

Operational activities

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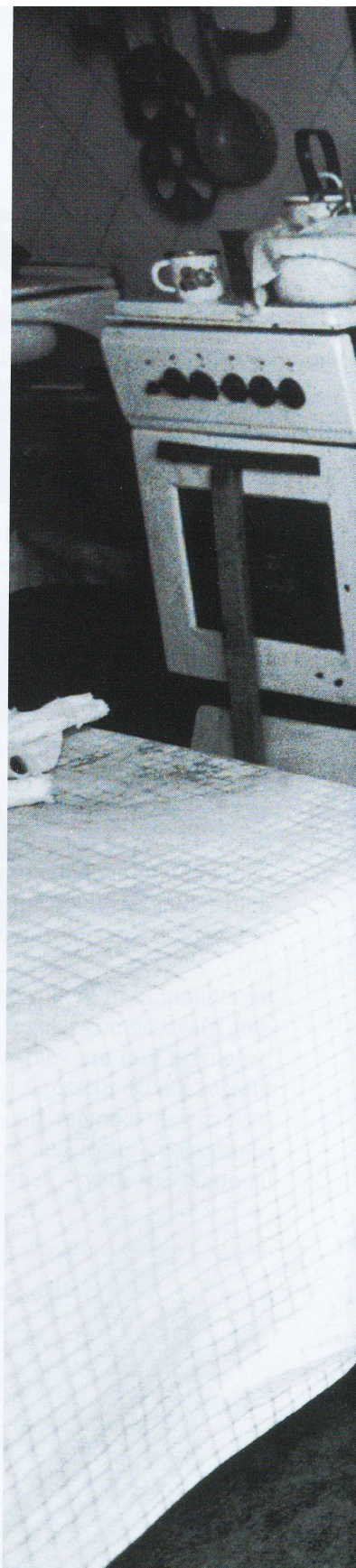
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OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Fond memories bring a smile to the face of this elderly grandmother separated from her family by the ruthless and uncaring hand of war. Humanitarian assistance is measured not only in tonnes of supplies delivered and numbers of people reached, but also in small gestures that restore hope and bring warmth to a lonely soul.





In the wake of the tragic losses suffered by the ICRC in 1996, humanitarian organizations continued to work under precarious security conditions during the past year. Moreover, the emergence of unforeseen armed conflicts and other forms of violence, like the lightning military offensives in the former Zaire, the constantly changing situation in Afghanistan, the crisis in Albania, the coups d'état in Sierra Leone and Cambodia and the war in the Republic of the Congo, together with the effects of disastrous weather on already vulnerable populations in areas such as South-East Asia and East Africa, stretched the human and financial capacity of the ICRC to the limit – all the more so as ongoing crises continued, predictably, to require the organization's attention in 1997. Although the virtual absence of any international conflicts gave rise to the general feeling that war was less prevalent in the world, delegates in the field were faced with a growing number of flashpoints for tension that developed into situations of extreme violence or internal conflicts.

The main victims of hostilities today are, increasingly, civilians, who are becoming both the focus and the target of the fighting. Preventing and alleviating the suffering of the victims of armed conflicts or violence, without discrimination, is the ICRC's raison d'être. On the ground, this translates into a global approach aimed at assisting all of these people, especially the most vulnerable groups. In 1997, besides carrying out its traditional protection and assistance work, the ICRC strove to prevent violations of international humanitarian law by multiplying its representations to the parties involved in conflicts, with a view to fostering greater respect for the law so that more lives could be spared and protected. The ICRC cannot overemphasize the fact that specific legal norms exist to strengthen the protection that should be afforded to women, children and elderly people, and that these norms must be applied. To this end, truly effective measures should be taken to implement the law, thereby guaranteeing respect for the dignity and fundamental rights of all individuals.

The increasingly numerous risks to which humanitarian organizations have been exposed in recent years are undoubtedly due to changes both in the very nature of conflicts and in the way hostilities are conducted. These risks are, moreover, heightened by the fact that both victims and those who come to their aid are more and more frequently caught up in the very midst of the fighting. To this must be added the rise in crime, which only increases the vulnerability of humanitarian workers in areas where there are disturbances. Whether this is demonstrated by the repeated theft of material or by hostage-taking, nowadays humanitarian organizations are at the mercy of certain individuals or armed groups, in particular in situations where poverty is endemic.

While recognizing the need to improve coordination among all those involved in providing assistance, the ICRC considers it just as important to increase consultation between humanitarian organizations and political bodies. This interaction must, of necessity, lead to a more clear-cut division of tasks and responsibilities between aid providers, which work to alleviate human suffering, and political

authorities, whose primary aim is to tackle the underlying causes of conflicts and restore conditions that are conducive to peace and stability.

Despite the constructive dialogue that has been established in many forums which bring together humanitarian organizations and political bodies, the ICRC has noted with growing concern that there is a tendency, in central Africa in particular, to fall back on humanitarian aid as an alternative to political action. However, if that aid is perceived by the warring parties as supporting political objectives, this may further increase the vulnerability of relief workers. Moreover, when violence – as an expression of a deliberate policy – increases to a point where the survival of whole groups is at stake, the response to crises can no longer be confined to humanitarian action.

The ICRC's capacity to take up the challenges ahead will depend on the ability and determination of the international community to find global solutions to humanitarian problems. These solutions will have to take account of the underlying political, social and economic factors if humanitarian aid is to achieve lasting results.

As far as coordination is concerned, the ICRC is ready to play its part and fulfil its responsibilities, on a pragmatic and voluntary basis, in particular wherever it is de facto the main humanitarian organization on the spot. Within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole, the ICRC takes charge of directing operations in countries where there are armed conflicts or other forms of violence, while continuing to develop its cooperation with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their Federation. This division of tasks and responsibilities is in conformity with the Movement's Statutes and the new agreement adopted in Seville in November 1997.

