



There is sometimes confusion over the role of the ICRC. Media references to the *International Red Cross* only add to this misunderstanding. The "International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement" is composed of three branches: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); the National Societies such as the British Red Cross Society or the Somalia Red Crescent Society; and the umbrella organization of the National Societies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, previously called the League. All three branches of the "Movement" have quite distinct tasks. Here is the broad outline of how the ICRC works.

In essence, the ICRC operates in areas of armed conflict, while the Federation acts in times of natural disaster. In physical terms, the ICRC has a permanent presence in 64 different countries, while the orchestration of this huge humanitarian effort is carried out from headquarters in Geneva. Swiss nationals form the majority among ICRC ranks, but increasing numbers of personnel from other countries are employed both in the field and at headquarters, mainly through National Societies.

The ICRC's principles of neutrality and impartiality are vital to its effectiveness as an intermediary in conflict situations. All parties to a conflict are treated with equal respect, whether they are official governments or opposition movements. This means that the ICRC is usually able to carry out its humanitarian work for victims of conflict on both (or all) sides. It often happens that other international organizations are not able to enter areas controlled by one of the parties to a given conflict, mostly for want of security. Civilians living in such zones can therefore only be reached by the ICRC.

Finances are described elsewhere in this document, but it is important to know that all of the ICRC's work is funded entirely through voluntary contributions.

HOW WE WORK



Within the framework of the ICRC's humanitarian work there are five quite distinct areas of activity, most of which are carried out with the indispensable help of National Society staff. Below we give a brief summary of what each aspect entails and some figures for what was the most demanding year yet for the ICRC.

PROTECTION

Because of its absolute neutrality the ICRC often acts as a bridge between warring parties, whether during or after a conflict. At the same time it offers protection and assistance to civilians caught up in the violence. Delegates visit prisoners of war and people kept behind bars for their beliefs or political views, registering their names, examining their conditions of detention, having the ICRC doctors and nurses check their health, and talking to them in private to take note of any ill-treatment. Visits are repeated to avoid the occurrence of "disappearances" and to check that proposed improvements to living conditions in the prisons have been followed up. In 1992 more than 92,200 detainees were visited in over 2,350 places of detention in 54 different countries.

MEDICAL ACTIVITIES

Conflicts frequently bring medical services to a halt, as hospitals are damaged and medical supplies are cut off. Sometimes there are so many wounded that local doctors and nurses can't cope. In cases like these the ICRC sends in medical staff and supplies, often to support the local Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. Treacherous minefields are a grim reality of war. This means that orthopaedic work to treat war amputees is high on the ICRC's medical agenda. Since food production is often disrupted, ICRC nutritionists strive to ensure that the food sent to people in conflict areas is adapted to their needs and culture. In 1992 over

CHF 38 million worth of material assistance was provided through the ICRC's medical division. Of the hundreds of thousands of people who received some kind of medical treatment from the ICRC in 1992, over 17,000 were cared for in ICRC hospitals, 32,800 surgical operations were performed on victims of conflict and over 11,700 amputees were fitted with orthopaedic devices.

RELIEF ACTIVITIES

In times of war civilians generally have to bear the brunt of the side-effects. Fighting in many instances prevents normal food supplies from arriving, and over a longer period other needs arise. Basic supplies such as shoes, clothing and soap are frequently lacking. Entire communities are often displaced; people are forced to flee from the tanks and approaching gunfire and have to settle elsewhere, often with no food or shelter. Upon their return they may find their homes looted or destroyed and their lands mined. The ICRC's relief activities aim to cover the emergency needs of such victims, often in areas to which other organizations do not have access. In 1992 230,000 tonnes of relief supplies were distributed in 54 countries.

TRACING

Another common problem which arises in time of conflict is the breakdown of communications. Family members separated in the turmoil are therefore

unable to telephone or write to let their relatives know where they are and that they're still alive. The ICRC's tracing service provides a means of establishing or maintaining contact between family members through its Red Cross message system. In addition, the tracing service registers prisoners, organizes repatriations and family reunions and opens tracing files on people who have gone missing in a conflict situation. In 1992 the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva received over 45,600 tracing requests and forwarded over 1,100,000 Red Cross messages.

DISSEMINATION

Helping governments old and new understand the commitments they have made in signing the Geneva Conventions (and the Additional Protocols, which not all of them have ratified) is an essential duty of the ICRC. In times of conflict it is imperative that government armies and their opponents are fully aware of the need to respect international humanitarian law. Students, academics, politicians and the general public must also be aware of what the ICRC stands for, not just so that the Red Cross emblem is respected, but so that people know whom to turn to in an emergency. From the highest military commanders and police chiefs right down to the rank and file of all armies, whether government or rebel, basic rules of conduct must be applied in combat. It is the job of ICRC delegates to educate them all, which is why an extensive programme of dissemination is still going on all over the world to train the uninitiated and to remind those who should know better.

WHAT WE DO