

**Zeitschrift:** Annual report / International Committee of the Red Cross  
**Herausgeber:** International Committee of the Red Cross  
**Band:** - (1979)  
  
**Vorwort:** Introduction  
**Autor:** [s.n.]

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 24.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## INTRODUCTION

The outbreaks of conflicts in Asia, the intensification of others in Africa, disturbances in Latin America, recurrent outbursts of violence in some countries of the Middle East: throughout 1979 these disaster-fraught situations created many difficult tasks for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), whose mission was often further complicated by obstacles stemming from incomprehension on the part of individuals and nations.

When carrying out its humanitarian duties, the ICRC does not always enjoy the facilities it is entitled to expect from the authorities. While it is true that ignorance of the principles underlying its mission is conducive at best to indifference and at worst to hostility, there can be no possible excuse for any misapprehension of the ICRC's role as a neutral institution operating in time of war, civil war and domestic disturbances or tensions and endeavouring to relieve the suffering of the victims of such conflicts by affording them protection and assistance. This is not only the ICRC's duty but also a right conferred upon it and solemnly recognized by almost all States in the world, i.e. those which are signatories to the Geneva Conventions.

The ICRC is frequently the only organization given permission to cross fronts in order to assist the wounded, both civilian and military, to comfort prisoners and detainees, and distribute food and medical

supplies. While it is true that these activities are carried out with the consent of the authorities in the countries concerned, it is equally true that the ICRC cannot suffer any transgression of its principles. In the interests of the independence which it has guarded so jealously for more than a century on behalf of the victims, it is oblivious of all political considerations and recognizes no frontiers, be they geographical, racial, religious, social or political.

### **A lot, but not enough**

Despite the difficulties it encountered the ICRC did a lot, but at the same time not enough, in 1979 to give balm to both physical and moral wounds, to feed the hungry, house the victims of disasters and bring cheer to separated families.

*A lot*, in so far as the assistance it provided in 45 countries amounted to 30,040 tons of relief worth 55 million Swiss francs, as against 17,400 tons worth 40 millions francs in 1978. A lot, too, because in order to tackle all the tasks arising from the extension of its activities, the ICRC's staff at headquarters in Geneva and in the field increased from 390 in January to 562 in December, an increase of more than 44 per cent, not counting the very large number of medical and paramedical personnel made available by National Red Cross Societies, particularly in Thailand.

*Not enough*, however, in so far as the ICRC was not always able to extend the assistance and, above all, the protection it would have wished to those in need. In Rhodesia, for example, it was sometimes forbidden to intervene in specific regions and the gates of certain prisons remained closed to it. In 1979 visits to "political" detainees benefited some 7,100 prisoners—a respectable figure, but lower than that for the previous year (over 28,700). However, it should be noted that this activity is carried out on the fringe of international humanitarian law and that in 1979 the ICRC was obliged to concentrate most of its strength and financial resources on situations of armed conflict covered by the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

Constraints, obstacles and difficulties were not able to prevent the ICRC from taking action in some fifty countries in 1979, through either its permanent delegations or itinerant missions by delegates. This Report outlines the work performed in the field and at headquarters, and the main features are summarized below.

## Activities throughout the world

### AFRICA

The intensification of armed conflicts in Africa led the ICRC to expand its activities, even though the scope of its action remained the same as in 1978. With regard to the **Rhodesian conflict**, work was undertaken in Rhodesia itself and in the "front line" countries (Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia), where tens of thousands of Rhodesian nationals had taken refuge after leaving their country because of events there. When the situation worsened at the beginning of the year, the ICRC launched a particularly vigorous appeal, denouncing the outrages committed by both sides, drawing attention to the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and the respect due to captured civilians and combatants and emphasizing how necessary it was for ICRC delegates to be able to perform their protection and assistance work unhindered. The material aid provided by the ICRC during the year amounted to 3,108 tons

worth 2,783,869 Swiss francs. Medical relief totalled 230,456 Swiss francs. Medical teams carried out 24,000 consultations, 29,900 vaccinations and 771 surgical operations.

In **Zambia**, the ICRC focused its efforts on providing both medical and material assistance to refugees in ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) camps. In **Botswana**, most of its work on behalf of refugees consisted in medical assistance to the Dukwe, Selebi Pikwe and Francistown camps. In **Mozambique**, medical assistance to ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) war amputees was continued and the state hospital structure was given material support to help it tackle the extra work generated by the Rhodesian conflict. In the three countries, the ICRC provided 1,132 tons of relief material worth 3,685,633 Swiss francs and medical assistance worth 518,462 Swiss francs.