For the ICRC, the past year was also marked by growing difficulties in financing all of its work. While severe crises received the expected attention and support, the same cannot be said of situations which were no longer in the headlines but nevertheless continued to require substantial ICRC involvement: those in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka; Colombia and Peru; Rwanda (with some 120,000 detainees) and the Horn of Africa; and Iraq, the Israeli-occupied territories and the Palestinian autonomous territories all illustrate this problem. In addition, increased financial support remained necessary for providing an adequate response to humanitarian needs in places where the situation might be described as "neither war nor peace", such as in several countries of the former USSR and the former Yugoslavia. Support for this type of work is an important factor in preventing new conflicts and ensuring a smooth transition from a situation of emergency to the rehabilitation and development phases.

Out of a concern to continue improving its performance while at the same time keeping its expenditure under control, in 1997 the ICRC began a study designed to enhance its ability to meet the needs of both victims and donors through a detailed examination of those needs, more elaborate planning and professional management based on an ongoing evaluation of its activities.

Wide-ranging activities for the protection of war victims

Within the ICRC's sphere of work, the notion of protection encompasses all activities aimed at shielding people who are caught up in armed conflicts and situations of internal violence from the dangers, suffering and abuses of power to which they may be exposed, making their voices heard and lending them support. Those concerned are mainly the wounded, people deprived of their freedom, families split apart by the events and the civilian population in general, including certain particularly vulnerable categories such as displaced persons, women and children. In the broader sense, protection involves a vast spectrum of activities ranging from bilateral negotiations and multilateral diplomacy to training and education, communication and the provision of services.

In the strictest sense, protection means gathering information and then taking steps to persuade the authorities concerned or those who wield power to prevent or put an end to infringements of the law, especially humanitarian law. An organization like the ICRC thus sees protection in three ways: primarily in terms of confronting people with their responsibilities and making confidential approaches, next in terms of providing support for existing structures and, exceptionally, in terms of substituting for those structures. Efforts to convince those in charge to shoulder their responsibilities are effective only where there is a modicum of political will to follow the recommendations made and collaborate effectively.

As a rule, respect for the dignity of individuals and protection of their fundamental rights can exist only in an environment in which it is possible to prevent and put a stop to violations of the law. Such a favourable environment is created through a combination of effort and resolve on the part of the authorities concerned, civil society, the international community and international and non-governmental organizations. The operational activities of the ICRC fit into and are a basic component of this endeavour. Nevertheless, it is the authorities themselves who are responsible for the safety and physical integrity of the people under their control.

Protecting the civilian population

Immunity and respect for civilians and other people who are not or are no longer participating directly in the hostilities is one of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and customary law.

As with its other protection-related activities, the ICRC's approach in this sphere is based on a great deal of preparatory work (making various contacts, building a climate of trust, getting to know the real situation in all its various aspects), on efforts to get close to the victims (gaining access to them, maintaining a presence over time, collecting reliable – in principle, first-hand –

information) and on persuasion (direct, discreet dialogue with the specific authorities concerned and with anyone in a position to put a stop to the abuses reported).

Unfortunately, it has to be said that in 1997, yet again, the distinction between civilians and combatants or other people bearing arms was respected less and less, particularly where the fate of the civilian population itself was at stake. Furthermore, humanitarian organizations did not always enjoy the respect or facilities that are essential for them to be able to do their work.

In some situations, the ICRC was thus not in a position to provide protection. This occurred primarily where the minimum conditions of security for humanitarian staff were not present, such as in Chechnya and Burundi. The same can be said of situations where access to victims proved impossible, mainly for lack of agreement by all the parties involved. Furthermore, efforts to give protection were in vain where there was a clear and deliberate intention to eliminate the other side. In this context, the massacre of several thousand people who had fled through the former Zaire and the tragic developments in Algeria, where the ICRC was unable to work, represented two of the organization's major concerns.

During the year under review the ICRC was, however, able to come to the aid of the civilian population in a number of places. In Sri Lanka, for example, it regularly approached government forces and the independence movement, the LTTE,* regarding cases of ill-treatment of which it had learned and regarding the manner in which hostilities were being conducted in the Vanni region. In other situations where active combat was taking place, such as in Afghanistan and northern Iraq, the ICRC made numerous representations aimed at persuading the forces there to keep civilians clear of the fighting and to take the necessary precautions to limit the effects of the hostilities on them as far as possible. In Afghanistan, the rising ethnic tension was a particular source of concern, as were various forms of discrimination against women practised for several months by the Taliban in the area of medical care.

In the Israeli-occupied territories, the ICRC continued its efforts on behalf of the civilian population in the face of recurrent violations of certain provisions of humanitarian law, violations such as the building of new settlements, the confiscation of land, the forced displacement of groups of people and the destruction of houses. In East Timor, the ICRC stepped up its approaches to the Indonesian authorities in order to improve the situation of civilians.

The ICRC significantly increased the geographical scope of its activities in Colombia, enabling it to strengthen its dialogue with those involved in the armed violence and, when excesses took place, to make more frequent approaches both to government forces and to the armed opposition movements and main rural self-defence groups. The situation in the country was a prime example of the

* LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

fragmentation of the power-base and multiplication of armed groups which the ICRC had already seen elsewhere and which made its work all the more difficult and complex.

Activities for people deprived of their freedom

Visits to detainees

Anyone deprived of their freedom is vulnerable, with regard to both the detaining authorities and the pressures of prison life. This vulnerability is heightened in situations of armed conflict and collective or political violence, where there is an even greater temptation to use excessive and unlawful force.

In its activities for people deprived of their freedom, the ICRC's priority aim is to prevent or put an end to disappearances, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, degrading conditions of detention and the splitting apart of families. While remaining careful not to take any position on the grounds for imprisonment, the ICRC nevertheless endeavours to ensure that people undergoing criminal prosecution have the benefit of the judicial guarantees enshrined in international humanitarian law and customary law.

Regular visits to places of detention, carried out in accordance with specific procedures, are an indispensable tool for the ICRC in achieving these particular aims. They enable the organization to find out exactly what the situation is, on the basis of the information gathered and observations made by its delegates, and are the foundation for a practical, realistic dialogue with the authorities. Dialogue is at the very heart of the ICRC's work: first of all, there are the private interviews with detainees, next, bilateral confidential representations to the authorities concerned, at various levels. Checking the identity of detainees and carrying out follow-up visits until their release are other special features of the ICRC's approach, and ones which are essential to its protection work.

The prison systems in many countries have comparable problems: precarious detention conditions due mainly to overcrowding, the slowness and inefficiency of legal proceedings, violence among detainees and corruption.

