

Operational cooperation between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Nigerian Red Cross Society

by **Ofor Nwobodo**

The Nigerian Red Cross Society has its roots in the year 1917, when the country was still under British rule. In that year the British Red Cross for the first time organized a fund-raising event in Lagos. There followed the formation of what was then known as the Nigeria Central Branch of the British Red Cross Society, with headquarters in Lagos. The branch had divisions in the then three regions of the country — Eastern, Northern and Western — with headquarters respectively in Enugu, Kaduna and Ibadan. Once Nigeria achieved independence, on 1 October 1960, the Nigerian Red Cross Society was born through an act of parliament (“The Nigerian Red Cross Society Act of 1960”). Today, the Society has a branch in each of the country’s 36 states as well as in Abuja, in the Federal Capital Territory.

Under the Society’s statutes, the Central Council is the highest deliberative body and is chaired by the National President. The branch in each state has four representatives on the Central Council, which meets once a year. The Council has an Executive Committee made up of elected national officers, advisers and branch representatives. It meets quarterly and is also chaired by the National President. Likewise, each branch elects its own Executive Committee, which is expected to meet at least ten times

Ofor Nwobodo has been the Secretary General of the Nigerian Red Cross Society since 1986.

a year. The branches themselves are composed of operational divisions, each with units of trained volunteers. The numerical strength (active members) of the Nigerian Society is currently over 400,000, more than 60% of whom are young people.

The Society's activities include both the traditional first-aid training and services that have been broadened and classified as the "community-based health programme" under the International Federation's new community-health approach. Members are also active in emergency-relief preparedness and disaster-relief operations, assistance for refugees, anti-HIV/AIDS programmes, ambulance services, welfare services such as homes for motherless and abandoned babies, blood-donation programmes, charity visits to hospitals, prisons and homes for the handicapped, programmes to promote knowledge of Red Cross ideals, principles and international humanitarian law and, finally, tracing and youth-development activities.

Establishment of an ICRC regional delegation

In 1986 the ICRC set up a regional delegation in Lagos. This created a new dimension — extensive practical cooperation — in the operations of the Nigerian Red Cross Society. If we look at the results of that cooperation since 1986, we can see that establishing the delegation in Nigeria was an act of great humanitarian foresight. The initiative certainly falls under the ICRC's mandate, i.e. that "the ICRC may take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its role as a specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary, and may consider any question requiring examination."¹ It has proved very positive in that it has facilitated the attainment of numerous humanitarian goals in Africa's most populated country,² goals that represented a convergence of views between the Nigerian Red Cross and the ICRC.

The presence of an ICRC delegation has, as it were, provided the Nigerian Red Cross with both a mirror and a compass. It has been for us a most cherished partnership in a period in which the Society has found it extremely difficult to cope with its enormous humanitarian obligations,

¹ Article 5(3) of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (1986).

² According to *World Population Projections to 2050*, a UN publication, "the population of Nigeria has reached 115 million and will climb to about 191 million in the year 2015, a 66% increase in 18 years."

a period in which it has had no other outside assistance. Nigeria is a country that has, since a few years after independence in 1960, faced a series of man-made and natural disasters. These disasters include the nation-wide political crisis that in 1967 led to a civil war (the Biafra War), which lasted until 1970. There have also been very serious communal and religious riots in different parts of the country and natural disasters including drought, floods and epidemics.

The needs of the Nigerian Red Cross

In the 70s and 80s, when Nigeria's economy was quite buoyant, the Society enjoyed remarkable support from the government, at both the federal and state levels, as well as from the public at large. The economic recession and the continued devaluation of the Nigerian currency, however, had a very regrettable effect on the Society's resources. Both government and public support for the Society's work has declined markedly and in some cases completely disappeared. And as funding has diminished, the needs have grown.

