



International Committee of the Red Cross

# BULLETIN

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## A YEAR OF ICRC ACTIVITIES

### “The ICRC cannot choose the victims it helps”

#### Interview with Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the ICRC

*Mr. President, in your annual press conference held on 3 May you reviewed ICRC activities over the past year. Would you say that the ICRC took a moral stance in the recent Middle East conflict?*

Yes, beyond its practical work the ICRC did take a moral stance by alerting public opinion and reminding governments of their humanitarian obligations. This was particularly clear in the appeal it launched on 1 February to the belligerents in behalf of all the victims and potential victims of the conflict. The ICRC deliberately invoked general humanitarian principles instead of specific legal provisions because decent treatment and basic protection are inalienable human rights, even in conflict situations.

*How does the ICRC's humanitarian work differ from that of other organizations or governments?*

The ICRC has an international mandate deriving from the Geneva Conventions.



Photo ICRC / Jean Mohr — IRAN 91

Iraqi refugees in Piranshahr, on the Iranian border.

The 165 States party to those Conventions conferred on it the status of a specifically neutral humanitarian intermediary that is required to take action in many different situations. This means, in particular, that the ICRC cannot choose the victims it helps. It has to come to their aid, and to do so has to be able to reach them. For this it needs the support of the international community. The ICRC's work is also unique in that its mandate covers not only assistance but also protection activities.

*How did the ICRC manage to respond to the overwhelming humanitarian needs created by the Middle East conflict?*

The ICRC could not have risen to such a challenge without great dedication on the part of the entire staff. I should like to pay tribute here to the unstinting work of its delegates, including former delegates who returned to lend a hand and the many headquarters staff who went out to work

(Continued on page 2)

## MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

### Eight medical teams in Iraq

With the help of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC has deployed eight medical teams throughout Iraq, with an ICRC medical coordinator based in Baghdad. Three teams are working in and around the capital and two others in Basrah and Nasiriyah, in the south.

The remaining three teams are helping at dispensaries and hospitals in the Arbil and Sulaimaniya areas near the Iranian border.

Priority is being given to providing support for existing medical services and efforts to control outbreaks of diarrhoea.

A sanitation programme is also under way throughout the country. Almost 40 sanitary engineers and technicians from the ICRC and nine National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are currently in Iraq repairing the country's water

treatment and distribution systems and taking measures to control diarrhoea epidemics.

In northern Iraq the ICRC has just installed six more mobile water purification units, each with a capacity of 100 cubic metres per day.

In the centre and south of the country, the three mobile units in Baghdad, Basrah and Nasiriyah are producing drinking water in plastic bags for distribution to hospitals and the population in general.

The repatriation of prisoners of war, which was suspended on 21 April, resumed on 4 May following the fifth meeting between Iraqi and Allied delegations, held in Riyadh under ICRC auspices. Since then ICRC delegates have repatriated several thousand Iraqi POWs held by Allied forces in Saudi Arabia,

including 114 who were sick or wounded. So far the ICRC has registered over 82,000 Iraqi POWs and supervised the repatriation of more than 66,000 of them.

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Mainly as a result of the Middle East conflict, during the first four months of 1991 there was a sharp increase in the number of missions by ICRC personnel. An average of 280 staff have been leaving for the field every month, as compared with 200 in 1990, which was already the highest number on record. This number includes both short- and long-term missions and visits abroad by ICRC headquarters staff.

The ICRC currently has 340 expatriate staff in the Middle East, comprising ICRC delegates and personnel seconded by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as compared with an average of 90 last year.



# Interview with the President of the ICRC

(Continued from page 1)

in the field. Moreover, it could not have undertaken such a large-scale operation without the virtually unconditional cooperation of the majority of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which provided not only substantial logistic means but also personnel. The ICRC received support from many governments, which were well aware of the magnitude of our task, and from public opinion and the media, which showed considerable understanding of the difficulties involved.

*Does the ICRC have the funds necessary to assist African countries facing a proliferation of long-drawn-out conflicts and disturbances?*

We cannot turn our back on Africa. I have repeatedly stated in recent months that the Gulf is not the ICRC's sole concern. Our aim is to provide impartial and neutral assistance and protection to conflict victims everywhere. We must therefore continue to draw attention to the plight of victims in Africa. In any undertaking, whether humanitarian or otherwise, priorities must be set and human and material resources allocated accordingly. I am profoundly convinced that the living conditions of innumerable African civilians, even outside conflict areas, are today barely tolerable. It is therefore all the more crucial for the ICRC to take action in situations of conflict, especially where it is the only institution able to do so. We shall not abandon Africa!