In 1997 the ICRC conducted visits to a large number of prisoners in 56 countries. Africa was the continent where it saw the highest number of detainees and where the problems arising were the most acute. In Rwanda, some 120,000 detainees were living in drastic conditions and to a large extent depended for their survival on the ICRC's visits and work. Lock-ups that did not have the basic facilities for prolonged incarceration, often with over six detainees per square metre, were used for housing this prison population, whose numbers had increased by 40% since 1996. In Ethiopia, the number of detainees visited by the ICRC doubled over the past year, partly thanks to better access. In Uganda, a new large-scale operation was launched in civilian prisons, police stations and military camps.

IN 1997 THE ICRC:

- ◆ visited 1,680 places of detention in 56 countries;
- ◆ visited more than 200,000 detainees and monitored the detention history of 130,819 of them;
- ◆ provided 14 million Swiss francs' worth of medical and other relief for detainees and their families.

Major detention-related work was also carried out in Asia, on the Indian sub-continent, in particular for people arrested in connection with the situation prevailing in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the conflict in Sri Lanka. ICRC activities increased substantially in Afghanistan, where, because of the growth of the prison population, the organization visited three times as many detainees as the year before. Despite certain difficulties, the ICRC was able to go to places of detention under the control of all the parties to the conflict, with only one of them refusing it all access for some months.

In the Middle East, the continuation of visits to detainees begun in 1996 in Bahrain and the resumption of visits in the Palestinian autonomous territories made it possible to forward appropriate recommendations and proposals to the authorities. The ICRC also continued to see people detained by the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, at the Hague and Arusha respectively.

Ensuring the survival of detainees

Much of the ICRC's work is directed at ensuring that the human dignity of detainees is respected. In a great many countries, the material conditions of detention have deteriorated catastrophically to the point where the physical integrity of inmates, and even their lives, are in danger. This extremely worrying fact may generally be explained by the overcrowding in prisons and the inadequacy of the budgets allocated, which leads to the inability declared by certain authorities to improve the situation. Armed conflicts and other forms of collective violence aggravate this problem, which affects the entire prison population, and not just the people arrested in connection with these events. Irrespective of the repressive policy being implemented, all prisoners are thus deprived of the minimum humanitarian protection they are entitled to expect from the authorities.

Often, faced with this fact, the ICRC cannot be content with reminding the authorities of their responsibilities and submitting recommendations to them with a view to ensuring the survival of detainees. It thus finds itself more and more frequently obliged to broaden its criteria for action in the countries where it is already working. This increased involvement has led the ICRC to extend its protection activities to penal-law prisoners, who were not initially among its concerns and who do not fall specifically within its mandate.

The decision to substitute in part, or even wholly, for the detaining authorities must be given careful consideration each time and calls for agreement with those authorities on the precise conditions that are to apply, especially when a long-term commitment is envisaged. Thus, in Tajikistan, the ICRC noted that the food and nutritional rehabilitation programme begun in 1996 for around 6,000

detainees had not led to the expected improvement in their nutritional situation, owing to the lack of tangible involvement by the authorities and various problems with pilfering. In Madagascar, the programme to improve the food supply for detainees, centred mainly on encouraging agricultural production within the prison system, was continued. ICRC involvement in Rwandan detention centres – mainly in the spheres of hygiene and nutrition – remained exceptional from the point of view of the range of services provided, the tonnage of supplies involved and the number of beneficiaries. Detention-related work with similar aims but in other spheres took place in Haiti (medical treatment and hygiene), Afghanistan (hygiene and supply of basic medicines) and Yemen (psychiatric treatment). In Azerbaijan, despite various problems of coordination with the authorities, the ICRC continued its ambitious programme to combat tuberculosis in prisons. Places of detention are a particularly favourable environment for the propagation of this disease, which remains the main cause of mortality among detainees in this country, and if it is not treated, or not well enough treated, TB can also have very serious consequences outside prisons. The same type of programme was started in Georgia.

Consultation, exchanges, specialized training

Because of the more and more marked involvement on the ground of new players working in the areas of protection and detention in particular, the ICRC had many contacts with bodies such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the International Civilian Mission in Haiti and various bodies set up in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to help develop complementary approaches and thereby avoid both duplication of effort and gaps in the services provided. Indeed, if the endeavour to promote human dignity is to be rational and effective, it calls for complementarity between the parties involved at all levels of their work. This applies to the situations covered and the mandates of each, as well as to types of activity, working methods, operational objectives and priorities.

In 1997 the ICRC took part in a number of international and national meetings and conferences, which enabled it to have fruitful exchanges. As a result it was involved, to a certain extent, in efforts to provide specialized training and in discussions on a wide range of subjects. It thus attended a conference for the heads of prison administrations in European countries, devoted to overcrowding in prisons, organized in Finland under the aegis of the Council of Europe; a seminar run by the African Prison Association on production activities in prisons; and a conference on alternatives to imprisonment held by Penal Reform International in Zimbabwe. In addition, it sent representatives to various conferences organized nationally by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights and other country-level meetings in Australia, Uganda and Turkey.

Aware of the need to support prison structures, the ICRC itself set up various national workshops, such as one in Madagascar on problems relating to food supply for inmates and one in Azerbaijan on combating tuberculosis in places of detention.

New developments

The main developments that occurred in 1997 regarding ICRC visits to people deprived of their freedom were as follows:

- ♦ visits were rapidly conducted to prisoners of war captured on both sides during the military operations between Sudan and Uganda;
- ♦ a new authorization to carry out visits to places of detention was issued in June by the junta in power in Sierra Leone;
- ♦ visits began in Lesotho in July, after permission was granted to see people accused of sedition, high treason and undermining State security;
- ♦ detainees held in connection with the secessionist uprising in the Comoros archipelago were visited as from September;
- ♦ in October, upon receiving authorization, the ICRC began visits to detainees in Côte d'Ivoire;
- ♦ visits began in July to people detained in Mexico because of their supposed links with the EPR;*
- ♦ also in July, shortly after signing an agreement with the government, the ICRC began to visit security detainees in Bolivia;
- ♦ an agreement to allow visits was signed in October with the Albanian authorities;
- ♦ visits to Peruvian prisons, which had been suspended for almost all of 1997, were resumed in December (during the year, visits continued to other places of detention, such as military installations and police stations).