During this period there was a lack of support from abroad, which could be attributed to a near-total lack of understanding by the outside world of the true situation in Nigeria from a humanitarian point of view, a situation that demands the services of the Nigerian Red Cross. Ironically too, a large proportion of the country's own population at all levels of education viewed the Red Cross most erroneously as a foreign-oriented organization whose function is to channel relief from the developed world to Africa. They therefore saw no reason to support the National Society. The unprecedented Red Cross operation in Nigeria during the "Biafra war" helped engender this erroneous impression. In the minds of many, the Red Cross — and thus public support for it — were necessary only in times of armed conflict. Informing Nigerians about the activities of the Society, in both peace and war, was a major task for the Society. But the dissemination materials needed to carry it out were not available. Nor were the means of reaching the entire country. It was during this period that the ICRC established its regional delegation in Lagos. The ICRC's initial agenda focused on dissemination and bringing about ratification of the Additional Protocols by the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These areas were also of utmost importance to the National Society and therefore became the first areas of cooperation between the two Red Cross organizations. Remarkable results were attained within the first two years.

These results included dissemination workshops for officials and members of the National Society, the media, the armed forces and the police, as well as ratification of the Additional Protocols in 1988.

Spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law

Joint dissemination work between the Nigerian Red Cross and the ICRC constituted the first international humanitarian law programme in which the Society had been involved since its founding. It was also the first collaborative programme between the two since the end of the "Biafra War" relief operations. The programme was aimed at raising awareness of the Society's principles and humanitarian services. It also helped erase the misconception in some Muslim communities that there was a link between the Society's emblem and the Christian religion. A good illustration of this positive development is a statement by the editor of a daily newspaper who took part in one of the dissemination workshops organized in 1988 for media executives in Kano, a predominantly Muslim city: "Before this workshop, I had always seen the Red Cross Society as a religious organization and never used its press releases. Today, I know that the Society is a purely non-religious and non-discriminatory humanitarian organization whose membership is open to all." He went on to suggest that measures should be taken to guard against the indiscriminate use of the red cross emblem by members of the public and some government agencies. He appealed to his media colleagues to give wide publicity to the work of the Red Cross and to its exclusive right (along with the medical units of the armed forces) to use the emblem. Interestingly enough, it was this same editor who made a strong case for the continued use of the red cross emblem when a non-participating journalist covering the closing ceremony of the workshop suggested that it be changed to what he called "a more acceptable emblem".

Joint dissemination activities have continued growing over the years. The programme has been made a regular feature in a number of leading military institutions, including the National War College, the Command and Staff College, the Nigeria Defence Academy and the School of Strategic Studies. In the last four years, the National War College has annually held a one-day workshop on international humanitarian law organized by the ICRC and with the participation of the National Society. The programme usually provides a forum for both dissemination and cross fertilization of ideas on the roles of the various components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in connection with peace and with armed conflict. There is usually a specific case study of real armed conflict or

a peace-keeping situation in which Nigerian armed forces are involved. At the dissemination seminar held in February 1998, for example, the case study was the ECOMOG peace-keeping operation in Sierra Leone.

In view of the acute need in Nigeria to implement the provisions of the four Geneva Conventions, which state that “the High Contracting Parties [have an obligation] to disseminate the text of the present Convention as widely as possible in their respective countries, and, in particular, to include the study thereof in their programmes of military and, if possible, civil instruction, so that the principles thereof may become known to the entire population, in particular to the armed forces, the medical personnel and the chaplains”,³ the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross embraced the Chinese proverb that it is better to “teach a man how to fish rather than simply to give him a fish”. To this end, a three-day workshop on the teaching of international humanitarian law was organized in February 1997 at the Command and Staff College for military training officers beginning with the rank of Colonel in the army and its equivalent in the airforce and navy. Intended to ensure the continuity of dissemination in key military institutions, it proved a most rewarding exercise.

Incorporating international humanitarian law in the programmes of Nigerian universities has also been a goal shared by the Nigerian Red Cross and the ICRC. Contact has been maintained with the administrations of a number of universities and in 1997 a two-day workshop on the subject was organized by the ICRC in Abuja, the country’s capital. The workshop was attended by selected lecturers from the law faculties of different universities and representatives of the National Universities Commission and the federal Ministry of Education. The workshop concluded with recommendations aimed at facilitating the teaching of international humanitarian law at Nigerian universities.

Implementing international humanitarian law

The Geneva Conventions are sometimes viewed as mere documents. In reality, they are far more. The fundamental principle of the treaty is *pacta sunt servanda*, i.e. that “every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith.”⁴ The Geneva

³ Articles 47, 48, 127 and 144 respectively.

⁴ T.O. Eliah, *New Horizons in International Law*, Sijthoff & Noordhoff, New York, 1980, p. 43.

