

Central tracing agency

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CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY

In 1980, the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) of the ICRC carried on its activities for the victims of conflicts past and present, as provided for in the Geneva Conventions. It should be noted, however, that its interventions are originating more and more from the universally recognized ICRC right of initiative, notably for the protection and assistance of people not covered by the Geneva Conventions, for example, prisoners detained for political reasons, refugees and displaced civilians, principally in South East Asia and Africa. In 1980, the tasks of the CTA in connection with these categories of victims accounted for nearly half of its activities.

Background and tasks of the CTA

As it did in 1870, at the time of the Franco-Prussian war, and subsequently in 1877, 1912 and 1914, at the outset of the Second World War in 1939 the ICRC set up a central agency (named "Central Agency for Prisoners of War") for the purpose of passing on to families news of their relatives who had fallen into captivity. This Agency has been in operation continually since that date and, in July 1960, its name was changed to "Central Tracing Agency", more in line with the Geneva Conventions of 1949 which apply to civilian victims of armed conflicts as well as prisoners of war.

The six main tasks of the CTA consist in:

- obtaining, recording, processing and, if necessary, passing on all information permitting identification of persons who should benefit from the activity of the ICRC in the context of international conflicts or situations of internal tension and unrest (prisoners of war, civilian internees, missing persons, political detainees, refugees, displaced persons, etc.);
- ensuring the passing on of correspondence between prisoners and their families when the normal channels of communication are either non-existent or disrupted by events, and between civilians separated from their relatives;
- endeavouring to trace missing persons;
- organizing family reuniting, transfers and repatriations;
- issuing travel documents for people (such as refugees, displaced persons, political exiles) without identity papers and wishing either to go to a country willing to receive them or to be repatriated;
- issuing captivity, sickness or other certificates to people who must provide proof of detention or sickness during their captivity in order to receive pensions, allowances or relief.

Tracing Agency offices in the field

The growth of its tasks in connection with current conflicts or situations of tension and unrest has led the CTA to set up offices within the delegations or sub-delegations of the ICRC. As a result of this decentralization, the CTA, in 1980, had fifteen offices operating in various parts of the world, manned by 28 delegates and some 200 employees recruited locally. The Tracing Agency office in Thailand alone numbered ten to a dozen delegates and 105 local workers.

(The work of the Tracing Agency offices is described under the heading "Activities throughout the World" in this Report.)

Statistics of activities in 1980

In 1980, the CTA in Geneva received or dispatched nearly 92,000 letters (as against 88,000 the previous year), divided as follows by category of victims:

- 33% connected with the after-effects of the Second World War;
- 20% concerned with the after-effects of conflicts since the Second World War, including current conflicts;
- 10% concerned with "political detainees" (Latin America, Africa, etc.);
- 37% concerning refugees and displaced persons (South East Asia, Africa, etc.).

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

- some 589,400 names were received and recorded, of which 397,000 were put on computer;
- nearly 1,015,000 family messages (Red Cross messages and mail) were conveyed, including more than 900,000 in the programme of aid for refugees from South East Asia. Approximately 8,000 messages passed through Geneva, including mail to and from Moroccan prisoners of war in the hands of the Polisario Front, Algerian prisoners of war in Moroccan hands, prisoners of war in the conflict between Iraq and Iran;
- approximately 65,000 requests were received, relating to the tracing of missing persons, family reuniting, emigration, certificates, appeals for cash or medicines, etc. Nearly 17,000 cases, relating to 1980 and preceding years, were resolved; the 47,800 remaining cases had not been concluded by the end of 1980 and were still to form the subject of various enquiries and proceedings;
- more than 6,000 certificates of captivity, relating to the Second World War and to subsequent conflicts, were issued;

— finally, 1,007 travel documents were issued, either by the CTA in Geneva, or by the Tracing Agency offices in the field.

The development of technical resources

DATA PROCESSING. — In 1980 the CTA completed the installation of its data processing system and from February onwards processing by computer, programmed and initiated during the second half of 1979, had become operational in the programme to help refugees in South East Asia. Relatively important adjustments and additions were made in the course of the year in order to double the storage capacity of the computer, to ensure better service to users in Geneva and in the field, and to rationalize certain operations with a view to reducing costs.

MICROFILMING. — Over 12 million documents, including 8 million individual cards relating to the two World Wars, were microfilmed during 1980 by the microfilming service of the CTA. This service was set up in 1979 in order to solve the problem of keeping archives while saving space.

Co-operation with National Societies

The CTA continued to co-operate with National Societies with a view to standardizing tracing procedures. A CTA delegate based in Kuala Lumpur co-ordinated the efforts being made on behalf of refugees in South East Asia by the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines.

In addition, the deputy director of the CTA met the heads of the Tracing Services of the Canadian and American National Societies to discuss the strengthening of co-operation between those National Societies and the CTA, notably as regards registration and family reuniting of refugees from South East Asia.

The director of the Tracing Service of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the Soviet Union visited ICRC headquarters for a week in order to familiarize herself with the working methods of the CTA.

Participation in meetings

In February 1980 the director of the CTA took part in a technical seminar organized by the ICRC in Singapore and attended by representatives from the Tracing Services of the National Societies of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong

Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and Australia (see page 40, under the heading "Refugees in South East Asia").

In May, the deputy director of the CTA took part in a round table on "humanitarian aid to refugees from Indochina", organized by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in San Remo (Italy), and in a symposium on international solidarity regarding the reception and integration of refugees which was organized by the "Diakonische Werke der Evangelischen Kirche" in November at Stuttgart (Federal Republic of Germany).

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On 1st March Mr. Ulrich Wasser was appointed director of the Central Tracing Agency, following the retirement of Mr. Pierre Basset who, in October 1977, had set in motion the modernizing of the CTA, both by the introduction of data processing and by supervising the work preparatory to the construction of a new building (see inset).

A NEW BUILDING FOR THE CTA

In 1963, on the occasion of the centenary of the foundation of the Red Cross, the Swiss Federal Parliament decided to make a donation to the ICRC in acknowledgement of the humanitarian work carried out by the institution since its creation in 1863.

In 1980, by a vote of Parliament, this gift took the form of a building designed to accommodate the various departments of the CTA and endowed with the most modern equipment and facilities (data processing and microfilms). Fifteen million Swiss francs was budgeted for the undertaking. Work is scheduled to begin in the second quarter of 1981 and the building is expected to be ready for occupation in 1984.