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Swiss Disaster Relief Abroad

The idea of Swiss disaster relief abroad owes its existence to motions by various Swiss parliamentarians. These led, in 1970, to the creation of a Central Office for Disaster Relief in Switzerland and, in 1972, to the appointment by the Federal Council of a Delegate for Disaster Relief Abroad. In conformity with the intentions announced by the Federal Council in its report of 11th August 1971, this Delegate was given the task of setting up a Swiss volunteer corps, with the necessary personnel and materials, of organizing it and maintaining it in readiness for use in the event of natural disaster or for humanitarian campaigns after armed conflicts.

Swiss volunteer corps

In establishing a volunteer relief corps, Switzerland was entering a new field. Foreign experiments in this sphere, several examples of which were studied in detail, were only of limited application as models, since the countries concerned generally use military units, which have the advantage that they can be very rapidly mobilized. Switzerland, on the other hand, decided to form a volunteer corps, not only because it would suit the particular conditions of our country, but also because it would be better able to cope with the realities of action in the field. Thus, the volunteers will not as a rule have to wear uniform, and a reserve of personnel and materials can be maintained in a relatively flexible form.

Established in 1973, the Swiss corps today numbers about 1000 volunteers, selected from among more than 4000 applicants. They are specialists, covering the following fields: medicine (doctors, nurses etc.), structural engineering (engineers, architects, constructors, building supervisors, brick-

layers, carpenters etc.), supply (storekeepers, cooks, bookkeepers etc.), communications (radio operators, fitters, technicians etc.) and transport (drivers, mechanics etc.).

They are recruited on the basis of specific criteria: professional competence, physical and mental stamina, sense of responsibility, adaptability, knowledge of languages, team spirit, experience of foreign countries etc. They must also undergo a thorough medical examination and a full programme of vaccination, then sign a general employment agreement, countersigned by the employer. This contract lays down, in particular, the amount of notice the volunteer needs to make himself available for a relief mission, the duration of the mission (from a few days to three months or more) and the salary (paid by the Confederation when the employer cannot pay).

The volunteers also receive appropriate practical and theoretical training. Special courses are regularly organized for them.

A stock of material (individual equipment, corps material, tools, machines etc.) and means of transport, communication and administration have been assembled and are permanently available.

A card index system, which will shortly be supplemented by a planning chart, enables the necessary specialists to be located quickly. In this way it is possible to choose from a reserve of men and women of all ages and occupations, without regard to party or creed, the staff needed to carry out relief operations of all kinds and varying scales. Here, briefly, are some examples:

Operation Sahel

This was carried out in the Lake Chad basin, from October 1974 to February 1975, in response to UN

Secretary-General Waldheim's appeal on behalf of this region, which was severely affected by drought. The operation made use of about a hundred volunteers of the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps and provided an opportunity to test the functioning of this new organization and to learn from its first practical experience. In spite of the difficulties of that first operation, which took place in four different countries and also in Gewani (Ethiopia), the Corps, helped by several hundred local workers, achieved virtually all the objectives it had set itself: curative and preventive medical care, vaccination of several thousand nomads, distribution of 354 tons of relief material, repair work in 12 hospitals and dispensaries, construction of three hospital establishments, of water reservoirs, of five large depots for agricultural enterprises in which the FAO was carrying out pilot development schemes, and of four other buildings for social purposes, repair of landing strips, digging of wells, installation of a ferry and of pumping stations etc. The cost of this operation was about five million Swiss francs.

Turkey

Following the Lice earthquake, in September 1975, which claimed more than 2000 victims, the Turkish Government accepted an offer of help by the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps. The operation was carried out in two phases: in October a group of about 15 volunteers, comprising mainly building specialists, constructed in less than six weeks, with the help of prefabricated parts transported from Switzerland by road, 50 houses at Yünlüce, a mountain peasants' village in eastern Anatolia. Then, for three months in the summer of 1976, a new team of volunteers added an infrastructure and social buildings; these included school premises, a mosque, a dispensary, a water supply and 150 cattle-sheds

spread over Yünlüce and the surrounding villages. These buildings, which cost three million francs, were handed over officially to the Turkish authorities on 18th November 1976.

