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CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY

Activities of the Central Tracing Agency in 1979

In 1979, the ICRC Central Tracing Agency (CTA) received or despatched nearly 88,000 mail items, i.e. an increase of 7.5% on 1978 (82,000):

- about 27,000 items or 31% relating to sequels of the Second World War;
- about 17,000 items or 19% relating to sequels of conflicts after the 1939-45 war (Middle East, Cyprus, India, Pakistan, etc.);
- about 24,000 items, or 27% relating to current conflicts, with the exception of the refugee problem of south-east Asia;
- about 20,000 items or 23% dealing with requests relating to south-east Asian refugees.

Moreover, 125,000 names were recorded and filed during the year (90,000 in 1978). More than 500,000 names of south-east Asian refugees were sent to the CTA in Geneva by various organizations or Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies. These names are to be stored in the CTA computer and will be dealt with as and when search requests are made.

These figures, which only cover the activities carried out at the headquarters, show a considerable increase in the number of cases handled compared with the previous year.

In 1979 the CTA continued its activities, its treaty obligations to conflict victims, often long after the actual hostilities had ceased. Even 35 years after the end of the Second World War, one-third of the CTA's activities are still connected with the sequels of that conflict.

Though a steady decrease has been noted in certain sectors, in others there is an increase: requests for certificates of captivity or sickness issued to former prisoners of war, reuniting of families between the Federal Republic of Germany and Eastern Europe, and the search for missing persons.

Moreover, files relating to some more recent conflicts are far from closed as far as the CTA is concerned. Whereas the ICRC operations have ended in Cyprus, India and Bangladesh, the CTA still pursues its tasks in these countries.

There are also many current operations and the CTA delegates are active in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Their activities are described in Chapter 1, "Activities Throughout the World".

New technical systems

In order to speed up the communication of information to enquirers the CTA needed to introduce the most modern means of processing, storing and communicating information. Hence, in 1979, the microfilming of old archives and data-processing was introduced.

MICROFILMS. — The creation of a microfilming service for CTA archives helped to reduce the overcrowding and make space available for new operations. Microfilming saves 98% of the space occupied by normal paper archives. Thanks to a gift from the Swiss Confederation, microfilming of old and rarely consulted records—some 17.5 million documents relating to the two World Wars and a few more recent conflicts—was started early in 1979.

During the year, about 8 million documents were micro-filmed on both sides and in duplicate. So, for the first time, the CTA has spare copies which, stored in appropriate cabinets, ensure the perennality of its archives. American microfilmed lists relating to German prisoners of war were also put on micro index-cards.

From October 1979, 25,000 files relating to individual cases were prepared for reproduction on micro index-cards. By the end of the year, 7,000 shots corresponding to 1,500 files were taken.

DATA-PROCESSING. — To enable the CTA to handle information, a data-processing system was started in 1979 for the CTA action for south-east Asian refugees. This was the first step towards a generalized system of data-processing at the CTA. This system along with others, such as the processing and recording of documents on microfilms, will enable the CTA to better discharge the tasks entrusted to it by the international community.

By the end of 1979 the problem had been analyzed, the programming completed and the filing of card-indexes planned for the beginning of 1980.

Assistance to National Societies

The CTA continued its efforts to induce National Societies to establish tracing offices and offered them technical assistance whenever necessary.

In this way, for south-east Asian refugees, many "Tracing and Mailing Services" (TMS) were set up within various National Societies, with technical help from the CTA (see page 44).

The beginnings of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) go back to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. In the International Relief Agency for the Sick and Wounded, started by the ICRC in Basle, a doctor took the initiative of setting up a special information bureau for prisoners. Thanks to the lists handed over by the belligerents, this bureau was able, for the first time in history, to give news to families of prisoners in enemy hands.

After similar initiative (Trieste in 1877, Belgrade in 1912-13, Geneva in 1914-18) the ICRC founded, in 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War, the Central Prisoners of War Agency, which since then has never ceased to function. Its present title, the Central Tracing Agency, dates from 1960.

“Tracing” as used by the ICRC means its activities:

- to obtain, centralize, process and communicate information on people for whom the ICRC is concerned, whether under the Geneva Conventions or not, i.e. whether they are victims of international conflicts or situations of internal tension (prisoners of war, interned civilians, political detainees, refugees, displaced persons, etc.);
- to undertake investigations through competent authorities, Red Cross National Societies, ICRC delegations, combat colleagues of those missing or anyone able to give useful information;
- to transmit family messages when normal channels of communication are non-existent or disrupted by events;
- to issue, once a conflict is over, certificates of captivity or sickness to persons who have to prove they were imprisoned or ill during their imprisonment in order to obtain retirement benefits, aid or pensions;
- to organize family reuniting, transfers and repatriation;
- to issue travel documents to refugees, displaced persons and political exiles who have no proper identification papers and wish to go to a country willing to receive them.

Participation at meetings

In 1979 CTA collaborators took part in the following meetings:

- Session of the Danish Refugee Council at Helsingore, in Denmark, in April;
- Meeting in Sarrebruck (FRG) for the heads of the tracing services of various branches of the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany, also in April;

- Round table on “Refugees in Orbit” organized by the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, in Florence, in June (see page 70).
- International Red Cross Conference on south-east Asian refugees in Geneva from 31 July to 1 August (see page 44).
- Technical seminar of the International Red Cross in Kuala Lumpur, 6-7 August (see page 45).

Furthermore, the Assistant Director of the CTA and the delegate for Europe visited the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany and participated in the work of the “family reuniting” section in Hamburg, in September.