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Action in the field

During 1984, the ICRC was active in more than 80 countries of Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Europe covered by its various regional delegations. At the end of the year, there were some 550 delegates (including about 60 people made available by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) in 36 delegations endeavouring to provide protection and assistance to victims of armed conflicts, internal tension and unrest, helped by 2,300 locally recruited staff.

ICRC delegates visited more than 30,000 persons (prisoners of war and so-called "security detainees"): almost 3,000 persons in nine African countries, 7,800 in some ten countries in Latin America, a thousand in four Asian countries, more than 18,000 in six countries in the Middle East and about 400 in one European country (*for details, see pages/conflicts concerned later in this chapter*).

The purpose of the visits is purely humanitarian: the ICRC delegates inspect the material and psychological conditions of detention and the treatment accorded to prisoners, provide detainees with relief if required (medicines, clothing, toilet articles) and, if necessary, ask the authorities to take steps to improve the detainees' treatment and living conditions. In the course of repeated visits, delegates talk to whichever prisoners they please for as long as they like without witnesses.

Before and after these visits, discussions are held with those in charge of the detention centres. Confidential reports are then drawn up. In the case of internal tensions and unrest, these reports are sent only to the detaining authorities, while in the case of international armed conflicts they are sent both to the detaining authorities and to the authorities of the detainees' own countries. These reports are not intended for publication. The ICRC, for its part, confines itself to publishing the number and names of the places visited, the dates of these visits and the number of people seen. It also mentions the fact that its delegates were able to talk to the prisoners without witnesses. It does not express an opinion on the reasons for detention and does not publicly comment on the material or psychological conditions it finds. If a government should publish incomplete or inaccurate versions of the ICRC reports, the ICRC reserves the right to publish and circulate such reports in full.

The ICRC visits places of detention providing its delegates are allowed:

- to see all the prisoners and talk freely to them without witnesses;
- access to all places of detention;
- to repeat their visits.

In addition, the ICRC generally asks for a list of the persons to be visited or for permission to draw up such a list during the visit and to distribute material assistance to detainees and their families in need of help.

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The Central Tracing Agency (CTA) of the ICRC continued to carry out its tasks arising both from its treaty obligation towards civilian and military victims of armed conflicts, and from the exercise by the ICRC of its right to take humanitarian initiative.

The traditional tasks of the CTA are as follows:

- obtaining, centralizing and communicating all information on civilian and military victims in enemy hands;
- ensuring the transmission of correspondence between prisoners and their families, as well as the exchange of Red Cross messages between members of families separated by conflict;
- tracing persons reported missing or whose relatives are without news;
- issuing certificates of captivity, sickness or death;
- transmitting legal documents, such as powers of attorney and wills;
- issuing travel documents.

Matching the development of ICRC activities other than those specifically provided for by the Conventions and Protocols, the CTA registers so-called "security detainees" in order to facilitate protection activities on their behalf and ensure the maintenance of contact with their families.

Statistics for the overall activities of the CTA in 1985, both at headquarters and in the field, are as follows:

- 1,713,332 Red Cross messages were exchanged, 1,565, 744 of them in relation to the conflict between Iraq and Iran;
- 27,506 requests for tracing missing persons were processed; the fate of 7,249 of these missing persons was ascertained;
- 7,381 capture cards for prisoners of war or civilian internees were received and 11,359 registration cards for security detainees were drawn up;
- 11,027 certificates of captivity, sickness, death, etc. were issued;
- 2,017 travel documents were provided for 2,735 persons.

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In relief operations for 1985, the ICRC purchased and sent directly to the scene of the action 48,417 tonnes of relief supplies valued at 52 million Swiss francs. In addition, 151,175 tonnes (worth 167 million Swiss francs) was sent by donors under ICRC supervision, some of it under food aid agreements concluded with various governments. A total of 199,592 tonnes of relief supplies (excluding medical material), worth 219 million Swiss francs, was thus dispatched by the ICRC to 39 countries in 1985. Out of this total, 151,739 tonnes worth 163 million Swiss francs were distributed in 1985, leaving over sufficient relief to continue aid programmes during the first few months of 1986.

Medical assistance totalled 12.5 million Swiss francs. Throughout the year, moreover, the ICRC sent 447 doctors, nurses and ancillary medical personnel (chemists, physiotherapists, prosthetists, nutritionists and sanitary technicians) to take part in activities in different parts of the world. Almost half this personnel, 226 people, were made available to the ICRC by the National Societies of twenty countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom).

The total material and medical assistance distributed by the ICRC in 1985 was divided geographically as follows:

Africa	136,981,008	77.65%
Latin America	16,640,008	9.43%
Asia	10,682,602	6.05%
Middle East	12,128,566	6.87%
Total (Swiss francs)	176,432,184	100%

(See pages 34, 48, 65, 75 for detailed tables)

Assistance for detainees and their families, included in the above figures, cost 4,332,575 Swiss francs, and amounted to more than 2,000 tonnes of relief supplies of all kinds.

It should be remembered that the ICRC undertakes aid programmes, for supplying both material and medical aid, only in cases of armed conflicts, internal tensions and unrest and only providing it is enabled to:

- determine the urgency of the victims' vital needs;
- carry out missions of assessment locally, enabling it to identify the categories and numbers of people who should benefit from assistance;
- organize and supervise the distribution of relief.

(The figures quoted above represent only part of the cost of aid programmes as they appear in the budgets and financial reports for each operation; these include also the very substantial cost of personnel, equipment, vehicles, transport, storage, etc.)

Finally, we would mention that, in 1985, the ICRC telecommunications network was progressively equipped with modern automatic radio transmission facilities, thus enabling it to increase its effectiveness and to consider, if necessary, a saving in specialized staff. On 31 December, the network comprised 17 base stations in direct radio contact with Geneva, and 38 local stations ensuring radio liaison in the field between delegations, sub-delegations and ICRC offices (see diagram on page 84). The number of radio messages exchanged between ICRC headquarters and delegations in the field rose to 15,886, an increase of 85.9% compared to 1984.

Of this radio traffic, 17.7% was exchanged on behalf of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with the station at Niamey, in the West Sahel network. Radio traffic between the different delegations totalled 25,171 messages, 85.5% more than in 1984. Taking telex messages into account, the ICRC Telecommunications Service dealt with a total of 58,770 messages transmitted or received, an increase of 25.8% compared with 1984.