Unwelcome developments and stagnation

In conformity with its mandate regarding the implementation of humanitarian law, and on the basis of its right of humanitarian initiative, which authorizes it to take up any issue that falls within its purview, in 1997 the ICRC offered its services, but to no avail, in several countries. In particular:

- ♦ the ICRC failed to gain access to Cameroonian prisoners of war allegedly in captivity in Nigeria;

* EPR: Popular Revolutionary Army

- ◆ despite some encouraging signs (the repatriation under ICRC auspices of 542 Iraqi prisoners of war and two Iranian soldiers captured after the Gulf war), the tragic situation of several thousand prisoners of war known to the ICRC remained unresolved nine years after the cessation of hostilities in the conflict between Iran and Iraq – as a result, the prisoners were still deprived of ICRC visits, and their release and right to repatriation continued not to be granted, in violation of Article 118 of the Third Geneva Convention;
- ◆ over 1,900 Moroccan soldiers held by the Polisario Front, often for over 20 years, who had been visited by the ICRC, continued to be detained despite the 1991 ceasefire, as the parties linked their repatriation with the political issue over which they remained at odds;
- ◆ no significant developments took place in discussions with Algeria;
- ◆ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the ICRC was not able to visit people deprived of their freedom after the change of government;
- ◆ in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, negotiations by the ICRC to gain access to security detainees in accordance with its customary criteria failed to come to a successful conclusion;
- ◆ no progress was made in the dialogue with the Turkish authorities on the humanitarian situation and related problems in Turkey.

No significant developments took place in the other contexts highlighted in the ICRC's 1996 *Annual Report*.

Role as neutral intermediary: humanitarian initiatives

In many situations, the ICRC made an effort to be flexible and adapt to specific needs so as to carry out its mission as a neutral intermediary in the best way possible. This was the case with respect to activities as diverse as taking part in the release and repatriation of prisoners, acting on behalf of hostages, transferring mortal remains or organizing the return home of persons displaced within their own country.

During the year the ICRC facilitated the release and/or repatriation of prisoners of war or civilian internees held in connection with the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh, soldiers detained by the FARC* in Colombia, prisoners of war and other detainees in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people held in southern Lebanon by the Israeli-backed SLA* militia and by Hezbollah, Taliban prisoners in the hands of the northern coalition in Afghanistan and people detained

* FARC: Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces

* SLA: South Lebanon Army

by the NPA* in the Philippines and by the LTTE* in Sri Lanka. The ICRC also stepped in as a neutral intermediary on a number of occasions to improve the situation of people who had been taken hostage, independently of its efforts to have a stop put to these acts banned by humanitarian law. In Lima, until the crisis at the Japanese ambassador's residence was resolved by force in April, the organization regularly visited the people being held there, enabled them to exchange news with their families and ensured their subsistence, while at the same time it was busy facilitating dialogue between the Peruvian government and the MRTA* members involved. In Colombia, the ICRC strove to obtain notification of people being held by most of the parties to the conflict and to gain access to them. It often enabled them to exchange news – strictly confined to family matters – with their relatives and provided logistic back-up to facilitate the release of close to 300 people.

Transfers of mortal remains took place mainly in southern Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and in connection with the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the ICRC organized the return of over 24,000 displaced people by boat, train, truck or airplane.

Restoration of family links

One of the main purposes of humanitarian law is to preserve the family unit, since the splitting apart of families is one of the major causes of suffering in times of conflict and violence.

In its day-to-day work in the field and as part of its protection mandate, the ICRC, with the help of its tracing staff, takes steps to maintain or restore contact between family members who have been separated by armed conflict, internal violence or imprisonment, thereby helping to alleviate their anguish and mental suffering. This work can take different forms, such as collecting and delivering family messages, organizing family reunifications, arranging for family members to visit relatives in prison or across front lines, or searching for people of whom there has been no news or who have been reported missing.

Family messages

Family messages, initiated during the First World War, still have a vital role to play. They continue to be a simple, swift and effective way of helping thousands of relatives who have been separated from each other to renew contact. This method of communication owes its success to a unique network coordinated and

IN 1997 THE ICRC:

- ◆ collected nearly 394,500 and forwarded more than 378,600 Red Cross messages;
- ◆ reunited 25,526 families;
- ◆ traced 4,815 people being sought by their relatives;
- ◆ received 7,673 new tracing requests.

* NPA: New People's Army

* LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

* MRTA: Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement

run in part by the ICRC, but above all made up of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout the world.

Compared with the preceding years, 1997 saw a reduction in the number of family messages handled. This may be explained by the fact that in several places, such as in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, postal services were restored. Nevertheless, there continued to be a great many exchanges of messages – essential in several contexts – especially in West Africa, the Great Lakes region and Eastern Europe. Over 120 National Societies contributed to this effort.

Family reunification and the problem of unaccompanied children

The ICRC continued its work to trace individuals who had been separated from their families and, where necessary, to arrange for their return home. Searches were carried out in many different ways: collecting and delivering family messages, sending Red Cross/Red Crescent staff to places where the individuals were thought to be staying, making contact with countless people and publishing names or photos. All this work depended on meticulously collecting information and analysing it in detail – in general, using computerized databases. It took place, for example, in Somalia, Croatia, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, where, in each place, several hundred cases were resolved.

In this sphere, children occupy a special category. The youngest, as the most vulnerable group in every community, are always among the first – and the worst – affected by the consequences of armed conflicts. Children often find themselves separated from their families during active hostilities and in the course of evacuations or mass movements of the civilian population. In such situations, protecting unaccompanied children means identifying them, searching for their parents and renewing contact with members of their families, then maintaining this link until it is possible to reunite them with at least one of their parents.

Throughout 1997 the ICRC, often in cooperation with other humanitarian organizations, played an important role in bringing unaccompanied children back together with their families and successfully conducted programmes for this purpose, in particular in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Over 24,000 children in the region were thus reunited with their families, while work continued for another 8,000 who were alone or had been taken in by other families.