*The ICRC has launched numerous fundraising appeals this year, especially for*

*its work in the Middle East. What has been the response of governments?*

I am happy to say that governments have responded generously. However, our needs have not been fully met in terms of both quantity and quality, so to speak. The ICRC requires not only additional funds to cover the cost of its humanitarian activities this year, which because of the Gulf war has increased by one fifth as compared with previous years, but also a free hand in using those funds. Governments must understand that the earmarking of contributions, in other words stipulating that they must be used for a specific operation, tends to favour certain programmes to the detriment of others. The ICRC must be allowed to set its operational priorities independently and impartially.

*In your press conference, you mentioned the destructive effect of laser weapons. Does this mean that the ICRC intends to press for a ban on such weapons?*

This requires further explanation. I was referring to work that the ICRC has been engaged in for the past four years with various experts in the field of laser weapons. The primary cause for concern is not the existence of laser weapons, but their potential for causing unnecessary suffering, particularly blindness, among civilians and members of the armed forces. It is the use of these weapons to inflict such injuries that should be banned. I hope that the next International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, due to be held in Budapest in November, will issue a statement to that effect. However, the adoption of a rule of international law is still a long way off.

*The ICRC is setting up a new executive structure. What role will this play?*

The new structure is intended to meet the need for closer working relations between ICRC staff and the institution's governing body, the Committee, which comprises up to 25 members. The new Executive Board should ensure more efficient and streamlined management, since as the sole executive body it will take all operational decisions and also prepare the ground for the more fundamental decisions taken by the Assembly. The Board, which is a collegiate body, will take decisions by majority vote and will be more closely involved in the ICRC's work in that five of its members will be full-time ICRC staff. Those five members are the President, the Vice-President, Mr. Claudio Caratsch, and three directors, Mr. Guy Deluz, Mr. Jean de Courten and Mr. Yves Sandoz.

*What major problems will be dealt with by the forthcoming International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference?*

Traditionally the President of the ICRC opens the Conference by taking stock of the implementation of international humanitarian law (IHL) throughout the world, and I intend to go into the matter in great detail. The Conference will also discuss the issue of universal adherence to humanitarian law instruments. Indeed, during the Gulf war it was all too evident that not every belligerent State had ratified Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions and relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts. We shall also deal with specific problems of IHL such as the use of laser weapons and the need for more widespread dissemination of the law, since governments too often fail to devote sufficient time and energy to teaching its rules to members of the armed forces, the police and diplomatic corps.

The Conference will also focus on the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's work in behalf of refugees. In addition, I hope that clear decisions will be taken on the use of the red cross and red crescent emblems in commercial sponsorship agreements. Another subject we shall be discussing is the development of National Societies, which is a matter of priority for the ICRC and the League, our international partner within the Movement. The International Conference in Budapest, which as you know will be attended by representatives of the National Societies and governments, will thus have a very full agenda.

## ICRC RECEIVES MAX SCHMIDHEINY PRIZE

On 27 May 1991 the Max Schmidheiny Foundation at the University of St. Gallen awarded the 1991 Freedom Prize to the International Committee of the Red Cross,

to the men and women who, as unwavering defenders of human dignity and freedom, inspired by the ideals of impartiality, risk their lives to bring protection and assistance to the victims of armed conflict and internal disturbances throughout the world;

to the guardians of humanitarian law who, confident in the universal mission entrusted to this private organization, resolutely place their courage and commitment at the service of the law and, by setting the example and without discrimination, strive to overcome the scourge of war, alleviate the suffering of mankind and prevent wanton destruction;

to those — Swiss and yet independent — who fight for humanitarian ideals, who in the tried and tested tradition of voluntary commitment put their neutrality and discretion at the service of mankind, and who in the spirit of Henry Dunant make a valuable contribution to international solidarity.



# INSIDE IRAN'S REFUGEE CAMPS

Over one million Kurdish and Arab Iraqis fled their country in the space of a few days to escape the internal disturbances that broke out in the wake of the recent Middle East conflict. ICRC press attaché Pierre Gauthier reports.

