regards food, lodging, clothing, etc., in the same way as the military personnel of the detaining Power. As soon as possible he must be evacuated to the rear, where the appropriate authorities will become responsible for him.

5. Non-combatants, especially women and children, must never be attacked by the armed forces, but should, on the contrary, always be respected and humanely treated.

6. Torture, cruel or degrading treatment, and the taking of hostages are and remain forbidden at all times and in all places and in respect of all persons.⁴

⁴Supplement, Vol. X, No. 2, February 1957, pp. 20-21.

The ICRC appealed to all those engaged in the fighting in Egypt or exercising authority in the country to ensure that the above principles were respected.

Contacts with the Israeli and Egyptian authorities

Upon arriving in Israel in the days that followed the outbreak of the conflict, David de Traz received confirmation from the Israeli authorities that they intended to apply the Geneva Conventions. They also agreed to the ICRC sending a medical delegate out to Tel Aviv to visit wounded Egyptians being held there; Dr Louis Gaillard accordingly reached Tel Aviv on 8 November.

De Traz then joined Edmond Müller in Cairo, where enquiries for news were flooding in from the families of captured soldiers. Together they set up a tracing service with the help of locally recruited staff, while the Central Prisoner-of-War Agency in Geneva compiled lists of prisoners and forwarded family messages.

De Traz also obtained an assurance from the Egyptian authorities that ICRC delegates would have access to Israelis in Egyptian hands.⁵

Relief supplies dispatched to Egypt

The Egyptian Red Crescent informed the ICRC on 7 November that it accepted the offer of assistance extended by the organization on 2 November, and made an urgent request for large quantities of medicines and other medical supplies. The ICRC at once appealed to some 50 National Societies, about 30 of which immediately responded with contributions to the relief fund it had opened. An aircraft loaded with four tonnes of essentially medical supplies left Geneva for Cairo on 11 November.

The consignment was escorted by an ICRC medical delegate, Dr R. Grosclaude, who on arriving in Cairo decided to send some of the medicines on to Port Said, which was completely cut off from the rest of the country. With the help of the Egyptian Red Crescent he persuaded the Egyptian authorities to send a special train to Port Said under ICRC protection; however, shooting was rife in the town, which was occupied by British and French troops who let practically nobody enter or leave.

⁵ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1956, p. 24, and 1957, pp. 22-23.

Nonetheless, Maurice Thudichum, another ICRC delegate, managed to reach Port Said on 12 November in a French military aircraft and there was assured by British and French officers that they would let the ICRC convoy through. The medicines thus reached their destination on 16 November.

During his mission to Port Said and then to Port Fuad, Thudichum visited Egyptian prisoners of war in French and British hands, organized the distribution of relief supplies to the civilian population and set up a service to forward family messages.⁶

On 20 November a second aircraft, lent to the ICRC by the Danish Red Cross, left Geneva for Cairo with three tonnes of medicines and dressings for the population of Port Said.

Visits to prisoners of war in Israel and civilians in the occupied territories

Dr Gaillard regularly visited over 5,000 Egyptian prisoners of war held in camps or being treated in hospitals in Israel. During his visits he was free to interview the men without witnesses, in accordance with standard ICRC practice, and he secured the release of several hundred civilians detained without due cause. He also travelled to the Gaza Strip and the Sinai several times to check whether civilians there were being treated in accordance with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. In Gaza he made several visits to Egyptian nationals interned in a district of the city and awaiting repatriation. He also organized the distribution of relief supplies to the needy in El Arish and Rafah.⁷

Repatriation of seriously wounded Egyptians

Dr Gaillard informed the ICRC on 18 November that the Israeli authorities were planning to repatriate an initial group of seriously wounded Egyptians. The ICRC delegates negotiated the terms of their repatriation with Cairo and Tel Aviv and, on 5 December, two medical aircraft made available to the ICRC by the Italian authorities flew 26 seriously wounded Egyptians back to Cairo. A few days later both aircraft returned to Israel with a cargo of individual and collective relief supplies

⁶ *Supplement*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1956, pp. 220-222. Reports by Maurice Thudichum, dated 14 and 17 December 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (43). Minutes of the ICRC Presidential Council's meeting of 9 April 1957 — ICRC Archives.

⁷ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1957, p. 24.

for Egyptian prisoners of war, before returning to Cairo with a second group of 22 serious cases.

Those medical flights between Israel and Egypt were the first direct air link between the two countries since the war in Palestine in 1948.⁸

Development of operations in Egypt

By the end of November the ICRC delegates in Egypt had succeeded in organizing regular relief convoys to Port Said. On the return journey the convoys were used to evacuate sick or wounded Egyptian military personnel requiring special treatment in Cairo hospitals.⁹

The ICRC encountered serious difficulties in obtaining information about the Israeli prisoners of war held by the Egyptians, but eventually it did manage to secure their names on 14 December: the group consisted of one officer and three soldiers. Initially an ICRC delegate was allowed to visit the officer, who was detained separately, but not the soldiers. Later, however, he succeeded in gaining access to all four prisoners, who were freed on 26 January 1957.

The ICRC delegates also visited and negotiated the release of the Egyptian prisoners of war held by the British and the French in Port Said. On 21 December 1956 a group of Egyptian prisoners detained by the British there was freed and the Egyptian authorities responded by releasing some Britons being held in Cairo. For their part the French military authorities told de Traz that they would take their Egyptian prisoners with them to prevent any incidents which might arise if they were released locally. The ICRC delegation in Paris was instructed to intervene on the prisoners' behalf, but the ICRC Archives contain no trace of any such representation, or of any request by the Egyptian government concerning the captives, which probably means that they were speedily released.¹⁰

Repatriation of all prisoners of war

In January 1957 the ICRC negotiated with the Israeli and Egyptian authorities over the repatriation of all prisoners of war. A first group of

⁸ *ICRC Annual Report*, 1956, p. 30.

