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- The delegation in Israel and the occupied territories, with headquarters in Tel Aviv — which was also the residence of the delegate responsible for the occupied territory in Golan — and two sub-delegations, at Jerusalem and Gaza. At the end of 1977, this delegation consisted of 15 delegates and 33 locally recruited employees.
- A delegation in Egypt, with headquarters in Cairo, consisting of two delegates and six locally employed personnel.
- A delegation in Jordan with headquarters at Amman, with two delegates and six locally recruited employees.
- A delegation in Syria, with headquarters in Damascus with two delegates and five locally hired employees.

To maintain close contact with the people in the occupied territories and report their humanitarian needs, the ICRC delegates travelled extensively throughout these territories. They made weekly visits to local bureaus in the principal towns of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and to El Arish in northern Sinai. They also carried out periodic missions in the Sinai desert and on the Golan plateau.

The delegations in Cairo, Amman and Damascus also took part in the transfer of various categories of persons across the demarcation lines between the occupied territories and the Arab countries.

The Damascus delegation was also concerned with the problems of victims of the Lebanese conflict (see previous chapter).

Egypt

Visit of ICRC President

At the invitation of the Egyptian Government, Mr. Alexandre Hay, President of the ICRC, visited the Arab Republic of Egypt from 16 to 23 December 1977.

In the company of the delegate general for the Middle East and the chief of the ICRC delegation in Cairo, Mr. Hay had talks with Mr. Butros Ghali, acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Admiral Fuad Zekri, Vice-Minister of War, Major General Hassan El Kateb, chief of the Army Liaison Bureau, Dr. Ibrahim Badran, Minister of Health, Mrs. Amal Osman, Minister of Social Affairs, Mr. Sayed Mariei, President of the National Assembly, and Mr. Mahmud Riad, Secretary General of the Arab League.

The ICRC President also met Mrs. Jihane Sadat, Honorary President, and Dr. Mahmud Mahfuz, President, of the Egyptian Red Crescent.

Mr. Hay discussed with all his interlocutors the activities of the ICRC in the region.

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Confrontation between Egypt and Libya

Following the frontier incidents between Egyptian and Libyan forces at the end of July, the ICRC offered its services to the governments of these two countries with a view to carrying out its conventional tasks on behalf of prisoners on both sides.

As the prisoners were repatriated to their respective countries at the end of August without any participation by the ICRC, the Egyptian and Libyan governments had no occasion to take advantage of this offer of its services.

Western Sahara

As indicated in its Annual Report for 1976, the ICRC has encountered great difficulties in carrying out its mission of protection for the victims of the conflict in the Western Sahara. While it did have access, in 1975 and 1976, to a number of prisoners — 99 Algerian soldiers interned in Morocco, 63 combatants of the Polisario Front in Mauritania, and 57 Moroccan and Mauritanian soldiers in the hands of the Polisario Front — they represented only a fraction of the prisoners held by each side.

In 1977, the ICRC continued its efforts and made repeated approaches to each of the parties with the aim of obtaining lists of, and of making visits to, all the prisoners. At the end of the year, as shown below, the results obtained fell far short of those sought, since the International Committee found in this conflict in particular that humanitarian questions were treated as a political matter. The parties involved used the problems of protection and assistance as a means of exerting pressure and for propaganda purposes. They insisted, especially, on reciprocity, which is contrary to international humanitarian law, and so made it impossible for the ICRC to act.

Assistance to the persons in the camps at Tindouf, in Algeria, it should be pointed out, comes within the purview of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Mauritania

Three missions to Mauritania took place in 1977, the first in January, the other two in August and December. On each occasion the ICRC representatives were received by the Head

of State, President Moktar Ould Daddah. All the missions had the same purpose: to discuss with the authorities and the Mauritanian Red Crescent the whole spectrum of humanitarian problems arising out of the conflict in the Western Sahara, to obtain the list of Polisario combatants in the hands of the Mauritians, and to obtain permission to visit them.

In January 1977, the ICRC representatives were able to make a further visit — the first having taken place in January 1976 — to 126 Polisario fighters captured by the Mauritanian armed forces. However, they were not allowed to talk to the prisoners without witnesses, and they were not given a list of names.

No other visit to prisoners took place later, since the Mauritanian authorities considered that Algeria was responsible for the situation and should grant the ICRC permission to exercise protective action in favour of all the Mauritanian troops captured in battle.

Prisoners in the hands of the Polisario Front

From the beginning of the year, through missions which visited Algeria in January and March and through approaches made from Geneva to the Sahrawi and Algerian authorities, the ICRC reiterated its request to be given the lists of names of Mauritanian and Moroccan soldiers captured by the Polisario Front and to have access to all of them.

Following the attack on May 1 against Zouerate (Mauritania) and the disappearance on that occasion of ten persons (six French and four Mauritanian), the ICRC, at the request of the families concerned, the French Red Cross and the Mauritanian Red Crescent, made approaches through the Algerian Red Crescent to the "Sahrawi Red Crescent", in order to obtain news of the missing persons.

On May 13, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs sent a message to the President of the ICRC in which, while affirming that Algeria was in no way responsible for the military operations in the Western Sahara, and in particular at Zouerate, he stated that his Government was completely willing to help establish direct contact with representatives of the Polisario Front.

On receiving this message, the ICRC President replied, proposing that an ICRC envoy should go to Algiers for top-level discussion of all the existing humanitarian problems. However, the Algerian authorities thought that the moment for such talks had not come, and persisted in this view, so that by the end of 1977 the proposed mission had still not taken place.

In the meantime, military and political tension had increased, and on 25 October fifteen Mauritians and two French nationals were captured in the region of Zouerate.

Again the ICRC took steps, and at the end of November another mission made a further attempt to visit all the prisoners

— Mauritanian, Moroccan and French — in the hands of the Polisario Front; but without success, since the Front's representatives made the visits conditional on reciprocal concessions for its combatants held in Morocco and in Mauritania.

Finally, without the ICRC having obtained confirmation of their capture, the eight French nationals were freed and handed over by the Polisario Front to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 23 December 1977.

Morocco

In addition to the messages sent from Geneva, various missions visited Rabat, in January, April and December 1977. The purpose of these was to visit once more the 99 Algerian soldiers held prisoner in Rabat, and to obtain lists of names and access to any combatants of the Polisario Front captured by the Moroccan armed forces.

In reply to a letter from the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, the President of the ICRC, writing on 20 July 1977, stressed the anxiety felt by the ICRC, confronted as it was by difficulties in carrying out its mission of protection and assistance in favour of all the victims of events in the Sahara. He proposed that an ICRC representative should travel to Rabat to discuss the problems.

It was not until December 1977 that another visit could be made to the 99 Algerian military prisoners. Through the Moroccan Red Crescent the ICRC had also been able to transfer the sum of 14,500 Swiss francs made available for these prisoners by the Algerian Red Crescent. With regard to the combatants of the Polisario Front in Moroccan hands, however, the efforts made throughout the year by the ICRC did not result in any progress.

Conflict in the Ogaden

Deeply concerned by the outbreak of large-scale armed conflict in the Ogaden region, causing a growing number of civilian and military victims, the ICRC made an appeal at the beginning of August to all the parties involved, urging them to respect the rules of humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts and to see that those rules were observed by their combatants.

In the appeal, the ICRC also offered its services to make visits to all the prisoners of war captured by the parties to the conflict (in conformity with Article 126 of the Third Geneva Convention) and to provide the prisoners with protection and assistance.