

ICRC Delegates in Angola

In its last five issues, the *International Review* has dealt with the protection and assistance activities carried out by the ICRC in Angola over the past few months on behalf of the civilian and military victims of the conflict raging in that country. The ICRC has sent not only delegates to Angola but also medical and surgical teams—supplied by various National Societies—which have been at work since July 1975. At the request of the three liberation movements, the ICRC delegates, who numbered more than 40 by November, have carried out the traditional tasks of the institution in wartime: visits to prisoners, exchanges of prisoners, medical and surgical assistance, delivery and distribution of relief supplies, registration and searches for missing persons, the reuniting of families, etc.

We should like to give our readers at this point a more direct impression of two of these activities, through articles by Mr J.-J. Kurz, describing events in which he participated while serving as an ICRC delegate in Angola during the autumn. This should serve to demonstrate the importance of aiding the war victims.

Visit to a prisoner of war camp

“The camp is right beside the road, somewhere in Angola. Colourless huts, surrounded by yellow sand and sprigs of faded grass. Inside the enclosure, a hodge-podge of tanks, guns and armoured vehicles.

“At the entrance, five armed sentries, with nondescript uniforms. We go through the gate without trouble, using the passwords, “Cruz Vermelha, Prisioneros!” The three words are enough. Inside there are two hundred meters of asphalt road, succeeded by a track through the soft sand, over which the vehicles pitch and toss. We reach the barracks, cement structures, around which a humid breeze blows. All the prisoners, 140 of them, are outside, in the shelter of a so-called refectory, made of dirty grey cement.

LEBANON



Relief supplies from the ICRC in Geneva...

Photo Müller/ICRC

LEBANON



...arriving at Beirut.

Photo Châtenay/ICRC

ANGOLA



An ICRC medical delegate delivers medical supplies to nurses at a bush infirmary.

Photo J.-J. Kurz/ICRC

ANGOLA



ICRC delegates escort prisoners of war and civilians from one zone to another.

Photo Pugin/ICRC

“Refectory indeed! The prisoners have not eaten for two days! Amidst the confusion of battle, the arrival of supplies lagged far behind the capture of the prisoners. The delegate oversees the unloading of two hundred kilos of flour, salt, corn, hundreds of tins of food—plus a package of cigarettes for each prisoner—from the ICRC truck.

“The prisoners crowd around the delegate. Their faces are haggard. Amongst the close-cropped haircuts and army headgear, one pink cap stands out. It belongs to one of three women prisoners, two of whom wear combat uniforms. The third wears army shorts and a yellow slipover—and carries a sleeping child in her arms. He is more than a year old, and mother’s milk is no longer sufficient. Tomorrow, special food must be brought for him.

“The prisoners’ spokesman says that some of the men are sick, possibly with malaria.

“The delegate offers reassurance. He says he will come back in three days for a more complete visit, bringing a Red Cross doctor with him. He tells the prisoners what they can expect from the ICRC: protection and assistance.

“Standing motionless amidst the crowd of prisoners around the delegate, a guard listens attentively, holding his rifle by the barrel, the butt resting on his shoulder. In Africa, captivity is not always felt in the same way as it is elsewhere. To some, it is merely another experience, to be accepted fatalistically. The barbed wire is slack and the guards are non-aggressive, standing some distance away and thinking of other things—but no one escapes.

“The prisoners have heard talk about exchanges and about possible release. They know that the ICRC plane has carried released prisoners from one zone to another. It is a difficult moment for the delegate, who must temper their hopes, but without destroying them.

“Meanwhile, an hour later, he will have to have talks with a highly-placed official, to see to it that these captives are fed, regularly and properly.”

The medical delegate on his rounds

“The ICRC medical delegate takes off his shirt, and a white cloud swirls into the air. He has just brought to Cardona a load of 8 tons of powdered milk and flour which he and the other delegates have stacked in the godown. Tomorrow he will be delivering a similar load to the hospital. This jack-of-all-trades, unloading bags of flour, negotiating

with government ministers, transporting medical supplies, organizing a blood bank, is a doctor, on loan to the ICRC from the Swiss Red Cross.

"The hospital is a group of four or five buildings planted here and there on the edge of town, with an almost constant coming and going of soldiers, nurses, mothers and children, and white-clad nuns, while the patients' families camp on the grass around the buildings.

"The blood bank is down to its last six bottles; and efforts to encourage donors have been in vain.

"This is where the medical delegate receives his patients, in a small clean building where the sick children squat in the corridor awaiting their turn.

"Then there is the doctor-delegate's round of the bush infirmaries. Along the way at a check-point manned by four armed soldiers he has to palaver a while until, with an "Ah ! Cruz Vermelha", the soldiers raise the bamboo pole and let him pass.

"Neither peace nor war—at least in this region. Slogans have been daubed on the walls of the little houses and in the village trenches have been dug for the machine-gunner who right now is dozing in the shade.

"The track winds its way through the plantations. On a small bare patch of elevated ground stands the infirmary; from the school comes the drone of children's voices, and to one side a cement hut displays the red cross.

"What medicines are needed? Just about the whole pharmacopoeia. Malaria, malnutrition, bronchitis, infected wounds, parasitic disorders; all are rife. And this infirmary, without even a thermometer, is the only place where the six thousand or so inhabitants of the area can hope for any sort of medical attention.

"The doctor-delegate looks through the register: 20 to 30 patients a day, their ills ranging from simple headaches to pneumonia. Prescriptions made out by the male nurse in the doctor's absence are correct in spite of his rudimentary training. The doctor-delegate leaves a small stock of basic medicines, and checks that the nurse knows how to administer them, and they decide together when to hold the weekly consultations. At each visit the medical delegate may treat a dozen or more serious cases. There are many infirmaries like this one in the region. War wounded are occasionally brought there.

"On the track again for a dozen miles or so the ICRC doctor continues his way through the plantations to the next infirmary which will be equally lacking in supplies."