Conventions are, therefore, meant to be strictly observed and respected by the States party to them. Cooperation between the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross has therefore focused on measures to enhance the implementation of that law in Nigeria. To this end, the two organizations worked in conjunction with the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs to organize a national workshop on the implementation of international humanitarian law in Nigeria, in Lagos in 1996. It was attended by top government officials and representatives of the armed forces, the police, academia, United Nations agencies, diplomatic missions and national non-governmental organizations. A number of recommendations were made by the participants and forwarded to the relevant government authorities. They included the establishment of a commission or other national body to promote implementation of international humanitarian law in Nigeria. This recommendation is being followed up jointly by the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross.

Dissemination for the general public

In Nigeria, one exciting and effective means of reaching the young and “still young” is theatre art. Local units of the Nigerian Red Cross use this medium to put a number of messages across to the local populace. One good example is public health campaigns, and this was done by the Kano state branch during the 1996 meningitis epidemic, with volunteers using a drama production to drive home the causes and preventive measures available against the disease.

The positive impact of the play prompted the ICRC delegation and the National Society to consider more closely the possibility of drama as a means of dissemination, with special focus on tolerance among the youths. Nurturing a spirit of tolerance among young people in a country with over 250 different ethnic groups was seen as a good way to promote peace, which the Red Cross stands for at all times. Putting this noble idea into effect was something greatly desired by the Nigerian Red Cross but the Society lacked the necessary resources. In line with Frédéric de Mulinen’s insight in *The Law of War and the Armed Forces* that “traditions, motivations, the origins of the law regulating relations between peoples, nations and states, whether in time of peace or in time of war, differ from place to place”, the ICRC also embraced the idea. The regional delegation therefore agreed to take part in the project, which began with a series of preparatory meetings that gave rise in May 1997 to the “Red Cross Theatre Project — Nigeria” and a play entitled *Askari*, which was performed in 30 different venues in 20 of Nigeria’s 36 states between May and

July 1997. The play was seen by over 30,000 people including state military administrators, top government officials and young people, who were the main target audience and who have continued to embrace the Red Cross message of tolerance.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the “ASKARI project” was the oneness of the Red Cross conveyed by it over the thousands of kilometres covered during its nation-wide tour. What the public saw and admired was one Red Cross advocating peace through tolerance. No one distinguished between the different components of the Movement, no one took more credit than anyone else. It was cooperation in its most beautiful colour. It was an act of one indivisible family. It was the Askari Red Cross Project, 1997.

Communication

Given the great importance of effective communication, more especially in times of disaster, the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross maintain a joint communication system within the country. Under this arrangement, 12 HF radio sets were installed by the ICRC in 12 Branches covering all five of the Society’s operational zones. Though the radio sets were installed and are being maintained by the ICRC, ownership remains with the National Society. Both organizations have equal access to the equipment. In a way, the branch offices housing the sets serve as outstations for both the National Society and the ICRC. To the outside world, the radio network is simply that of the Red Cross. Branches without radio sets receive monthly financial support from the ICRC to enable them to purchase the services of the nearest radio equipment. It is worth mentioning that the Nigerian Red Cross Society is the only non-governmental organization with a radio network in Nigeria.

Relief operations

Bringing relief to disaster victims has been one of the greatest challenges to face the Nigerian Red Cross Society. As noted above, Nigeria has frequently been subjected to one form or another of natural or man-made disaster. No year has ever passed without two or more large-scale catastrophes occurring somewhere in the country. These situations have always been critical for the Nigerian Red Cross Society in the sense that over the years it has experienced severe financial constraints and lack of support from sister National Societies generally referred to

as Participating National Societies. One nevertheless notes with immense delight that this changed dramatically in 1996 with the meningitis outbreaks in a number of northern States: the International Federation and the National Societies of countries such as Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Great Britain responded most helpfully. The International Federation now has a delegation in Lagos.

Whatever the situation, whatever the degree of human suffering and the need for humanitarian action, the National Society has repeatedly been the major — often the only — source of relief to thousands of disaster victims in all parts of the country.

No doubt the uninformed might wonder how the National Society has been coping with the challenges posed by disasters over the past decade. The answer lies in ICRC cooperation. The most remarkable aspect of that cooperation has been the fact that it has continued to grow from year to year in one form or another. In the area of relief services, ICRC assistance has been second to none. It has proved an invaluable humanitarian partner in all times of need whether in time of peace or armed conflict.

