

# Cooperation: an essential means for conducting and developing the activities of the Cuban Red Cross

by **Dr María de los Ángeles de Varona Hernández**

The Cuban Red Cross, which was founded on 10 March 1909, was recognized by Presidential Decree No. 401 of the same year as an “aid society auxiliary to the public authorities”. For more than half a century its activities remained rather modest, focusing on health care for the most needy groups in Cuban society, for example by setting up dispensaries and offering medical and dental services at no charge or for a nominal fee.

From the 1940s it also ran life-saving and ambulance services.

In 1959, the country underwent major changes involving reorganization of the political system, government structures and the functions of ministries and other bodies. Among other things, the State assumed full responsibility for the provision of free medical care for all citizens, and Red Cross medical and dental dispensaries ceased to operate because they were no longer needed. The National Society expanded and developed its other activities, such as first aid. Indeed, with the country’s new system came public events attracting large crowds of people, mass mobilizations for agricultural work, and many other gatherings which created a need for the services of Red Cross first-aiders.

---

**Dr María de los Ángeles de Varona Hernández** is a professor at the University of Havana Faculty of Law and Director of the Department of Dissemination of International Humanitarian Law and Communication at the Cuban Red Cross.

Original: Spanish

Until 1993, the Cuban National Society's relations with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the National Societies were confined to friendly exchanges. The first major example of international cooperation was an emergency appeal issued through the Federation to deal with an epidemic of neurological disorders which beset the country. The response demonstrated the potential for cooperation within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, just as the response to a previous appeal launched to repair flood damage after the "storm of the century" had done earlier. There had been other appeals for cooperation and other such activities, but never before on such a large scale. The National Society had also received a number of ICRC officials who held courses on international humanitarian law, and some scholarships had been granted to allow officers of the armed forces to attend courses on international humanitarian law in San Remo.

The past five years have seen growing economic difficulties in Cuba, as the economic embargo originally imposed in 1962 on a few products has been tightened and become generalized. This has had many repercussions, not the least being the increased vulnerability of certain sectors of the population. The Cuban Red Cross, in accordance with its commitment and duties as an aid society, must seek ways of meeting the population's needs as best it can. One means of developing its activities is to request international cooperation from the Movement.

In the current circumstances, the National Society will need to develop as an institution if it is to be able to provide an appropriate and professional response to each case and to every need. Its activities are growing both in number and in scope as the population requires more kinds of assistance and is more frequently in need of help.

Cooperation, both vertical and horizontal, has played a decisive role. Without it, development, which requires advisory assistance, exchanges, training and economic support, would not have been possible.

The Cuban Red Cross has set up a structure enabling it to carry out a range of activities in various spheres, including the promotion of international humanitarian law, tracing work, relief, first-aid and rescue operations, training and special programmes. More recently, it has also stepped up its Red Cross Youth programme.

#### *Cooperation agreement with the ICRC*

The first cooperation agreement with the ICRC took effect in November 1994, with the establishment of the International Humanitarian

Law Study Centre in Havana. With the exception of salaries and the teaching staff, which are provided by the Cuban Red Cross, the Centre's activities are funded by the ICRC.

In February 1997 the ICRC and the Cuban National Society concluded a new cooperation agreement. The new accord is important for two reasons. First, it commits both parties to a common endeavour, and secondly, it expresses in concrete terms the basic aims of cooperation.

The objective of this agreement is to provide a framework for cooperation between the two parties by determining what form that cooperation will take in practice, indicating what tools and means will be used, and providing for periodical assessment of the results by both sides. It sets out specific annual programmes to help achieve the general objectives of the Cuban Red Cross in the five-year period following its signing, its ultimate aim being to respond to the humanitarian needs of the country's most vulnerable population groups.

The areas of cooperation enumerated in the text include humanitarian assistance, the promotion of international humanitarian law and communication, programmes for migrants and refugees, relief work, tracing activities, training and special programmes. These fields of activity correspond to the National Society's operational structure.

It is important that the objectives should be attainable and that it should be possible to implement them using the resources provided under the terms of project and the input of the Cuban Red Cross. It should also be possible to evaluate the results.

The Cuban Red Cross programmes covered by the agreement are as follows:

- the International Humanitarian Law Study Centre;
- seminars on international humanitarian law for legal specialists and journalists; lectures at universities;
- research competitions for legal specialists, awards for journalistic excellence for articles devoted to the Red Cross, and public awareness contests;
- photo exhibitions.