5 May. Close to 100,000 refugees were sheltering in four camps near the small town of Tazehabad in West Bakhtaran province, where the ICRC had set up a dispensary and a rehydration centre staffed by a Norwegian Red Cross medical team.

One of the team members explained: "We are still waiting for our equipment to arrive, so at the moment we have only a temporary dispensary in several small tents. We treat over 100 patients daily, mainly dehydrated, feverish or exhausted children brought to us by their mothers. We work without a break from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. — I can't even remember when we had our last meal."

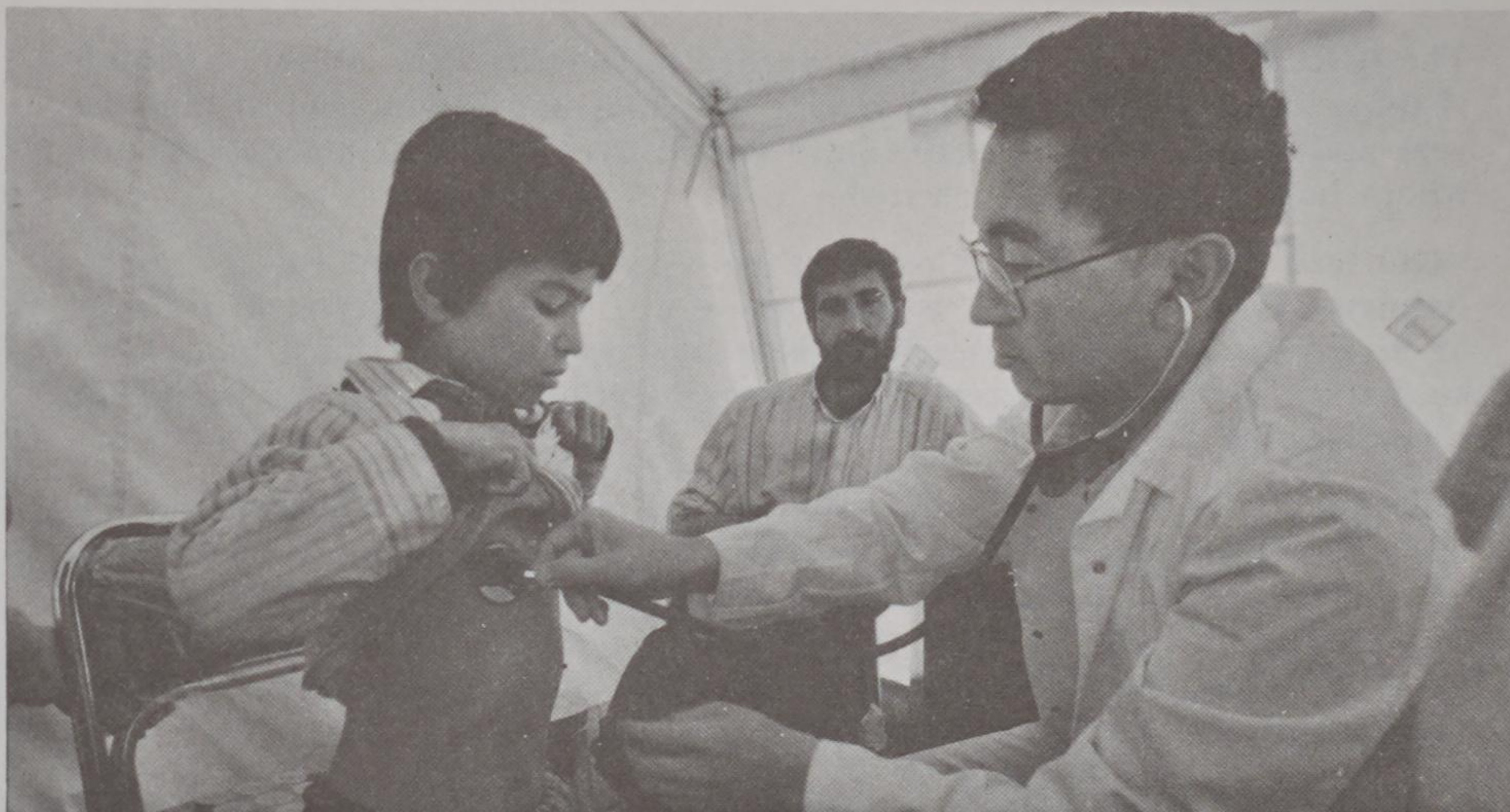
Inside the tents, nurses were showing mothers how to mix a solution of rehydration salts to be instilled into the babies' mouths. The infants, too weak to cry, stared vacantly into space. Despite their critical condition, most of them would survive.

