

Central Tracing Agency

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Annual report / International Committee of the Red Cross**

Band (Jahr): - **(1976)**

PDF erstellt am: **29.06.2024**

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II. CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY

As in 1870 and in 1914, the ICRC opened in 1939 an information agency with the purpose of obtaining news of soldiers in captivity. Its offices were not closed down after the war and today it bears the name of **CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY**. Its function is to record and transmit information on prisoners of war, civilian internees, people who are released or repatriated, etc., on the basis, principally, of the lists of names which are transmitted to it. It endeavours to trace civilians and men of the armed forces reported missing during a conflict and communicates news of them to their families. It makes out certificates of captivity and death certificates.

When normal means of communication are severed, the Central Tracing Agency forwards messages between civilians who have become separated because of a conflict, and between prisoners and their relatives.

The ICRC Central Tracing Agency (CTA) maintained its activities in the field and at headquarters, dealing with both new situations and the consequences of former conflicts. Requests for news, requests for the reuniting of families and messages to transmit continued to arrive at CTA headquarters, along with a great many requests for certificates of captivity. The Agency received 104,680 messages and sent 99,238. Of 13,066 requests for news received, 6,078 positive replies and 8,028 negative replies were sent. In addition, 153,536 new elements of information were received and added to the card files.

The Agency was saddened in December by the death of Miss Paulette Y. Tombet, who had directed it with outstanding competence and devotion since 1966.

Following her entry into the CTA in 1940, Miss Tombet gained a wealth of experience and knowledge over the years, which she shared with all the members of the staff and which made it possible for her to cope with uncommon skill with the problems confronting the Agency.

After the loss of Miss Tombet, the two deputy directors, Miss Monique Katz and Mr. Nicholas Vecsey, were put in charge of the Central Tracing Agency.

Lebanon

Due to the worsening of the situation in Lebanon, it was necessary in the summer of 1976 to reinforce the Agency office working in conjunction with the ICRC delegation in western Beirut and to set up branches at Jounieh, Tripoli and in the Bekaa region.

In addition, to facilitate the distribution of messages and the handling of requests for inquiries, a distribution network had to be set up to cover a score of localities in the interior of the country.

Three Agency delegates, assisted by twenty local employees, were assigned to listing the names of displaced persons and, at

the request both of families in Lebanon and of the ICRC in Geneva, to undertaking searches to find out what had happened to missing combatants and civilians, with a view to restoring contacts between members of separated families and to reuniting families. To complete these arrangements, an Agency delegate was sent to Damascus.

The Agency transmitted 22,770 messages and carried out 17,800 investigations, enabling the CTA at headquarters to reassure Lebanese and Palestinian families in other countries who had lost contact with their relatives in Lebanon.

An Agency delegate also spent March and April in Athens to arrange, in co-operation with the UNHCR, the ICEM, the World Council of Churches and the ICMC, the transit formalities for some 3,000 stateless refugees who had left Lebanon with ICRC travel documents and who sought to reach their final country of refuge, in most cases the United States.

Conflict between Israel and Arab countries

The CTA continued to serve as an exchange centre for the ICRC delegations at Amman, Damascus, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Gaza and Cairo to assist families separated by the conflicts which had taken place in the Middle East. Some 25,000 family messages were exchanged, in addition to which many official documents were delivered, such as visiting permits, marriage licences, birth certificates and school and university diplomas.

Cyprus

During the year, the CTA delivered 18,000 family messages, to and from Cyprus.

It also provided 135 certificates of captivity to former prisoners of war.

Indo-China

Even though hostilities had ended in this area at the beginning of the second quarter of 1975, the CTA still had to deal during 1976 with many cases of missing persons and separated families.

At headquarters, it set up a file of 190,500 cards with the names of missing persons and the names and places of residence of Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugees. Facts about the refugees came either from the persons themselves or through the active co-operation of National Societies in several host countries, some of which supplied computerized lists to the Agency. The ICRC delegation in Bangkok continued to send regularly to the CTA individual cards drawn up on the occasion of visits to refugee camps in Thailand. Lastly, through lists prepared by the ICEM, the Agency entered in its files information on refugees leaving Thailand for their ultimate countries of asylum.

Although incomplete, the information available to the CTA on refugees was indispensable for the tracing of displaced persons, often believed to be dead, and for undertaking when the opportunity arose the steps required for the reuniting of families.