To draw up the projects, it was necessary to:

- plan the main lines of the National Society's work in the future;
- select priorities and determine which ones required outside support;

- distinguish, having regard to the various areas of responsibility within the Movement, between activities that fall within the ICRC's purview and those relating to other components;
- decide which activities or projects could be submitted. To this end, each proposed project was drawn up individually, always beginning with a presentation and analysis of the situation and a description of the objective sought.

At this point we can briefly assess the impact of these projects through the end of 1997.

### *The International Humanitarian Law Study Centre*

The International Humanitarian Law Study Centre is a long-term enterprise which has produced excellent results. In just three years, more than 900 graduates have passed through the centre, including about 800 senior officers of Cuba's armed and internal security forces. With the development and use of modern teaching methods contributed to the project by the ICRC, and thanks to its skilled instructors trained at the San Remo courses, the Centre is already in a position to make its facilities available to anyone interested in the subject from the region or anywhere in the world, to promote the essential task of disseminating international humanitarian law.

As for dissemination among specific target groups, in this case legal specialists and journalists, the objective is to make them familiar with the subject matter and encourage them to work to develop and spread knowledge of the law.

Among the most notable achievements in this regard was the submission by Cuban legal specialists of 26 research papers, all of excellent quality, which cover subjects relating to the historical development of international humanitarian law and more topical issues. Three of these works won prizes thanks to project funding from the ICRC.

The contests which were organized to raise public awareness of international humanitarian law, the Movement's principles and the work of the Red Cross generated a great deal of interest. For most people, this was the first time they had ever heard of humanitarian law. For others, the competition provided a reminder and an incentive to continue their study of the law and to further broaden their knowledge of the subject.

University lectures underlined the relevance of humanitarian law and the need and duty to know its provisions. Young people took an interest

in the subject, and professors gave humanitarian law the importance and attention which is its due. This had a marked impact on the academic world: beginning with the 1997-98 academic year, international humanitarian law was incorporated in the university syllabus for students of public international law.

The image of the National Society as an institution was also enhanced with the mounting of four photo exhibitions and a permanent exhibit which used pictures to show the public the activities the Red Cross conducts for the benefit of the community. This cooperation project provided funding for the purchase of photographic materials and for the presentation of the photos. Advertising these days is an indispensable means of communication, but it is one that was inaccessible to us for lack of funds.

In 1997 cooperation in other fields made it possible to purchase a number of typewriters and office supplies for some of the provincial Red Cross branches, enabling them to continue their basic everyday work. Support was also provided for the repair and maintenance of four vehicles used by our National Society.

Lastly, we were able to build up stocks of emergency medical supplies, food and hygiene products for the refugees and migrants who land on Cuban shores when their boats capsize or run aground. Statistics show that in the five years before the project request was drawn up there were 114 such arrivals; the Cuban Red Cross ran camps which housed over 16,000 Haitians.

Work in all these fields has produced satisfactory results, an achievement which would not have been possible without the assistance offered under cooperation projects.

This article would not be complete if we did not mention that cooperation should not be only vertical, that is, between the ICRC and the National Societies, but also horizontal, that is, among the National Societies themselves.

The potential of the latter should be tapped precisely through cooperation with the ICRC. At some of our regional meetings, National Society representatives have raised the possibility of exchanges and advisory support; in some cases such assistance has been provided with cooperation from the ICRC, and with good results. We warmly welcome this practice, which has, for instance, led to the use of manuals and documentation produced by a given National Society as a common resource for part of the region. We also believe that it is an incentive for the development of

institutional capacity, as this kind of cooperation allows for feedback and exchanges of experience.

Certain regions and National Societies can offer their cooperation through the funding of projects; other, less affluent ones have to respond to the pressing needs of their own communities and are in need of such cooperation. Some National Societies may be able to cooperate by making available highly qualified personnel.

*Cooperation: an essential means*

The very universality of our Movement makes cooperation indispensable. We ourselves have benefited from it through project funding from both the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Other National Societies can offer their assistance as well, according to their possibilities and in response to our requirements, which, in this difficult period for our country, are increasing daily.

Thanks to this support, we at the Cuban Red Cross have been able to maintain and develop our work for the most vulnerable, tending to their most urgent needs. Cooperation has played a decisive role in this success.