Outside, a woman pressed a nurse's arm and said: "I am from Sulaimaniya. My husband and two children died on the way here. Yesterday I gave birth to twins. One weighed only 750 grammes, the other barely a kilo, and both of them died. But I still have milk, so please let me feed some of the babies here".

The nurse showed the woman to a makeshift cot and moments later she was nursing two babies, a melancholy smile lighting her face.

## Tragic journey

7 May. There was still only a trickle of returning refugees in Bakhtaran; but in West Azerbaijan long lines of vehicles heading for Iraq could be seen converging on the border post of Piranshahr. Under two white awnings next to the hospital some 60 women were listening attentively to a young ICRC paediatrician giving simple but effective advice and explaining the basic rules of hygiene. The young women in brightly coloured dresses, eager to learn how to protect their children from disease, asked innumerable questions. It was hard to imagine that only a few days earlier they had been trudging barefoot in mud and snow on the long road to exile.



A Japanese Red Cross doctor at work in the Oshnavieh camp.

Further north in the same province 12,000 people had found refuge in an ICRC camp set up on a mountainside near Oshnavieh. Inside a tent a young woman described her tragic journey. Her entire family, including her brothers, sisters and husband of only 20 days, had been killed before her very eyes. Yet her words betrayed no hatred or bitterness, only sadness and fear for the future. Somewhere in the dark recesses of the tent an old man was weeping softly.

Tarpaulins flapped in the rising wind and clouds of dust swirled by. Below the tents, near the water taps installed by ICRC sanitary engineers, children were playing while women washed dishes in the gathering dusk. Soon the moon and stars appeared, bathing the camp in silvery light. In the bitter cold a lamp over the camp dispensary shone reassuringly all night long.

## The Iranian Red Crescent at work

Khorramshahr, Khuzistan, 11 May. The town of Khorramshahr was virtually razed to the ground during the Iran-Iraq war. Here and there steel girders of buildings blasted apart by the bombing loomed amidst the ruins. There, in the abandoned remnants of former homes, refugees from southern Iraq had set up makeshift shelters. An Iranian Red Crescent water truck provided by the ICRC threaded its way through the debris several times a day. That morning a small child waiting by the roadside hailed the truck, and when it stopped some 20 refugees emerged from the crumbling masonry carrying buckets, jerrycans, or any other available receptacle. When the water began to flow, cool and burbling, it sounded almost joyous in the desolate landscape. At 10 a.m. the temperature already stood at 40°C.

The local Red Crescent representative accompanying us was known to everyone as "Hadji" or "pilgrim". He was about to leave on his third journey to Mecca and had joined us to say goodbye to the refugees, *his* refugees, before setting off. Children flocked around us, while men proudly showed us their Red Crescent distribution cards on which the amount and nature of the goods received and the corresponding dates had been carefully entered. The refugees seemed well provided for and we were again impressed by the excellent work of the Iranian Red Crescent.

Further on, near some warehouses, Hadji showed us the canteen, *his* canteen, where the most needy received a full meal each day.

The call of the muezzin suddenly rang out in the blistering heat and Hadji left us briefly to join in the prayers. On both sides of the rough trail leading us to a place called Shalamsheh, a scarred battlefield stretched as far as the eye could see. The twisted wreckage of tanks, exploded rockets half buried in the shifting sands, abandoned trenches and bomb craters littered the landscape. For years no one had ventured into this heavily mined region. The Shalamsheh transit camp was empty. But every day Red Crescent vans carrying returning refugees stopped there and each refugee was given food, water and other basic supplies before moving on.

After each distribution everyone piled again into the van and it took off in a cloud of dust. There too, the return to Iraq was slowly gathering momentum.

Time seemed to stand still as the stifling heat bore down on us. Hadji, taking my hand in his, said awkwardly: "We are all brothers, you know".