In **Angola**, the ICRC gave its attention to the situation of displaced persons in the central and southern provinces where armed opposition movements were operating. Some emergency relief was distributed while a more extensive assistance programme was set on foot with the help of the Angolan Red Cross. The medical work of a team of specialists sent in August to the Bomba Alta centre for war amputees in the province of Huambo enabled some 30 persons to be fitted with a prosthesis by the end of the year. Medical supplies worth 278,300 Swiss francs were provided to the centre.

In **South Africa**, the ICRC continued its protective work on behalf of sentenced security prisoners and persons held in preventive detention under section 10 of the Internal Security Amendment Act. At the same time it continued its endeavours to obtain access to other categories of persons imprisoned for political or security reasons in South Africa and **Namibie/South-West Africa** by the South African authorities. However, no progress was achieved in this respect in 1979.

Substantial protective action was undertaken in connexion with the conflict between Uganda and Tanzania. In **Uganda**, ICRC delegates visited some 4,500 detainees in 18 detention centres between May and the end of December. Material assistance activities were also carried out on behalf of displaced persons in camps on the Tanzanian border and in various hospitals. In

addition, 52.5 tons of medicaments and medical supplies worth 1,429,000 Swiss francs were provided to hospitals and dispensaries. In **Tanzania**, 482 wounded Tanzanian combatants and 795 prisoners of war, including 741 Ugandans, were visited by ICRC delegates during two series of visits in June and August. Assistance work was also undertaken on behalf of displaced persons.

In **Ethiopia**, the ICRC continued to assist the victims of the armed conflicts in Eritrea and Ogaden by distributing medical and material relief in collaboration with the Ethiopian Red Cross and the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. Assistance was also granted to the population of the Tigre and Gondar provinces. All in all, 1,366 tons of relief worth 2,143,000 Swiss francs were distributed. Furthermore, in accordance with the commitments it had made in 1978, the ICRC carried out a project for the establishment of a prosthesis and physiotherapy workshop for war invalids at the Debre Zeit centre near Addis Ababa. A team of five specialists was made available to the centre, a workshop for the manufacture of prosthetic equipment was set up and local personnel were trained. The ICRC's financial involvement amounted to some 320,000 francs. In **Somalia**, despite its efforts throughout the year, the ICRC was unable to visit Ethiopian prisoners of war, except in one specific case. In **Sudan**, activities were pursued on behalf of the victims of the hostilities in Eritrea. In particular, medical assistance was provided to the Kassala hospital, where the ICRC took charge of medical activities in collaboration with the Swiss Red Cross and with the agreement of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), and to the Port Sudan rehabilitation centre for paraplegics, hemiplegics and war casualties.

In 1978 the ICRC had started to concern itself with the internal conflict in **Chad**, where two delegations were opened (at N'Djamena and Faya-Largeau). In 1979 protective action was continued in favour of prisoners in the hands of FROLINAT and those detained by the Chad authorities, and extended to prisoners taken following the fighting in the capital and various parts of the country. In the BET (Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti) provinces, delegates carried out some sixty visits to more than 1,200 prisoners of war. At N'Djamena, about 40 prisoners were seen during some ten visits to three places

of detention. The ICRC also made arrangements for the return of civilians held in detention by the FAN (Northern Armed Forces) at Abeché and by the FROLINAT in the BET provinces. In all, some 2,150 persons benefited from these operations, 1,096 tons of various kinds of relief worth 1,465,500 Swiss francs being distributed; of the total, 399 tons, worth 734,500 francs, went to prisoners of war in the BET. In addition, 23 tons of medicaments worth about 785,000 francs were distributed, including 2.3 tons, worth 128,500 francs, to prisoners of war in the BET.

In **Zaire** the ICRC concentrated mainly on stepping up its protection activities. After visiting the places of detention in Shaba (almost 2,900 detainees were visited in 60 such places), efforts were made to extend such action to other provinces. By the end of the year the Zaire authorities had agreed in principle that the ICRC might visit all civil and military prisons and police stations. Only access to the places of detention run by the National Documentation Centre (security services) had not then been obtained.

Finally, the ICRC continued to follow developments in the **Western Sahara** conflict and to maintain contact with all the parties concerned with a view to discharging its treaty obligations towards the victims of the conflict, particularly prisoners of war. However, despite repeated approaches, progress was made only in Mauritania where a further visit was made in July to the Polisario Front prisoners held by the Mauritanian armed forces.

