



ICRC

waiting for news

waiting for **NEWS**






ICRC

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July 2002



waiting for NEWS



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Populations in flight, children lost, families dispersed... Combatants wounded, taken prisoner, missing or killed in battle... Civilians arrested, caught up in the fighting, injured or killed... Houses destroyed, front lines impassable, communications disrupted...

Of all the suffering caused by war, perhaps the most bitter anguish is not knowing what has happened to a son or brother gone off to

fight, a wife or grandfather left behind in a village, a child lost during flight...

Ever since its origins, the Red Cross has placed this mental suffering at the centre of its concerns. To alleviate it, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), through its Central Tracing Agency (CTA), takes the action described in this brochure.

(...) the activities of the High Contracting Parties, of the Parties to the conflict and of the international humanitarian organizations mentioned in the Conventions and in this Protocol shall be prompted mainly by the right of families to know the fate of their relatives.

(Protocol I of 1977, Article 32)

Writing a Red Cross message is an expression of hope to get news from relatives

In time of conflict, postal and telephone communications are often disrupted and direct contacts may be impossible. In these circumstances, anyone who wishes to do so may send news of a strictly personal nature to his or her family and receive such news by means of a Red Cross message (RCM). Exchange of correspondence continues until normal means of communication are restored.

The traditional RCM is a standard form with space for a personal message and the addresses of the sender and the recipient. ICRC, Red Cross and Red Crescent staff, often with the cooperation of other organizations, collect, forward and distribute the messages by various means:

- ▣ door-to-door delivery;
- ▣ contacting neighbours, village elders or clan chiefs;
- ▣ posting lists in ICRC, Red Cross and Red Crescent offices, refugee camps and public places where the addressees are likely to go;
- ▣ publicizing addressees' names in the press, on radio programmes or on public communication networks. (In the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda the BBC, in cooperation with the ICRC, broadcast the

names of people being sought by their relatives, and in Zaire "Reporters sans frontières" broadcast a similar programme on "Radio Agatashya".)

All persons (...) shall be enabled to give news of a strictly personal nature to members of their families, wherever they may be, and to receive news from them.

(Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 25)



Unaccompanied children: a tragic phenomenon

Just like adults, children flee from fighting and take the road to exile, but in the general panic they all too often lose their way, become separated from their parents and end up in a refugee camp with no one to take care of them. Also too often, they become orphans and prey to unofficial adoption or trafficking.

In order to reunite children with their parents, the ICRC makes every effort to :

- register and follow up unaccompanied children, wherever they may be found;
- record the identity of each child (name and age, parents' names, previous and present addresses);
- photograph each child (a photo is often the only "identity document" that can be placed in the file of a baby or a very small child);
- set in motion a mechanism for tracing the parents, which includes:
 - posting the names of the relatives sought in refugee camps and much-frequented public places;
 - broadcasting the names on local or international radio networks;
 - launching appeals to parents who are looking for their children, urging them to contact the nearest ICRC, Red Cross or Red Crescent office;
 - sending RCMs written by children to their parents' former address;
 - visits to and enquiries in the children's villages of origin;
 - approaches to authorities which may be able to supply useful information.



Children shall be provided with the care and aid they require, and (...) all appropriate steps shall be taken to facilitate the reunion of families temporarily separated.

**(Protocol II of 1977,
Article 4, para. 3 (b))**

The long road to family reunification or back home... or to a country of asylum...

Reuniting members of families split up by conflict often entails lengthy administrative procedures.

Before organizing a family reunification, the ICRC must make sure that such a move will improve the situation of everyone involved, particularly in conflict areas.

The agreement of each person concerned must be obtained and the family relationship verified. In addition, the necessary authorizations and visas must be obtained from the parties and the countries involved, including countries of transit. Priority is given to people requiring special protection, such as unaccompanied children, elderly people living alone and released detainees, and to next of kin.

