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Action in the field

With some 580 staff working at the Geneva headquarters, an average of 500 other staff in 39 delegations, sub-delegations and offices (including about 60 people seconded by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and more than 2,300 locally recruited employees, in 1986 the ICRC was active in almost 80 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and the Middle East—taking into account the countries covered from its various regional delegations—providing protection and assistance for the victims of armed conflict and internal disturbances and tension.

In 1986 ICRC delegates visited people who had been deprived of their freedom (prisoners of war and so-called “security detainees”) in 719 places of detention in 37 countries (*for details, see the countries/conflicts concerned later in this chapter*). The purpose of these visits is purely humanitarian: ICRC delegates inspect the material and psychological conditions of detention and the treatment accorded to prisoners, provide detainees with relief if required (medicines, clothing, toilet articles) and, if necessary, ask the authorities to take steps to improve the detainees’ treatment and living conditions. In the course of repeated visits, delegates talk to whichever prisoners they please for as long as they wish, without witnesses.

Before and after these visits, discussions at various levels are held with those in charge of the detention centres. Confidential reports are then drawn up. In the case of internal disturbances or tension, these reports are sent only to the detaining authorities, while in the case of international armed conflict they are sent both to the Detaining Power and to the prisoners’ Power of Origin. These reports are not intended for publication. The ICRC, for its part, confines itself to publishing the number and names of the places visited, the dates of the visits and the number of people seen. It also mentions the fact that its delegates were able to talk to the prisoners without witnesses. It does not express an opinion on the grounds for detention and does not publicly comment on the material or psychological conditions it finds. If a government should publish incomplete or inaccurate versions of ICRC reports, the ICRC reserves the right to publish and circulate such reports in full.

The ICRC visits places of detention providing its delegates are allowed:

- to see all the detainees and talk freely to them without witnesses;
- to have access to all premises used for detention;
- to repeat their visits.

In addition, the ICRC generally asks for a list of the persons to be visited or for permission to draw up such a list during the

visit and to distribute material assistance to needy detainees and their families.

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The Central Tracing Agency (CTA) of the ICRC continued to carry out its tasks arising both from its treaty obligations towards civilian and military victims of armed conflicts and from the exercise by the ICRC of its right to take the humanitarian initiative.

It will be recalled that the CTA and its delegates in the field are mainly concerned with the following tasks:

- obtaining, registering, collating and, when necessary, forwarding information about people helped by the ICRC, such as prisoners of war, civilian internees, detainees, displaced persons and refugees;
- forwarding family messages when normal means of communication are non-existent or interrupted by conflict;
- tracing persons reported missing or whose relatives are without news;
- arranging for family reunifications, transfer (of particularly vulnerable groups, for example) to safe places, and repatriations;
- issuing, on request, written attestations for former detainees and prisoners of war certifying that they were actually held, or were sick, wounded or hospitalized while in captivity; drawing up death certificates so that family entitlements to pensions or compensation can be claimed;
- issuing ICRC travel documents on the basis of statements made by applicants, who, owing to the upheavals caused by conflict, have no identity papers or passports. Such documents are valid for one journey only.

All these activities undertaken in Geneva and in the field are carried out in co-operation with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a large number of which have their own tracing services.

Statistics for the overall activities of the CTA in 1986, both at Geneva headquarters and in the field, are as follows:

- 2,093,485 Red Cross messages were exchanged, a large number of them in relation to the conflict between Iraq and Iran;
- 54,817 requests for tracing missing persons were processed;
- 9,699 capture cards for prisoners of war or civilian internees were received and 4,155 registration cards for security detainees were drawn up;
- 3,264 certificates of captivity, sickness, death, etc. were issued;
- 2,795 travel documents were provided.

The CTA continued to handle cases relating to previous conflicts, in particular the Second World War.

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Turning to relief operations, in 1986 the ICRC purchased and sent directly to the scene of action 23,663 tonnes of relief supplies for a value of 24 million Swiss francs. In addition, 59,095 tonnes (worth 51 million Swiss francs) were sent by donors under ICRC supervision, some of it under food aid agreements concluded with several governments. A total of 82,758 tonnes of relief supplies (not counting medical supplies), worth 75 million Swiss francs, was thus dispatched by the ICRC to 45 countries in 1986. Out of this total, and including what was stockpiled in the field at the end of 1985, an overall amount of 96,642 tonnes, worth 108 million Swiss francs, was actually distributed during 1986.

Medical assistance came to 12.8 million Swiss francs. Throughout the year, moreover, the ICRC sent 220 medical and ancillary personnel (doctors, surgeons, male and female nurses, physiotherapists, prosthetists, nutritionists, public health specialists and medical administrators) to take part in activities in different regions of the world. Of these, 155 were seconded to the ICRC by the National Red Cross Societies of 19 countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom).

The total value of the medical and other supplies dispatched by the ICRC in 1986 was distributed geographically as follows:

	(Swiss francs)	
<i>Africa</i>	80,761,146	74.66%
<i>Latin America</i>	14,338,503	13.25%
<i>Asia</i>	4,930,373	4.56%
<i>Middle East & North Africa</i>	8,148,368	7.53%
<i>TOTAL</i>	108,178,390	100%

(See pages 34, 48, 64, 76 for detailed tables.)

Assistance for detainees and their families, included in the above figures, cost 5,862,973 Swiss francs and amounted to more than 2,645 tonnes of relief supplies.

It should be remembered that the ICRC undertakes material and medical aid programmes only in cases of armed conflict and internal disturbances and tension, and only providing it can:

- carry out on-the-spot assessments of the urgency of the victims' needs;
- make local surveys to identify the categories and numbers of people requiring assistance;
- organize and supervise relief distributions.

(The figures quoted above represent only part of the cost of aid programmes as they appear in the budgets and financial reports for each operation. Such operations also involve very substantial expenditure on personnel, equipment, vehicles, transport, storage, etc.)

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On 31 December 1986 the ICRC telecommunications network consisted of 19 base stations in direct radio contact with Geneva (including one in Niamey for the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and 42 local stations ensuring a radio link-up in the field between delegations, sub-delegations and ICRC offices (see diagram on page 85). The number of radio messages exchanged between ICRC headquarters and the various delegations rose to 18,572, while radio traffic between all the delegations amounted to 30,672 messages (the figures for 1985 were 15,886 and 25,171 respectively). Taking telex, telephone and facsimile messages into account, the ICRC Telecommunications Service in Geneva dealt with a total of 60,861 messages, an increase of 3.6% over the previous year.