#### *LATIN AMERICA*

In Latin America the ICRC was very active in connexion with the Nicaraguan conflict, mainly in Nicaragua but also in neighbouring countries (Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala) where Nicaraguan nationals had taken refuge.

In **Nicaragua** itself, traditional protective action was taken both during the fighting which preceded the change of régime and after the National Reconstruction Junta had taken over. During the transitional period, delegates went to the main prisons of Managua in order to ensure that the release of detainees imprisoned under

the previous régime was not accompanied by acts of violence. In collaboration with the Nicaraguan Red Cross, reception areas were organized in the main towns, for the benefit of members of the National Guard who had laid down their arms, for their families and other civilians. In short, 82 visits were made to 24 places where 748 persons were detained under the old régime, while 248 visits to 109 places of detention enabled some 6,400 detainees to be seen after the change of government. At the same time, a large-scale programme of assistance to the civilian population was launched. Road convoys were organized in collaboration with the National Society in order to transport foodstuffs and medicaments to the places affected by the fighting. Between January and May, 989 tons of various kinds of relief (including 600 tons of foodstuffs donated by the European Economic Community) worth 1,187,697 Swiss francs were distributed. Later, in order to cater for ever-increasing needs and because of the difficulties involved in supplying the city of Managua overland, the ICRC organized an airlift which, from 19 June to 16 August, conveyed 2,082 tons of relief on 114 flights. As safety improved, the airlift was replaced by road and sea convoys. All in all, over 7,400 tons of relief worth 7,500,000 Swiss francs reached Nicaragua during the emergency months of June, July and August. As to medical activities, over and above the distribution of medicaments and sundry supplies, the ICRC made arrangements to evacuate the wounded from the combat areas in collaboration with the Nicaraguan Red Cross and other assistance bodies. Medical assistance worth 884,728 Swiss francs was provided. The total value of donations of medical relief is estimated at over 1,030,000 francs.

The ICRC also followed developments in **El Salvador** and **Bolivia**, both of which countries were the scene of disturbances. The Bolivian Red Cross was granted financial assistance in the order of 66,000 Swiss francs for the purchase of medical supplies. A plan for increasing the operational capacity of the Salvadorean Red Cross was drawn up in collaboration with the League.

Protective action was continued in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and El Salvador on behalf of persons detained for security reasons. Furthermore, the

ICRC obtained permission from the government at Montevideo to start protection activities in Uruguay in 1980. In **Argentina**, ICRC delegates carried out 38 visits to 25 places of detention where some 2,200 persons were being held. In **Colombia**, 45 visits to 26 places of detention enabled some 550 detainees to be seen. In **El Salvador**, following the change of régime in October, delegates visited almost all civilian and military places of detention and were given access to persons who were being held under interrogation, who were awaiting trial or who had been sentenced. Visits were also made to places of detention in **Chile** and **Paraguay**. In addition, the ICRC took action on behalf of persons declared missing in Argentina and Chile by submitting lists of names to the authorities for inquiry.

## ASIA

In Asia, the year 1979 was characterized by a significant increase of ICRC involvement, because of two conflicts in particular: that between the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and that in Kampuchea.

ICRC delegates went to both **China** and **Viet Nam**, and visited prisoners of war in the hands of both parties. After the hostilities were over, five operations for the repatriation of Vietnamese and Chinese prisoners of war took place between 21 May and 21 June under the auspices of the National Society of each country and in the presence of ICRC delegates. Furthermore, displaced persons in the six Vietnamese provinces most seriously affected by the fighting received medical assistance from the ICRC (256,500 Swiss francs) as well as food aid from the EEC (approximately 6,925,000 Swiss francs) forwarded through the ICRC.

The **conflict in Kampuchea** led the ICRC to set on foot, together with UNICEF, a very extensive programme of material and medical assistance in both Kampuchea and Thailand, where tens of thousands of Kampucheans had sought refuge. The related activities, which started on 9 August with the despatch of an initial consignment of medicaments and medical supplies to Phnom Penh, were stepped up considerably from October onwards, on the basis of a joint programme



submitted to the authorities of the People's Republic of Kampuchea by the ICRC and UNICEF. By the end of December, 37,428 tons of relief (including 34,000 tons of foodstuffs) worth about 16 million dollars had been forwarded to Kampuchea. Most of the foodstuffs (some 30,000 tons) were made available by the World Food Programme (WFP). Of the 37,428 tons of relief, 36,290 tons were transported by aircraft and ships chartered exclusively under the joint programme. Transport of the remaining 1,138 tons was organized by the donors themselves. Medicaments and medical equipment worth 669,000 Swiss francs were forwarded to Kampuchea through ICRC channels.