The complexity and scope of the activities undertaken to assist unaccompanied children in the Great Lakes region led to an unprecedented coordination of efforts between the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations, such as UNHCR, UNICEF and SCF.* Some highly productive exchanges, including those that took place at a regional workshop organized by SCF in Nairobi, contributed to developing streamlined and complementary approaches, in particular where working methods and tools were concerned.

* SCF: Save the Children Fund

People reported missing

International humanitarian law stipulates that the parties to a conflict have an obligation to supply all the information in their possession regarding the fate of combatants and civilians reported missing. In various situations during the year, the ICRC encouraged and took an active part in the implementation of mechanisms to facilitate dialogue both with and between the authorities concerned and to speed up efforts to settle the major problem of persons unaccounted for. In doing so, it gave ongoing support to the families of those reported missing, helping them in their search for the truth and attempting to meet their legitimate expectations. For anyone in this situation wishes, and has the right, to know what has happened to a relative who is missing – to find out first of all whether or not the person is still alive and, if not, to recover the mortal remains and give the person a decent burial. Knowing the fate of a loved one, even when it is tragic, is the only way to put an end to the awful uncertainty for the people affected and enable them to begin the mourning process that is essential if their lives are to return to normal.

In the former Yugoslavia, the process initiated in 1996 to gather information from the authorities on people unaccounted for continued, through the working group specially set up under the Dayton agreement. Despite some difficulties, the group met three times under ICRC auspices in 1997. Representatives of the families of people reported missing were also formally integrated into the mechanism. To supplement the responses expected from the former warring parties, the ICRC actively explored all possible sources of information in the field. It also participated regularly in the meetings of the Expert Group on Exhumations and Missing Persons chaired by the Office of the High Representative, set up to coordinate the activities of the different international bodies involved.

The ICRC also continued to chair the Tripartite Commission in charge of ascertaining the fate of people who had disappeared during the Gulf war. The concrete findings of the Commission, as those of the Technical Subcommittee reporting to it, remained slight and its progress, unfortunately, fell short of expectations.

In relation to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, the ICRC submitted requests to the parties concerned, drawn up on the basis of information supplied by the families of persons unaccounted for. It formally offered its services, but to no avail, in establishing procedures to shed light on these cases.

Developing and strengthening the National Society network

Cooperation with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in order to assist them in further developing their tracing services intensified in 1997.

Work begun with the National Societies in the former USSR at the end of 1993 led in 1997 to the signing of cooperation agreements with several tracing

services in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). A fresh boost was also given to cooperation with the tracing services of the National Societies in Central Europe.

Furthermore, as part of its effort to support and cooperate with the National Societies, the ICRC organized various events throughout the world. International meetings were thus held in New Delhi, bringing together the tracing services of a number of Asian National Societies; in Moscow, in the form of a regional round table; and in Geneva, with the participation of 20 or so representatives from the tracing services of the National Societies of Australia, Canada, the United States and several European countries. National workshops were also held in seven African countries, including Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Relief: a comprehensive approach with health as the ultimate goal

Conflicts and other violent situations inevitably result in damage to the health of the individuals and populations affected by them.

This damage can be direct, such as people wounded or disabled. It can also be indirect, for example, the destruction or impairment of health services, the breakdown in the supply of medicines, the exodus of medical personnel, restricted or lack of access to health care, but also – and above all – the disruption or collapse of services and activities that are essential to survival, including the supply of water, the maintenance of environmental hygiene, the control of vectors of epidemics, agricultural production, livestock-rearing, fishing and food marketing.

The end of hostilities does not necessarily mean that everything will immediately go back to normal: anti-personnel mines can still kill or maim women, children and farmers, and make it impossible to cultivate vast areas. Impoverishment, the destruction of infrastructure and the disruption of services continue to endanger the health, and even the survival, of entire populations or vulnerable groups for a long time. The capacity to cope with any natural disasters that may occur is also diminished in a country which has suffered the consequences of a war. And the longer the fighting lasts, the more disastrous those consequences will be.

The ICRC, which for decades has been faced with both the immediate and the delayed effects of conflicts, has gradually developed a comprehensive approach to them. This involves striving, among other things, to supplement medical assistance with measures to maintain or bring about food and economic security, access to water, environmental hygiene and protection from the elements, all essential factors in preserving or restoring the health of conflict victims.

In order to take into account the duration of conflicts and their delayed effects, emergency aid often has to be supplemented with rehabilitation programmes. As far as possible, these are included as part of relief work right from

IN 1997 THE ICRC:

- ◆ dispatched medical supplies and 103,000 tonnes of other relief, altogether worth a total of 140 million Swiss francs, to 48 countries;
- ◆ distributed medical supplies and 89,000 tonnes of other relief, altogether worth a total of 135.2 million Swiss francs;
- ◆ distributed 6,270 tonnes of seed and farming tools worth 7.4 million Swiss francs.

Tables showing details of relief dispatched and distributed, contributions received in kind and purchases made by the ICRC in 1997 appear on pp. 359-362.

the start, or at a very early stage. Thus it often happens that emergency aid and rehabilitation or reconstruction activities coexist as part of the same project.

The quality of the assistance given can only be guaranteed through the evaluation of relief work and the provision of appropriate training to humanitarian personnel. Evaluation and training are therefore an integral part of assistance.

The projects described below illustrate this comprehensive approach as practised by the ICRC in 1997. What follows is not an exhaustive list of relief and health activities, which will be described in greater detail in the sections devoted to each country, but rather a selection of representative examples.

Emergency food aid, food and economic security, protection of the basic means of subsistence

Emergency food aid was frequently required in 1997: for example, supplies were distributed to displaced people in the eastern part of the former Zaire; to widows, disabled people and other groups at risk in Afghanistan; to flood victims in Somalia and to hospitals, orphanages and other social-welfare institutions in Albania; and a nutritional assistance programme was carried out for detainees in Tajikistan.

In a less urgent post-conflict situation, namely the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ICRC continued to provide supplementary food aid linked to programmes for seed distribution, small-scale food production and job creation.

