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Criteria for Action

Activities for people deprived of their freedom

In 1990, ICRC delegates carried out 5,199 visits to 84,769 people deprived of their freedom in 1,327 places of detention in 42 countries (*for details see the countries/conflicts concerned*).

By virtue of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, the ICRC visits persons deprived of their freedom in international armed conflicts (prisoners of war within the meaning of Article 4 of the Third Convention and Article 44 of Protocol I) and persons protected under the Fourth Convention (civilian internees, persons arrested by the Occupying Power and penal-law detainees in enemy hands).

In the event of non-international conflicts, covered by Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Protocol II of 1977, the ICRC concerns itself with persons deprived of their freedom in connection with the conflict (combatants of government or rebel forces captured by the opposing side, civilians arrested by the government or captured by the rebels because of their support, real or not, active or not, for the opposing forces, whether or not they have been tried).

In situations of internal disturbances and tension, which are not covered by international humanitarian law, the ICRC has a statutory right of initiative entitling it to offer its services to visit people arrested for political or security reasons.

The purpose of ICRC visits is purely humanitarian; ICRC delegates observe the material and psychological conditions of

detention and the treatment accorded to detainees, provide them with relief supplies if required (medicines, clothing, toilet articles) and ask the authorities to take any steps deemed necessary to improve the detainees' treatment.

ICRC visits to places of detention, whether pursuant to the Geneva Conventions or outside the field of application of international humanitarian law, are carried out according to specific criteria. Its delegates must be allowed to see all the detainees and talk freely to them without witnesses, have access to all premises used for detention, repeat their visits and, if necessary, distribute material assistance to the detainees and their families. They must also be provided with a list of the persons to be visited or permitted to draw up such a list during the visit.

Before and after these visits, discussions at various levels are held with the people in charge of the detention centres. Confidential reports are then drawn up. In the case of international armed conflict these reports are sent both to the Detaining Power and to the Power of Origin of the prisoners of war, while in other cases they are sent only to the detaining authorities.

These confidential reports are not intended for publication. The ICRC confines itself to releasing the number and names of the places visited, the dates of the visits and the number of people seen. 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 them in full.

Central Tracing Agency

The ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA) was once again very busy in 1990, the number of persons being sought, like the overall volume of data to be processed, having tripled in three years.

The ICRC's first small information offices came into being during and after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The subsequent central information agencies set up by it during the two World Wars were huge in comparison. The latest, the Central Tracing Agency, today makes extensive use of computers. It is represented in the field by some 60 specialized delegates posted to 27 delegations. At its Geneva headquarters, over 80 staff members work on card files — a mute record of so many families torn apart by past and present conflicts. Sixty million such cards have been established since 1914, including, for example, the 500,000 cards bearing names of Indo-Chinese refugees or displaced persons compiled since 1979.

On the basis of the ICRC's obligations under the Geneva Conventions or its right of humanitarian initiative, the Agency's main tasks are as follows:

- to obtain, centralize and, where necessary, forward any information that might help to identify the people in whose behalf the ICRC works (in 1990, 1,089,521 such data were registered);
- to maintain the exchange of family correspondence when the usual means of communication have been disrupted (985,237 letters and family messages forwarded in 1990);
- to trace persons reported missing or whose families have had no news of them (74,119 tracing requests processed in 1990);
- to arrange for transfers, repatriations and reunification of separated families (78,180 civilians and prisoners of war repatriated in 1990);
- to issue, for a limited period and a single journey, "ICRC travel documents" to persons without identity papers (3,121 such documents issued in 1990 to 4,305 refugees and displaced persons);
- to issue captivity, hospitalization or death certificates for former detainees, prisoners of war or their rightful claimants (48,708 such certificates issued in 1990).

The forwarding of family messages, tracing activities and family reunifications are often carried out in conjunction with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The Central Tracing Agency, which acts as technical adviser to those Societies, organized three training courses in 1990, including a regional seminar in Dakar. Twenty-eight National Society representatives took part.

Following the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the Agency was approached by a number of the States concerned for assistance in setting up National Information Bureaux as provided for by the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions. Such bureaux have the task of collecting relevant information about persons protected under the Conventions and passing it on to the Agency.

Medical and material relief

The ICRC furnishes medical and material assistance in situations of armed conflict

and internal disturbances or tension providing it can:

- assess on the spot the urgency of the victims' needs;
- carry out field surveys to determine the categories and number of people needing assistance;
- organize and monitor the distribution of relief.

In 1990, the ICRC purchased and dispatched to 48 countries a total of 43,042 tonnes of relief supplies for a value of 62.1 million Swiss francs, consisting of 13,319 tonnes of material relief (other than medical) worth 24.7 million francs purchased directly by the ICRC and 29,723 tonnes worth 37.4 million francs provided by donors as contributions in kind to ICRC field operations. Medical assistance purchased and dispatched in 1990 came to an additional 31.4 million francs. The

total value of medical and material relief supplies purchased or received and dispatched in 1990 thus amounted to 93.5 million francs.

Actual distributions by the ICRC in 1990 totalled 41,210 tonnes of material relief supplies for a value of 60.7 million Swiss francs, plus medical assistance for a value of 28.7 million francs. The total value of the medical and material relief distributed by the ICRC in 1990 thus amounted to 89.4 million francs. Medical and other assistance for detainees and their families, included in the above figures of relief distributed, cost 3.9 million francs and amounted to more than 1,127 tonnes of relief supplies. Financial assistance in places of detention came to a total of 2.5 million francs.

(See detailed tables on pages 38, 49, 68, 72, 87).