Pierre Gauthier



## TRACING AGENCY

### Protection work in Sri Lanka

The ICRC delegation in Sri Lanka opened in October 1989. Within a month visits to security detainees and tracing activities had begun, and in the past year and a half ICRC delegates have visited over 23,000 detainees, some of whom have already been released.

"Our task", says Monique Crettol at the Asia section of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) in Geneva, "is made more difficult by the frequent transfer of prisoners. We cannot merely register new detainees; we must be able to keep track of those we have already seen and check that they have actually been released".

In addition, following the publication in the local press of an article on the ICRC's work, delegates have been swamped with tracing requests concerning missing persons, some of whom disappeared several years ago. The CTA has received several thousand requests in connection with both the conflict in the south, between government forces and the Sinhalese JVP movement, and the Tamil conflict in the north and east of the island.

These requests are already being processed by computer, but this summer the Colombo delegation will receive more powerful data-processing equipment enabling it to deal more efficiently with this huge mass of information. Monique Crettol concludes: "In Sri Lanka all our delegates do tracing work, for it safeguards thousands of lives."

## AFRICA

### Spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law among the armed forces

For several years the ICRC has been carrying out a programme to spread knowledge of the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL) among members of the armed forces. Its aim in the medium term is to encourage national dissemination programmes which incorporate the teaching of IHL in military instruction courses.

"From the outset", says Jean-Jacques Gacond, the ICRC delegate to the armed forces who is in charge of this programme for Africa, "African military personnel have been very receptive to the idea of dissemination". Over a three-year period 21 courses for high-ranking officers were organized at national level in 18 countries. The next step was to extend the programme's scope to the sub-regional level by organizing seminars for more senior officers of various nationalities with a view to increasing cooperation among the States. This has now been achieved, with the support of ICRC field delegations, in West Africa, southern Africa, and last February in Kinshasa (Zaire) for the countries of Central Africa.

A total of 800 officers from 36 countries have so far taken part in national or regional courses on IHL. Independent national programmes are already under way, in Benin, Congo, Mozambique and Uganda for example. Jean-Jacques Gacond considers that two-thirds of all African countries are now ready to set up similar courses.

The ICRC's next goal is to reach a larger audience comprising not only government armed forces, but also police and security forces, opposition groups and other belligerents.

Next October a conference on IHL is due to take place in Nairobi, Kenya. It is being organized by the ICRC in cooperation with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), for the heads of legal services and of operations in the armed forces of all OAU Member States. Eminent African experts from the military and academic circles will attend the conference, which will be the first to cover the entire continent.

## MEDICAL ACTIVITIES

### Medevac network around Kabul

Several times a week, security conditions permitting, a team of ICRC delegates and nurses leaves Kabul for the Mir Bachakot first-aid post, where they collect war casualties and bring them back to the Afghan capital for treatment at the ICRC surgical hospital. Before reaching its destination 30 km north of Kabul, the team must clear first a government and then an opposition checkpoint.

The site for the Mir Bachakot first-aid post, which was set up in September 1990, was chosen in agreement with about 20 opposition commanders. The Mujaheddin bring their wounded in for treatment by local doctors employed by the ICRC, which also provides the medical supplies, including antibiotics and tetanus antitoxin. The more serious cases are evacuated to Kabul.

During the week of 5 to 11 May ICRC delegates took 28 patients to the surgical hospital in Kabul. "This is a model operation", says Dr. Bruce Eshaya-Chauvin, ICRC medical coordinator for Asia, "since the wounded, after being treated in Kabul, return home across the front lines under ICRC protection".

A second first-aid post was set up in Sheikhabad (south of Kabul) in December 1990 and a third will soon be opening in the Maydan valley west of the capital. The ICRC already has two major networks for the evacuation of the wounded to the Peshawar and Quetta surgical hospitals in Pakistan. As the fighting increases, other networks are being set up around the Afghan capital and in the vicinities of Herat in the west and Mazari-i-Sharif in the north, where the ICRC has two sub-delegations.

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*An independent humanitarian institution, the ICRC is the founding body of the Red Cross. As a neutral intermediary in case of armed conflicts or disturbances, it endeavours on its own initiative or on the basis of the Geneva Conventions to protect and assist the victims of international and civil wars and of internal troubles and tensions, thereby contributing to peace in the world.*

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