A few days later a new earthquake ravaged the eastern part of the country. Preliminary aid, to a value of 485 000 francs, was immediately sent by air. Then, at the request of the Turkish authorities, a group of volunteers transported and erected, between 12th December 1976 and 5th January 1977, two large prefabricated multi-purpose buildings for use as dispensaries, dormitories, store-rooms etc. This work will be completed by the addition of further buildings in the spring of 1977.

Guatemala

Nearly 12 million francs was collected in Switzerland following the earthquake of 4th February 1976 which caused the death of 24 000 people and destroyed 250 000 houses. After immediate aid had been ensured, four charitable organizations, including the Swiss Red Cross, together with Swiss Disaster Relief decided to carry out a joint aid programme, comprising the rebuilding of 2500 houses, and to devote about half the above sum to the reconstruction of Santiago Sacatepéquez, a community of about 6000 people situated 40 kilometres from Guatemala City which had been almost completely destroyed. Teams of volunteers have been working in relays since July 1976, with the object of rebuilding, in a simple but permanent manner, 1000 houses and several social buildings. The intention is to respect the traditional Guatemalan style of building while introducing anti-earthquake improvements.

Italy

Immediately after the report of the earthquake which practically destroyed Frioul, Swiss Disaster Relief

sent by air and road medicaments, vaccines and tents to a value of half a million francs. It also engaged two military helicopters, which carried out, between 17th and 29th May, 21 operations with 200 landings in the disaster area for the medical service of Udine province. Finally, on the basis of agreements concluded with the local authorities, the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps rebuilt, between August and December 1976, part of the mountain village of Subit and, with financial help from the Swiss Red Cross, that of Borgo Cancellier. They were able to build 20 two-storey concrete earthquake-resistant houses comprising safe, permanent flats for 40 families. This work, which had cost 2.6 million francs by the end of 1976, will be continued in the spring of 1977. In September 1976 the volunteer corps also organized the transport and distribution of 62 tons of building machines and other building equipment – concrete mixers, cranes etc. – made available to Frioul by numerous members of the Swiss Building Contractors' Association.

Then, in response to an appeal from the Italian authorities following new and severe earth tremors in September 1976, operation «huts» was launched. This consisted of buying 60 huts in Switzerland, transporting them to the disaster zone of Attimis and erecting them as accommodation for 600 people. All for one million Swiss francs. Finally, parallel to this operation, the volunteer corps carried out the «caravan campaign». The appeal to the Swiss people was successful in that 120 caravans – 85% of which were permanent gifts – were sent to Frioul, where they are occupied by about 400 people.

Other operations

Since the creation of the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps about 50 volunteers have carried out technical or organizational missions

abroad on behalf of other organizations, notably the FAO (six railway experts in Senegal and Mali), the ICRC (various specialists and doctors in Vietnam, the Middle East and Angola and six Relief Delegates in Lebanon), the League of Red Cross Societies (an administrator in Niger), the High Commission for Refugees (an architect in Guinea-Bissau). Eighteen radio operators also worked in the Indian sub-continent from 29th September 1973 to 22nd March 1976. As yet the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps has taken no part in the first phase after a disaster, when immediate life-saving measures are required, but only in the second and third phases, when the vital task is to overcome the crisis by restoring the essentials of life in the disaster area and then, by reconstruction, to re-establish normal conditions.

However, the Federal Council's Delegate for Disaster Relief Abroad is studying the possibility of creating small units (especially surgical and communications) which could go into action immediately. At the same time he is endeavouring to conclude agreements – such as already exist with Greece, Turkey and Pakistan – with countries regularly affected by natural disasters, so as to settle the legal and administrative conditions enabling the Corps to be deployed as quickly as possible.

Finally, the Federal Council's Delegate is also trying to develop even closer relations with the international organizations, particularly with UNDRO (Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator).

Convinced that solidarity remains one of the basic essentials of Swiss foreign policy, the Delegate hopes to make the Swiss volunteer corps a flexible, quick and effective instrument, so that the humanitarian dimension of our foreign aid, particularly to the Third World, may be extended still further.