The ICRC also set up a wide range of multifaceted projects, adapting its strategies to the particular socio-economic contexts in which it worked so as to stimulate production for the direct benefit of needy individuals and families. These projects were primarily aimed at protecting the basic means of subsistence, with many focusing on rehabilitation as a means of reducing the dependence of vulnerable groups on nutritional aid or continual seed distributions. In Somalia, for example, repairs were made to 11 irrigation systems and pumps were purchased for them in order to boost agricultural production. In Afghanistan, efforts to rehabilitate irrigation canals and major water-supply infrastructure continued. Such projects, of course, emerged in response to strong demand from the local population, which was a key to their success.

In other instances, the ICRC launched operations without having been requested to do so by the population concerned. A major effort was then needed to inform local communities and secure their cooperation. In Somalia and Ethiopia, for example, the programmes to reduce the numbers of tsetse flies – the vectors of trypanosomiasis in animals – called for numerous traps to be set up along the banks of water courses, which are the main areas of infestation. The programmes reduced the fly population, bringing about a substantial improvement in livestock health (leading to increased production of meat and milk, and improved fertility), and made it possible to use grazing land by the waterside, which is the most fertile, and often the only source of fodder.

In north-eastern Armenia (an area bordering on Azerbaijan), a small sum of money was granted in May 1997 for the repair of eight combine harvesters in six villages, to enable the population to bring in their wheat on time and thus keep down losses. This type of assistance created the basic conditions needed to revive the village economies. The relationship of trust that was built up, based on familiarity with the region's economic mechanisms and on dialogue, also made it possible to rehabilitate destroyed schools and to rebuild damaged homes so that families could move in again.

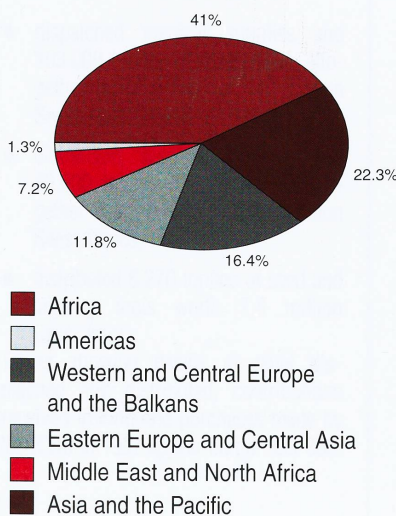
With a view to obtaining the total backing of the population, projects to assist the victims of the genocide in Rwanda were not managed by the ICRC but were systematically carried out by local or national organizations (charities, youth groups, churches, widows' associations, etc.). A wide range of activities were included, from agriculture and livestock-rearing to reconstruction and craftwork.

In Somalia, a four-month vocational training course in fishery was provided in seven coastal villages, and was a unique experience in more ways than one. It stood out not only by its broad scale, but also by the very close cooperation that was developed with the Somali Red Crescent Society, the use of the expertise of local fishermen and the distribution of a large amount of fishing tackle to participants, all of this in the hope of generating substantial income.

Other activities, less spectacular but just as vital, were also carried out successfully. In Sierra Leone, for example, a complex and finely-tuned monitoring system was set up to guarantee the purity of some 15 varieties of upland and swamp rice bought within the country and distributed to 36,000 farming families in difficulty. This operation, which took account of local adaptation strategies, slowed down the impoverishment of Sierra Leone's genetic capital of rice varieties and was also aimed at making it possible for the target population's rice production to get off to a fresh start. The diversity of rice varieties actually plays a key role in agricultural production, as farmers sow several varieties, each of which is specifically suited to the micro-conditions in their various fields.

In Mali, two programmes were being carried out simultaneously for a truly comprehensive approach: on the one hand, a veterinary programme backing annual campaigns against the main epizootic diseases and promoting marketing activities, and on the other hand, an agronomy programme focusing on market gardening and cereal production (mainly flood-resistant rice, sorghum and wheat). Through the distribution of supplies, technical support, training and the setting up of different types of associations in local communities, the two programmes pursued the same objective: to take part in consolidating the peace process by making technical services available to the population and by bringing various groups together. This approach was also reflected in the launching of longer-term projects, such as technical support for rebuilding houses and for creating a healthier environment, or the financing of new community health centres and health posts in areas difficult to reach.

Geographical breakdown
of ICRC relief supplies
dispatched in 1997:



Since one of the root causes of the rebellion in northern Mali is the lack of economic integration among the country's ethnic groups, a common problem in the context of development, this comprehensive approach is exemplary and shows how a well-run assistance programme can help to protect the population.

Access to water, sanitation and environmental hygiene

Whether the aim is to bring emergency supplies of drinking water to displaced persons, repair water-treatment and distribution systems in areas or towns devastated by conflict, provide running water for hospitals, dispensaries or prisons, set up latrines, or even dispose of corpses, the ICRC's relief work almost always includes programmes involving water and sanitation.

In 1997, the ICRC's activities in this sphere were carried out in 14 countries, particularly in central Africa (Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda), but also in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iraq. Many projects were carried out in cooperation with participating National Societies.

Providing medical treatment, running medical and surgical services, caring for the wounded and those disabled in war

Depending on the situation, the ICRC had to adopt different strategies so as to enable the wounded, the sick and the disabled to receive treatment in conflict areas.

In Afghanistan, for example, besides supplying hospitals with medical and surgical equipment and medicines, and providing surgical teams for the hospitals in Kandahar and Kabul, the ICRC had to deal with a particular problem raised by the local health authorities' decision to refuse women admission to hospitals that were not specifically designated for them. Since there was only one very poorly equipped hospital that could receive female patients, this was tantamount to depriving them of treatment. The ICRC played a major role in negotiating the revocation of this decision.

Another particular health problem was posed by the taking of hostages at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru. In this case, ICRC doctors arranged for daily consultations for the hostages, some of whom were released on health grounds. With the help of volunteers from the Japanese Red Cross Society, they also provided psychological support for the families of the hostages.

In the Republic of the Congo, the prevailing lack of security caused by the fighting in Brazzaville forced the ICRC to take action outside the capital: it set up temporary health posts along the route taken by people fleeing the city, organized the evacuation of the wounded to hospitals in Kinshasa and supplied the latter with the additional equipment necessary for treating those patients. The staff and patients of a hospital that was situated on the front line were moved to a disused school in a safer area, where the ICRC installed a water tank and latrines, and supplied treatment equipment.