The Agency also assisted in the repatriation of various categories of foreigners living in Viet Nam who wanted to return to their own countries. Some of these persons were without passports; some were heads of families who had passports themselves but whose Vietnamese wives and children lacked the papers required to prove that the family heads' countries of origin were willing to accept them.

In 1975, the CTA in Geneva had approached the various National Societies and the governmental authorities of the countries of origin of these people through the intermediary of their permanent missions in Geneva. The requests for repatriation were subsequently centralized at Bangkok where the countries concerned had instructed their diplomatic representatives to deal with the problem. In January 1976 the CTA therefore sent to Bangkok an Agency delegate who was instructed to compile the necessary documentation on emigration requests received from Viet Nam and to intervene as required with the relevant diplomatic representatives. Following the return of the Agency delegate to Geneva in June 1976, the CTA continued to co-operate with the ICRC delegation in Bangkok on this matter. The Agency also concerned itself with the cases of Vietnamese wives who had received no news from their husbands of foreign nationalities who had returned to their countries of origin, doing what it could to find the husbands.

Latin America

The Agency section at the ICRC delegation in Santiago continued its work during 1976 (see page 23).

Due to the reduction of the Agency staff in Santiago, the Central Office in Geneva had to deal with a heavier work-load.

Among its tasks were the listing of liberated detainees and compiling all information concerning the emigration of former

detainees and their families and persons who proposed to join relatives abroad. Thanks to the Agency's central file drawn up at headquarters, to which additions continued to be made, persons separated from their relatives have been able to obtain news and renew contacts, often the first step towards family re-unification.

Agency activity was not limited to Chile. It also recorded the names of detainees periodically visited by ICRC delegates in other Latin American countries as well as data concerning persons believed to be missing.

Listing of detainees and persons reported missing as a result of situations of tension in other parts of the world

As in Latin America, the Agency also recorded the names and places of the incarceration of detainees whom the ICRC delegates were permitted to visit in other parts of the world. In addition it listed cases of disappearance or incarceration reported to it so as to enable these to be followed up by visiting delegates.

Western Sahara

In co-operation with the relevant National Societies, the Agency served as intermediary for the transmission of mail between Algerian soldiers in Moroccan hands and their families. Some messages were also exchanged between prisoners in the hands of the Polisario front and their families.

In addition, the Agency instituted various investigations concerning persons reported missing as a result of the events in the Western Sahara.

Angola

At the beginning of 1976, the CTA had three delegates in Angola, two of them at Luanda and the third at Huambo. Their job, in co-operation with the National Society, which was in process of formation, and with the authorities, was to search for missing or displaced persons and to deliver family messages. More than 10,000 such messages went through the CTA office in Geneva, in answer to requests for news which continued to flow in both from neighbouring and distant countries.

The agency made many radio appeals and posted lists to inform the public of the names of those missing. Following the restoration of postal services, the number of requests diminished greatly. After the closing of its Angola office in October 1976, the CTA in Geneva, having centralized all available information, continued to deal with pending cases and with inquiries which continued to arrive.

Sequels of earlier conflicts

More than 31 years after the end of the Second World War, the Agency must still deal with a great number of requests for certifications of captivity, sickness, wounds or death related to the conflict. This influx has been stimulated by new legal provisions adopted by some countries for the benefit of their nationals who were direct or indirect victims of the hostilities and of captivity.

For example, the adoption by Poland on 1 January 1976 of a law improving war pensions and other social benefits produced an increase in the number of requests for certificates of captivity. During 1976 the CTA's Polish service received 19,252 letters, three times as many as in the year before.

Polish veterans were not the only ones to address themselves to the CTA which received from several countries, in particular

from Italy, a great number of similar requests about soldiers killed abroad and about former prisoners.

It should be noted that drawing up such a certificate so that it will constitute a valid legal document requires a great deal of care—thorough searches in the files, strict verification of the data in the great mass of documentation in CTA archives and the collation of information in the certificate itself.

The Second World War and events which followed it produced successive waves of refugees and no solution has been found for the situation of a number of persons who are members of ethnic minorities and who wish to leave their countries to join members of their families living in other countries. The CTA therefore, on the basis of resolutions concerning the re-uniting of families adopted by the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Conferences of the Red Cross, worked throughout 1976 in close collaboration with National Societies on cases of separated families whose members were often scattered widely throughout the world, thus carrying out a demanding work which called for long and often difficult research.