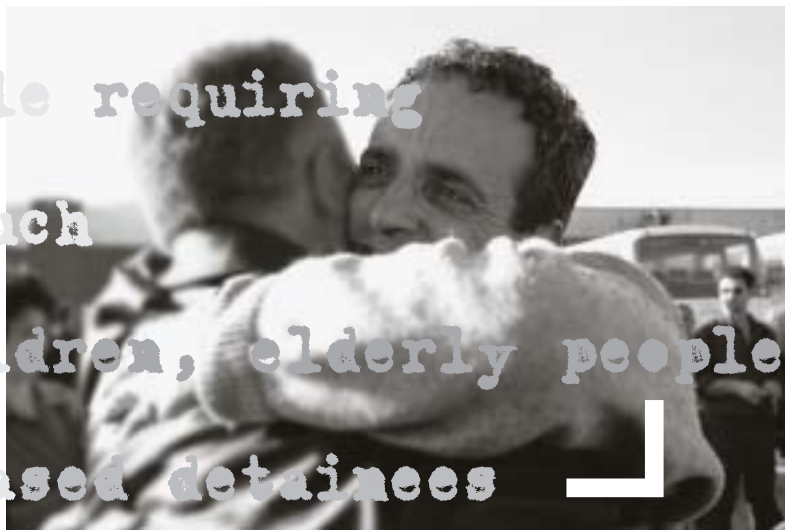
In the chaos of conflict many people lose their identity papers. They have no means of obtaining new papers enabling them to return to their country of origin or residence or enter a host country.

In order to help such cases, the ICRC used its right of initiative to establish, at the end of the Second World War, an internationally recognized temporary Travel Document.

Today, thousands of ICRC Travel Documents are issued every year to refugees and displaced or stateless people.

The document is not a substitute for a passport or for any other identity papers, and is valid only for the duration of the journey.

The High Contracting Parties and the Parties to the conflict shall facilitate in every possible way the reunion of families dispersed as a result of armed conflicts (...).
(Protocol I of 1977, Article 74)



Nyashe finds his family

In the midst of tens of thousands of Rwandan civilians milling around at the Zairian border, little Nyashe, seven years old, has just fallen down.

Jostled and almost trampled underfoot by this solid mass of adults, he begins to cry. He has just lost his parents and his sister. A British television journalist and an ICRC delegate rush to the little boy's aid and take him to the hospital in Bukavu, Zaire.

After his bumps and scrapes have been treated, Nyashe tells the story of his family's flight and how he became separated from his parents. As they do for thousands of other children who have found themselves alone, ICRC delegates record Nyashe's identity and take

his photo with a view to tracing his family. On the following days Red Cross volunteers search through the refugee camps in and around Bukavu, showing the photo and asking questions.

A week later their efforts are rewarded when they find Nyashe's parents. Meanwhile, the little boy has been placed in a receiving centre for unaccompanied children, and it is there that the family comes together. Nyashe's sister is the first to spot him and hurls herself into his arms under the tender gaze of their parents. The other children cluster around them, happy and at the same time a little envious, hoping that their fathers and mothers will also come looking for them.



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Using the Internet and computer technology to keep track of victims

In addition to the RCM service, the ICRC provides different means to restore family links: mobile or satellite phones, radio broadcasts and the Internet.

As part of its response to the 1999 Balkans conflict, the ICRC launched the Internet-based Family News Network. Designed for use in restoring family links, it is accessible on any computer with an Internet link at <http://www.familylinks.icrc.org> or via the main ICRC website at <http://www.icrc.org>.

Depending on the situation, the web site provides for the following services:

- victims of conflict or disaster can register their name and present location with the aim that a relative will consult the site and come across these details;
- enquirers can register the name of the person sought and their own name and address with the aim that those they are seeking will in turn consult the site;
- any user can consult the lists of names published;
- any user can send an electronic RCM to a relative, provided he or she has an address, and then the message is directed to the nearest ICRC, Red Cross or Red Crescent office for delivery.

All the information on war victims collected by the ICRC is managed in databases which are capable of processing millions of entries and are compiled in delegations throughout the world. The ICRC manages over 70 such databases, containing some two million identities.

Some of the information may be made available as needed to other humanitarian organizations cooperating with the ICRC, on condition that the protection of personal data is guaranteed.

hoping that fathers and mothers will also come looking for them

A worldwide network: humanitarian cooperation in action

To restore family links between people affected by conflict, the ICRC cooperates with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies all over the world.

In areas affected by conflict and anywhere in the world, the ICRC works with staff and volunteers of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the countries concerned.