A case in point was the Bakassi Peninsula boundary dispute between Nigeria and the Cameroon, in connection with which the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross joined efforts. As it was an international conflict, the ICRC's mandate automatically gave that organization a role to play while for the National Society the situation constituted a natural call to duty to care for those displaced by the hostilities. As noted by Frédéric de Mulinen, "only a hundred years ago fighting took place exclusively between soldiers and did not affect civilians apart from the very few who had the misfortune to be near a battlefield. But since then, and especially since the Second World War, civilian casualties have increasingly outnumbered military".⁵

De Mulinen's words certainly applied to the Bakassi Peninsula, where thousands of displaced civilians accounted for the majority of the victims. The Nigerian Red Cross surveyed the situation but was handicapped by its lack of relief supplies. It presented its problem to the ICRC and the regional delegation promptly furnished it with the needed materials, which it distributed on the Bakassi Peninsula itself, along the Cross River and in Akwa Ibom states, while the ICRC pursued the issue of prisoners of war. Tracing work was carried out jointly. It is worth mentioning that the

⁵ Frédéric de Mulinen, *The Law of War and the Armed Forces*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1992, p. 18.

Nigerian Red Cross was the first humanitarian organization to provide relief services to the victims of the Bakassi Peninsula conflict on the Nigerian side. This was possibly due to the ICRC's support.

It should be noted that all victims, whether of natural or man-made disasters, have always been accorded equal consideration under ICRC cooperation with the Nigerian Red Cross, the ICRC's sole yardstick being the human suffering confronting the National Society and the capacity of the local branch or the headquarters to relieve that suffering. The spirit of cooperation knows no "exclusion cause", only the alleviation of human suffering. To a very high degree, this spirit has made the different components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement one humanitarian entity in the eyes of Nigerians.

Transport

In the 1970s, when the nation's economy was buoyant, most branches had new or road-worthy ambulances and other emergency relief vehicles. With the downward economic trend and the resulting negative impact on the Society's finances, it became extremely difficult to maintain those vehicles and they became unroadworthy. In the late 1980s, four branches were able to obtain new or used ambulances from their state governments and from private business. The breakdown of most of the operational vehicles in the 1990s and the resulting immobility did much to hinder the Society's emergency services. Reaching remote rural areas became very difficult and the Society's ambulance services ceased almost totally.

With ICRC support, however, there was a very positive change in the second half of the 1990s. New vehicles were very expensive and in any case a high number were needed to cover the entire country. The Society therefore preferred to seek ICRC support for the repair of its older emergency vehicles both in the branches and at national headquarters. The ICRC responded positively and in the last three years has repaired 28 old vehicles and transferred to the Society four of its own vehicles. It also purchased two used ambulances which were passed on to branches in disaster-prone areas.

With ICRC cooperation, rapid response became the norm in almost all branches. Special emergency squads were set up and equipped with ICRC support. Among the volunteers there was a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to the humanitarian ideals of the Society. It has, indeed, been a dramatic shift from near dormancy to nation-wide humanitarian

operations. This most welcome development is, however, due solely to the Red Cross spirit of cooperation shown by the ICRC delegation.

Emergency preparedness

Inter-communal clashes, which now seem to have become common occurrences in Nigeria, have always been a depressing source of suffering for the thousands of Nigerians usually displaced by such events and forced to turn to the Nigerian Red Cross for help. In the last ten years, such clashes have occurred in Kano, Zango Kataf in Kaduna State, Wukari in Taraba State, Aguleri/Unuleri in Anambra State, Warri in Delta State and Ife/Modadkeke in Osun State. Whenever the National Society is faced with these incidents, the ICRC stands reliably at its side. Once the Society has surveyed the affected area, the ICRC provides the needed relief items and acts to facilitate transportation.

In the area of disaster preparedness, the ICRC also supports the Nigerian Red Cross in terms of training. And in 1997 it transferred to the Society a warehouse that it had built some years before at the Lagos state branch premises. The warehouse now brings in rent payments to the National Society from the ICRC, which still uses it.