In Thailand the ICRC and UNICEF together started in October, at the request of the authorities, to dispense food and medical assistance at the frontier; at the same time the ICRC co-ordinated medical work in the camps run by the HCR, in collaboration with voluntary agencies. By the end of December 20,070 tons of relief, including 19,500 tons of foodstuffs, had been forwarded to the frontier; of the total, 13,220 tons were provided by the WFP. It is estimated that some 350,000 persons benefited from this relief, the total value of which was 5,628,000 dollars. Medical work, which entailed a sizeable increase of both personnel and equipment, was carried out both in the camps and along the frontier. Two 1,000-bed hospitals were set up at Khao I Dang. Mobile teams were stationed along the frontier to pick up the sick and wounded and transfer them to hospital. This task would not have been possible without the massive support of the National Red Cross Societies and voluntary agencies which made medical and paramedical personnel available to the ICRC. Medical assistance in Thailand, including the frontier area, amounted to 5,552,000 Swiss francs at the end of the year, of which 3,269,000 francs corresponded to donations in kind from National Societies and other sources.

In another sphere, the plight of **refugees and displaced persons in South-East Asia** was a matter of deep concern to the ICRC, which proposed plans of action and offered its services to the international community in collaboration with the League and the HCR. Three appeals were launched, on 12 January, 15 June and 28 June. At the Geneva conference held on 20-21 July, the

ICRC also announced that it was willing to help with registrations, the search for missing persons and the exchange of news, through its Central Tracing Agency (CTA). Furthermore, the ICRC and the League set up a "task force" of the International Red Cross for the purpose of harmonizing their respective activities in South-East Asia. In order to finance their joint programme, the two institutions launched an appeal for funds of the order of 22,751,500 Swiss francs, of which 1,475,500 francs were intended to cover the CTA's technical and material support while the remainder was earmarked for the work of the National Societies concerned.

In 1979 the ICRC was also involved in a number of other activities in the Far East. In **Viet Nam**, arrangements were made to repatriate foreign residents with no diplomatic representatives in the country. In **Malaysia** and **Indonesia**, protection activities were continued and efforts made to extend them to further categories of "political detainees". In the **Philippines**, the National Red Cross received support for its work on behalf of displaced persons on Mindanao. In **East Timor**, an emergency programme of food and medical assistance for some 60,000 displaced persons was undertaken in collaboration with the Indonesian Red Cross.

In the **Indian sub-continent**, the ICRC supported the assistance work being carried out by the Pakistan Red Crescent for some 3,000 Afghan refugees in the north of Pakistan. Technical assistance was also provided in connexion with the repatriation of Biharis from Bangladesh to Pakistan. Following the changes in **Afghanistan**, the ICRC offered its services four times to the authorities at Kabul.

#### *MIDDLE EAST*

The action taken by the ICRC in the Middle East was concerned mainly with the conflict between Israel and the Arab States and the internal conflict in Lebanon. In **Israel and the occupied territories**, visits were continued to detainees under interrogation and other categories of detainees (those who had been sentenced, those awaiting trial and persons in administrative detention). Delegates were given access to 1,176 detainees in the former category and some 3,100 in the other categories. The

assistance afforded to them and their families totalled 376,600 Swiss francs. The ICRC also organized the passage of students, pilgrims, people being reunited with their families and released detainees across the demarcation lines between the occupied territories and the neighbouring Arab countries. Activities were carried out pursuant to the Third Convention to mitigate the after-effects of the Israeli intervention in southern Lebanon in March 1978. Arrangements were made for the repatriation to Lebanon of 14 persons who had been captured by the Israeli armed forces and held in administrative custody. An Israeli prisoner of war held by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) was visited. With the consent of both parties (the PFLP-GC and the Israeli authorities), arrangements were made for the simultaneous release of the Israeli soldier and 76 Arab civilian detainees under ICRC auspices.

Since the situation in Lebanon remained relatively calm in 1979, the ICRC was not called upon to take action on a large scale. A small amount of medical work was undertaken, mainly in connexion with the situation in the south, which had been the scene of several Israeli armed interventions as well as internal fighting between various parties. Medicaments and medical supplies worth 570,035 Swiss francs were forwarded to Lebanon in 1979. Material assistance, which consisted largely in the distribution of relief to communities and families particularly affected by the events, totalled 283 tons (including 205 tons of foodstuffs) worth 1,424,052 Swiss francs.