The CTA and the Tracing Services of practically all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout the world make up the global network for restoration of family links which collects and forwards messages, often after considerable time and effort have been spent tracing the addressees.

When RCMs cannot be delivered, additional means are used to trace the whereabouts of the persons.

Other humanitarian organizations are becoming involved with increasing frequency in activities for restoring family links. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, are regular partners of the ICRC in nearly all conflict situations. Other agencies, such as UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations like the Save the Children Fund cooperate with the ICRC in dealing with certain specific issues, including that of unaccompanied children.



Deprived of freedom

Soldiers captured on the battlefield, civilians arrested, interned for security reasons, detained by an occupying power or because they do not belong to the same ethnic group, do not practise the same religion, or hold different political opinions... all these categories of people deprived of their freedom are visited by ICRC delegates the world over.

The identities of all prisoners/detainees visited throughout the world are registered and they are given the possibility to write and receive an RCM. Thus, during the ten years of war between Iran and Iraq, the ICRC recorded the identity of over 90,000 prisoners of war and exchanged over 14 million

RCMs between the prisoners and their families.

The ICRC expresses no opinion on the reasons that prompt the authorities to make arrests. It requests release only for vulnerable categories of people, on humanitarian or medical grounds (children, pregnant women, the elderly, the seriously wounded). At the end of the hostilities, the ICRC calls for the release of all detainees.

In order to combat disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and to improve the material and psychological conditions in which detainees are held, the ICRC aims to:

- ▣ determine and record the identity of all prisoners/detainees;
- ▣ follow up each prisoner individually so as to monitor his or her treatment by the authorities throughout the period of captivity;
- ▣ restore contacts with relatives by informing the prisoner's family of his or her capture.

Maintaining family contacts

Thanks to RCMs, prisoners/detainees can inform their families of their situation and keep in touch with them throughout the period of their detention.

Family visits to places of detention may also be organized by the Red Cross, since prisons are often very far away from the family home and travel is expensive, or there may be front lines to cross. The ICRC facilitates such family visits in cooperation with the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society concerned and the prison authorities. This is the case, for instance, in the Philippines and Indonesia, where the National Societies arrange for the transport of families to prisons which may be more than a thousand kilometres away from their homes.



Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated.
(Third Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 13)

Release and repatriation

The ICRC often organizes the return of released prisoners to their countries or regions of origin at the end of hostilities, or sometimes even earlier.

ICRC delegates interview the prisoners individually to ascertain whether they wish to be repatriated or transferred to the other side of the front line.

The ICRC encourages the simultaneous release of all captives in the hands of the belligerents, in order to avoid bargaining in human lives, or the making of arrests for the sole purpose of increasing the number of people to be released to match that of the adverse party.



Assistance to families

Certifying captivity

The ICRC draws up, where necessary, documents certifying that a prisoner/detainee has been visited by its delegates during his or her period of detention. Thousands of such certificates are issued every year by ICRC delegations all over the world. These documents often enable former detainees or their families to receive compensation or State pensions under national legislation, or to find a country of asylum.

Certifying death

In accordance with its mandate, the ICRC tries to obtain notification of persons who have died during a conflict, in order to ensure that their families are duly informed.

Clarifying the fate

One of the most distressing effects of conflict is uncertainty about the fate of close relatives: have they been taken prisoner, are they wounded, or dead? If the family link cannot be restored by means of RCMs and no information can be obtained about the capture or death of the person sought, the ICRC deploys additional efforts to trace the whereabouts or ascertain the fate of the sought persons. The ICRC approaches the authorities concerned and submits cases of persons unaccounted for whose fate the authorities might help to elucidate using information at their disposal.

Parties to the conflict shall record as seen as possible, in respect of each wounded, sick or dead person of the adverse Party falling into their hands, any particulars which may assist in his identification. (...) Parties to the conflict shall prepare and forward to each other through the same bureau,* certificates of death or duly authenticated lists of the dead. (First Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 16)

* i.e. ICRC Central Tracing Agency

Restoring family links means...

- enabling members of families split up by war to re-establish contact with one another and to correspond;
- collecting information about people who are detained or have died because of a conflict, so as to inform their families;
- organizing family reunifications and repatriations;
- taking steps to trace the whereabouts of persons unaccounted for and clarify their fate.



Mission

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.



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