As noted above, the ICRC's major consideration at all times in its assistance to the National Society is "visible human needs", i.e., those requiring humanitarian action. We draw no excessively sharp distinction in Nigeria between the respective mandates of the various components of the Movement. For example, the ICRC supported the Nigerian National Society during the 1996 anti-meningitis operation in a number of northern states. Though this was a health crisis that would normally fall under the mandate of the International Federation and the National Society, the ICRC in Lagos facilitated the operation in the remote rural areas by securing the loan of two vehicles from Peugeot in Kaduna for use by Society volunteers.

Institutional development — cooperation among all components of the movement

In 1994 the ICRC and the International Federation joined the Nigerian Red Cross Society in its desire for a joint evaluation of its structure and operations by independent auditors. The Movement's two international institutions provided financial and staff support for the process. It remained up to the Society to decide whether to accept and implement the

recommendations resulting from the joint evaluation exercise. There was no outside interference. The ICRC ensured funding to enable the Society to hold the meetings needed to consider the recommendations, which are now being implemented. Over 95% of the recommendations aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Society's operations were adopted by the Central Council in 1995.

Ideas are easy but implementation often less so. In fact it is always difficult, and the Nigerian Red Cross is no exception to the rule. It is encouraging therefore that both the ICRC and the International Federation are standing shoulder to shoulder with the Society during this difficult implementation period. ICRC support includes sponsorship of annual seminars for senior members of staff at the national and branch levels, and payment of the full salaries of three members of managerial staff at national headquarters: the dissemination/information officer, the national training and emergency preparedness officer and the assistant director (public support). The ICRC also supplements the salaries of a further four senior members of headquarters staff. To optimize governance, the ICRC has in the last four years been financially supporting the Nigerian Red Cross Society for the holding of its annual general meetings. This makes it possible for all branches of the Society to be adequately represented at the meeting, which is the Society's highest policy-making forum.

In addition to its immense financial support, the ICRC provided the Society's national headquarters with modern office equipment including two computer/telex sets, dissemination aids such as television and video sets, a video camera and a projector. It has also placed its own facilities (fax machine, telephone, fuel from its reserves during periods of fuel scarcity, vehicles, etc.) at the Society's disposal. It should also be mentioned that the head of the regional delegation has always considered it part of his duty to raise the National Society's profile before the international community, in particular vis-à-vis the diplomatic missions in Nigeria. He has seized every opportunity to draw their attention to both *the humanitarian services and needs of the Society*.

The International Federation for its part has worked relentlessly to achieve the goals set under a three-year development plan adopted by the Nigerian Red Cross in 1997. For the first time in the Society's history, it is benefiting from a tripartite project sponsored by the Federation and the National Societies and governments of the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada and the United States. This is a most welcome development.

Conclusion: cooperation is a must

The nucleus of the cooperation between the ICRC and the Nigerian Red Cross is the trust and team spirit that has always prevailed between the two. Evaluation has likewise always been a joint exercise between the two organizations, which regard themselves as equal partners in progress.

Whatever progress and innovation that has been achieved under ICRC/NRCS cooperation has been due to a number of factors. Physical proximity is one of those factors as the two share the same administrative premises, the ICRC having moved its office from a private rented house to the National Society headquarters, thereby freeing funds that had been going for rent and redirecting them to the Society's coffers, a major source of income for the Nigerian Red Cross.

Another major factor has been leadership by the ICRC delegation. This leadership has been grounded in objectivity rather than sentiment. It is a leadership that nevertheless treats the partners as equals, a leadership that, while never patronizing, seeks to reward initiative, transparency and accountability, and to act as a compass in times of confusion or need.

It should also be noted that the open-door policy of the Nigerian Red Cross Society — which it has maintained throughout — has been a crucial factor. There is no doubt that self-help is always the best approach, though succeeding in the search for self-sufficiency is never an easy task. However, one must start somewhere, and the Nigerian Red Cross is much better off for the ICRC's support.

Another important factor in fruitful cooperation is the practice of occasionally organizing a joint press briefing on the Society's activities. This helps clear up the usual confusion on the media's part as to the mandates of various components of the Movement.

There is no question that, while it is possible for each of them to go it alone, the humanitarian goals of the different components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement can best be attained through transparent cooperation, the binding force between the weak and the strong within the Movement. It is a practical remedy for the weak and should be considered as indispensable in all the Movement's activities.

Cooperation breeds understanding, trust, efficiency, effectiveness and true development in all human endeavour. For the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, cooperation at all levels is unquestionably a must.