⁹ Report by David de Traz, dated 7 December 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (43).

¹⁰ *ICRC Annual Reports*, 1956, p. 26-29; 1958, p. 16; 1959, p. 15. *Supplement*, Vol. X, No. 1, January 1957, pp. 7-9. Report by Edmond Müller to the ICRC Presidential Council, dated 18 December 1956 — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (43).

500 Egyptian prisoners was handed over on 21 January to officers of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) between Rafah and El Arish, in the presence of Dr Gaillard and Maurice Thudichum.

From then on, groups of Egyptian prisoners of war were repatriated at regular intervals. The operation was completed on 5 February, by which time the Egyptian authorities had released the Israelis they were holding.¹¹

Doctor Gaillard then left Israel, but the ICRC kept on Doctor Bernath, who had already worked for the organization during the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948-1949, as its local correspondent.

Relief for the population of Port Said

One ICRC delegate, two senior staff of the Egyptian Red Crescent and a representative of the League of Red Cross Societies (today the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) travelled to Port Said in February 1957 to organize a relief operation in aid of some 15,000 civilians whose homes had been destroyed during the attack by French and British troops and who were living in camps set up by the Egyptian authorities.¹²

Relief for Jews living in Egypt

When the Suez conflict broke out, the Egyptian government accused the 55,000 or so Jews living in Egypt of colluding with Israel and threatened them with immediate expulsion. Without ordering such an extreme measure, however, the authorities took a number of steps (nationalization of Jewish-owned businesses, confiscation of Jewish property, dismissals and arrests, etc.) aimed at provoking their departure. Those measures hit foreign, stateless and Egyptian Jews alike. The ICRC came to the conclusion that it could not concern itself with the fate of foreign Jews, whose interests should be defended by their own governments, but that stateless Jews, and by analogy Egyptian Jews, came under the category of individuals whom it had a duty to protect and assist.

On 27 November 1956, therefore, the ICRC cabled the Egyptian government requesting a suspension of all measures of immediate

¹¹ *Supplement*, Vol. X, No. 2, February 1957, p. 25, and No. 3, March 1957, pp. 54-57. Note dated 21 December 1956 from Pierre Gaillard to David de Traz — ICRC Archives, file No. 200 (43).

¹² *Supplement*, Vol. X, No. 3, March 1957, p. 58.

expulsion and proposing that sufficient time be allowed to ensure respect for the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention.¹³

From then on the delegates in Egypt actively concerned themselves with stateless Jews and those stripped of their Egyptian nationality who wished to emigrate, and the ICRC organized a shipping schedule from Alexandria to Greece and Italy. Between 2 January and 14 September 1957, the delegation chartered 14 vessels, which shipped 7,190 stateless Jews to Piraeus or Naples. Upon arrival they were assisted by the Greek and Italian Red Cross Societies and by the local branches of international Jewish organizations, which sought to find a country of permanent asylum for them (Israel in most cases).

At the end of 1957 the Egyptian government reversed its policy towards Jews living on its territory and started slowing their departure so that they would not go to swell Israel's demographic potential. There were no more collective departures, therefore, although emigrants wishing to leave Egypt individually still sought help from the ICRC. The delegation advised them and assisted them with the many administrative formalities they had to complete, but the number of departures dropped considerably and the delegation was reduced to a single delegate as from 1 January 1961. However, the Egyptian authorities saw no more call for an ICRC presence and, in the spring of 1962, ordered the closing of the Cairo delegation, which was done on 31 December of the same year.¹⁴

Continuing operations in Israel

Until the early 1960s, ICRC activity in Israel was almost wholly determined by the aftermath of the Suez conflict. Thus the ICRC continued to receive requests from Egyptian families concerning persons reported missing during the Sinai campaign; these it transmitted to the Israeli authorities, though the latter systematically answered that they no longer held any prisoners of war.

¹³Telegram dated 27 November 1956 from the ICRC to the Egyptian government - ICRC Archives, file No. 233 (43).

¹⁴*ICRC Annual Reports*, 1956, p. 29; 1957, pp. 25-27; 1958, pp. 16-17; 1959, pp. 14-15; 1960, p. 18; 1961, p. 22. François Bugnion, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, 1994, pp. 1042-1043. Note dated 8 December 1961 from Edmond Müller to Roger Gallopin, Executive Director of the ICRC — ICRC Archives, file No. 252 (43).

Israel was still holding a number of detainees of Palestinian origin (*fedayeen*), however, and ICRC delegates were regularly allowed to visit and hand family messages to some of them.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

During the Suez conflict, all the parties involved — with the exception of the United Kingdom — were bound by the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. In securing a commitment from London to respect the Conventions, the ICRC managed for the first time to have the new Geneva law applied in an international conflict.

The 1949 Conventions entrust the ICRC with the mandate to come to the aid of civilians and prisoners of war alike. Indeed, it was on the basis of the Fourth Geneva Convention for the protection of civilians that the ICRC was able to protect and assist the civilian population in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and Sinai and that its delegates were allowed by the French and British military authorities to distribute relief supplies to the populations of Port Said and Port Fuad.

Thus, in a conflict limited in time but complex in humanitarian terms because of the diversity of situations on the ground, the ICRC succeeded in helping various categories of war victims: prisoners of war, civilian internees, the inhabitants of occupied territories and stateless persons.

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¹⁵ *ICRC Annual Reports*, 1958, pp. 15-16; 1959, pp. 15-16; 1960, p. 19; 1961, p. 22; 1962, pp. 30-31.

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