IN 1997 THE ICRC:

- ◆ deployed sanitation teams in 14 countries to provide drinking water for displaced people and/or repair water-treatment facilities and distribution systems in towns and regions affected by conflict;
- ◆ initiated or completed 11 water and sanitation programmes, through projects delegated to the National Societies of Australia, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States;
- ◆ distributed and/or installed water and sanitation materials worth 21 million Swiss francs.

In many conflict-ridden areas, ICRC aid consisted in supplying medical and surgical equipment and medicines to hospitals and other health centres.

The ICRC surgical hospital in Lokichokio/Lopiding, opened in 1987 on the border between Kenya and Sudan, admitted 2,163 patients and performed 4,858 operations in 1997. The hospital's prosthetic/orthotic workshop, opened in 1992, fitted 180 amputees.

During the year, the ICRC ran 20 prosthetic/orthotic workshops and provided thousands of components to other organizations, including Handicap International, the Cambodia Trust and Veterans International, which also fit amputees. In order to ensure that its limb-fitting projects continue after its withdrawal, to support similar projects run by other organizations, to pass on its techniques (notably the use of polypropylene) and to help train prosthetists, the ICRC administers a Special Fund for the Disabled, which runs a training centre in Addis Ababa, finances projects in various countries and follows up former ICRC projects. In 1997, some 30 prosthetists from 10 countries were trained and 20 evaluation and technical assistance missions were carried out in workshops in Africa, Latin America and Asia with backing from the Fund.¹

IN 1997 THE ICRC:

- ◆ distributed medicines and other medical supplies worth 20 million Swiss francs in 43 countries;
- ◆ was the major supplier of medicines, medical materials and equipment to 9 hospitals in Asia and Africa where a total of 33,682 patients were admitted and 176,639 people given out-patient treatment;
- ◆ deployed medical teams in 4 hospitals throughout the year and, for part of the year, in 9 hospitals;
- ◆ fitted a total of 7,503 amputees with artificial limbs in its 20 prosthetic/orthotic workshops;
- ◆ produced for its workshops 11,354 prostheses, including 7,201 for land-mine victims;
- ◆ manufactured and provided for other organizations that fit amputees more than 19,000 prosthetic/orthotic components (artificial knees and feet, and various appliances).

Evaluation of activities, training

The work of the ICRC in Mali and its programme for treating detainees with tuberculosis in Azerbaijan were the subject of special evaluations in 1997. The programme in Azerbaijan provided both material for a study on drug-resistant TB and data on the problem of TB in prisons. These findings were presented at various meetings of specialists and concerned organizations (WHO*, MSF*), notably in Baku. A statement underlining the magnitude and seriousness of the problem was drawn up and later published in the British Medical Journal (29 November). The ICRC is currently writing a manual on the treatment of TB in prisons, in cooperation with WHO.

A consultant from the Relief Division carried out an evaluation of the impact of a micro-credit programme in Azerbaijan, thus making it possible to develop a methodology that will be useful for future work.

Furthermore, a study on the impact of the numerous agricultural programmes conducted in Angola confirmed the validity of the activities undertaken, although it pointed to some weaknesses when it came to procedures for concluding and handing over programmes. The study also analysed the effects of mines on agricultural production and survival strategies. The data gathered should

¹ See *Special funds*, p. 370.

* WHO: World Health Organization

* MSF: Médecins sans frontières

make it possible to step up activities aimed at raising awareness of the danger of mines and spreading information on how to deal with the presence of these weapons within the framework of other agricultural programmes.

For the first time in the context of the ICRC's agricultural work, a report was drawn up entirely by external experts in order to evaluate the entire range of economic support and rehabilitation work carried out in Afghanistan. Indeed, after the final assessment of any programme, which is the most important step in improving design, an external evaluation of follow-up and overall management can prove most useful. In another case, a specialist in the multiplication of seed potatoes was asked to carry out a three-week assessment of work done in Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh.

In the area of training, five HELP* courses were organized in 1997 in Bangkok, Geneva, Baltimore, Honolulu and – for the first time – Addis Ababa, the latter in cooperation with the city's university. The course in the Ethiopian capital, which attracted 29 candidates from 20 countries, was the first to take place on the African continent.

Lectures were also given at the University of Aix-Marseille III in France and the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, within the framework of the NOHA* postgraduate diploma in humanitarian assistance set up by ECHO.*

An annual seminar on war surgery was held in Geneva in April. Another seminar took place in Omdurman, Sudan, in June, with the participation of 190 members of the Sudanese armed forces medical services.

A seminar on tuberculosis in prisons, for doctors working in places of detention, was organized in Georgia in June.

As the result of a symposium held in 1996 on the medical profession and the effects of weapons, a project to study and reflect on the effects of conventional weapons, was launched in 1997. The main aim of the project, entitled SIrUS, was to define in objective terms which weapons cause “superfluous injury” and “unnecessary suffering” as referred to in certain instruments of humanitarian law.

Cooperation with National Societies in the conduct of operational activities

Under the terms of Article 3 of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, “the National Societies form the basic units and constitute a vital force of the Movement”. In this sense, they are the ICRC's primary ally in its humanitarian work and are central to its strategy. Recognizing the

* HELP: Health Emergencies in Large Populations

* NOHA: Network on Humanitarian Assistance

* ECHO: European Community Humanitarian Office

important role played by the National Societies in providing assistance for conflict victims and in promoting humanitarian law, the ICRC has established a partnership with them, and intends to develop it further. This calls for clearly defining the objectives and scope of its collaboration with them, putting in place effective mechanisms for consultation and coordination, balancing the interests of all while working out common aims, communicating effectively and searching for outside support for humanitarian work.

This process, which requires efforts from both sides, is gradually moving forward. To take first of all the National Societies in whose countries and with whom the ICRC conducts operational activities, the organization's general objective could be expressed as follows: to help strengthen the Movement as a whole by facilitating the setting-up and development of a network of National Societies capable of carrying out their mission effectively, while maintaining a high level of integrity. It is particularly in situations of conflict or internal disturbances, or in anticipation of such situations, that the ICRC wishes to involve the National Societies in its work and support their initiatives and projects designed to increase their independence, financial autonomy and operational capacity.²

As for the ICRC's partnership with National Societies that, from outside, back up the organization's operations (providing staff, funding or material support), this is just as important to develop, in particular by pursuing and clarifying the policy of project delegation and by continuing to carry out bilateral projects.³ The ICRC also wishes to extend its exchanges of views with National Societies and consult them on operational matters of mutual interest (as it did in March 1997, when it organized an operational forum on security problems).