In **Jordan**, the ICRC received permission from the authorities to carry out two series of visits to places of detention, one in February and one in October.

In **Iran**, under the old régime, the ICRC intervened on behalf of political detainees or persons arrested under martial law. After the change which came about in February, it took action on behalf of persons arrested in connexion with the events.

In the **Yemen Arab Republic**, assistance activities were undertaken on behalf of some 45,000 displaced persons following disturbances in the vicinity of the frontier with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

## Headquarters activities

The activities carried out by the ICRC in the field would not be possible without a headquarters structure and services capable of planning, supporting and monitoring them. There are five departments at headquarters: Operations, Principles and Law, Central Tracing Agency, Personnel and Finance and Administration.

Essentially, the task of the **Operations Department** is to conduct the operations which the ICRC undertakes in the field pursuant to decisions of the Assembly and, more generally, of the Executive Board. The Department is divided into five geographical zones and also comprises the Relief Division, the Medical Division, the Detention Service and the Telecommunication Service. A further support service, which handles liaison with National Red Cross Societies and governments, was created in 1979.

The role of the **Department of Principles and Law** is to defend the cause of mankind on the juridical plane. To this end it gives constant attention to the development, reaffirmation and dissemination of international humanitarian law, adapted to constantly changing world conditions. It encourages States to become parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Protocols, participates in international meetings concerned with the development of international public law, particularly international humanitarian law, organizes regional seminars on dissemination and brings out publications for teachers, the armed forces, young people and the general public. It also maintains close contact with other International Red Cross bodies, the League and the National Societies, and assists in the dissemination of the principles and ideals of the Red Cross. It comprises three divisions: the National Societies and Principles Division, the Legal Division and the Documentation and Dissemination Division.

The **Central Tracing Agency** comprises various services which correspond to the geographical zones of the Operations Department: the Europe zone deals with the sequels of the First and Second World Wars, whereas the other four keep abreast of developments in close collaboration with delegates in the field. In 1979 the

number of cases handled by the CTA increased substantially. Almost 88,000 mail items were received or despatched as against 82,000 in 1978, i.e. an increase of 7.5 per cent. In addition, 125,000 names were registered and recorded on index cards (90,000 in 1978) and over 500,000 names of South-East Asian refugees were transmitted to the CTA for processing as and when inquiries were made. This increase of the workload led the CTA to adopt modern techniques such as data processing and microfilm.

In the field of information and public relations, the **Press and Information Division** not only pursued its regular activities in 1979 but also stepped up its work in the field, particularly in Kampuchea and Nicaragua. It also continued the information campaign launched in southern Africa at the end of 1978.

As in previous years, the **delegate to international organizations** followed the work of the United Nations General Assembly and made a number of contacts in New York in connexion with the joint ICRC/UNICEF operation in Kampuchea and Thailand.

The management of ICRC staff both at headquarters and in the field was the task of the **Personnel Department**, which was restructured in 1979 when two divisions were set up to deal, respectively, with recruitment and training and with personnel administration.

The ICRC's work taken as a whole raises acute financial problems which have to be solved if that work is to continue. The **Finance and Administration Department** has the unenviable task of seeking the funds required to finance activities. The results achieved in

this regard in 1979 were encouraging, if not entirely satisfactory. Not all governments and National Societies realize how much the ICRC needs regular contributions that are tailored to its activities throughout the world. In the connexion, it is worth mentioning that the Swiss Confederation again made the highest contribution to receipts, namely 14.5 million Swiss francs of a total of 30.4 million (excluding ad hoc financing of large-scale operations).

\* \*  
\*

No record of humanitarian work, however comprehensive, can fully reflect reality. Words and figures will always be powerless to describe the suffering of a wounded man waiting for help, the dull eyes of a starving child, the tears of a mother weeping for her son—or a mother's joy on learning that the loved ones she presumed dead are alive, thousands of miles away. The ICRC lives these moments every day of the year through its delegates and is thus spurred forward in its mission despite the disproportion which exists between the humanitarian tasks facing it and the meagre resources available for their performances.

The ICRC is aware that whatever touch of humane-ness it has been able to inject into the horrors of war is due to the support of the international community and the world of the Red Cross. In conveying its gratitude, it also expresses the hope that it will continue to enjoy the support that enables it to discharge its obligations towards the hundreds of thousands of victims of disasters that are of man's making.