In addition, the ICRC wishes to deepen its familiarity with the National Societies by broadening what has up to now been only an occasional practice, namely professional exchanges between ICRC staff and their colleagues within the Societies.

Relations with international organizations

Violations of the norms of humanitarian law and of basic humane values call for a strong reaction on the part of the international community lest these violations become a tacitly accepted parameter of international relations. Faced with this risk, the ICRC redoubled its efforts with governments and international organizations, with civil society and with all the perpetrators of violence, seeking to mobilize them on humanitarian issues.

² See *ICRC cooperation within the Movement*, p. 311.

³ Delegated projects are ICRC projects carried out by a National Society, while bilateral projects, which are also carried out by a National Society, are not part of the ICRC's objectives in the given area; both however, are carried out under overall ICRC responsibility.

Attempting to prevent humanitarian crises, to soften their effects, to meet the most pressing needs and to prepare for development by restoring and strengthening local resources – all of this also calls for consultation with each player involved and an ongoing dialogue between the various humanitarian organizations.

Broad-based humanitarian endeavour

In multilateral forums, increasing attention was paid to humanitarian law. The ICRC was particularly pleased with the outcome of the 12th Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Countries, which was held in New Delhi on 7 and 8 April. For the first time, a document from the Non-Aligned Movement allocated a separate section to humanitarian action and included among the Movement's aims respect for humanitarian law and implementation of the principle whereby States are jointly responsible for ensuring that respect.

The latter principle was also at the core of a resolution (A/RES/ES - 10/3) adopted on 15 July by the 10th emergency special session of the UN General Assembly on "illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory". In the resolution, the General Assembly recommended that the parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention "convene a conference on measures to enforce the Convention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory" – as they are bound to do under Article 1 common to all four Geneva Conventions.

As regards strengthening and clarifying humanitarian law, several measures on anti-personnel mines were taken in advance of the Ottawa Conference⁴ by various regional organizations, such as the OAU,* the OAS,* the OSCE* and the Council of Europe.⁵ In addition, the OAU Council of Ministers adopted a resolution raising the minimum age for recruiting children into the armed forces.⁶

Lest these various measures and resolutions remain empty gestures, discussions were undertaken with several regional organizations to give some form of follow-up to them. In Lima, for example, the OAS adopted a resolution on respect for humanitarian law that included a provision aimed at informing the ICRC on progress made.⁷

⁴ See *Promotion and development of international humanitarian law*, pp. 295-297.

⁵ See *Promotion and development of international humanitarian law*, pp. 295-297.

⁶ See *Promotion and development of international humanitarian law*, pp. 293-294.

⁷ See *The Americas*, p. 121.

* OAU: Organization of African Unity

* OAS: Organization of American States

* OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Neutral and independent humanitarian action

In 1997, the ICRC's mobilization efforts also – and perhaps increasingly – took the form of a dialogue with political bodies, such as the Central Organ of the OAU mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution, the Permanent Council of the OSCE and the UN Security Council. For example, a working lunch was organized, as every year, for the members of the Security Council and the ICRC President, and there were monthly meetings between the successive Presidents of the Council and the head of the ICRC delegation in New York. The latter addressed the Council three times during the year: on 12 February on the subject of humanitarian challenges in Africa, on 21 May on the protection of humanitarian assistance, and on 14 August on the situation in Albania.

At the heart of the matters discussed was the distinction – a vital one if humanitarian work is to be neutral and independent – between peace-keeping operations, on the one hand, and humanitarian activities, on the other. The ICRC was therefore particularly glad to hear the new UN Secretary-General state, at a symposium held in Singapore in February, that: “Humanitarian assistance must not be used as a tool to achieve political goals. The political and the humanitarian mandates must not be confused. The former are determined by the Security Council. The latter derive from the need to provide concrete help and from the principles of international humanitarian law.”⁸

Dialogue and cooperation with the various players on the humanitarian scene

In order to preserve the solid principles underlying humanitarian action, the ICRC continued its efforts, together with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, to promote the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*.

The ICRC also organized a forum in Wolfsberg, Switzerland, in June to strengthen the dialogue between political and humanitarian decision-makers. It was attended by about 60 representatives of donor countries and humanitarian organizations.⁹

- ◆ In 1996, the ICRC signed a cooperation agreement with the Organization of American States;
- ◆ In 1994, the ICRC signed a cooperation agreement with the Organization of the Islamic Conference;
- ◆ In 1992, the ICRC signed a cooperation agreement with the Organization of African Unity;
- ◆ In 1990, the ICRC was granted observer status at the United Nations.

⁸ Humanitarian action and peace-keeping operations: Debriefing and lessons, Kluwer Law International Ltd, London, 1997, pp 29-30. Report on a symposium held by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Singapore, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) of Japan.

⁹ See *External resources*, p. 330.

Contacts with various non-governmental organizations continued in 1997. The ICRC thus hosted, jointly with the Graduate Institute of International Studies, a symposium dealing with security issues for around 60 such organizations in Geneva on 5 December.

Throughout the year, the ICRC continued to take part in the UN's inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Furthermore, out of a concern to include rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in its response to emergencies, the ICRC established closer ties with UNDP,* the World Bank and, in particular, the latter's newly set up Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit. It continued to have a constructive dialogue with URD* (a consortium of non-governmental organizations) and intensified its relations with UNHCR and FAO* in particular. The ICRC also contacted the new UN Commissioner for Human Rights.

Lastly, speaking at the 52nd session of the UN General Assembly, the ICRC declared its readiness to take on a more active coordinating role in certain spheres of activity: "The ICRC is ready and willing to assume field coordination responsibilities, on a pragmatic and voluntary basis and without prejudice to its specific mandate, particularly in places where it is *de facto* the main humanitarian organization on the spot".

* URD: *Urgence, réhabilitation, développement*

* UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

* FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations