

Information in the Red Cross

Comments by the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies

1. The Tansley Report viewpoint

The Tansley Report gives the following comments under the heading *The concept of International Red Cross*:

Members of Red Cross have an ambivalent approach to the concept of and use of the term "International Red Cross". On some occasions great effort is expended to enhance the idea of one Red Cross, of Red Cross moving as a unity, of acting in the name of the International Red Cross. On other occasions equal pains are taken to distinguish between, say, the League and the ICRC, or the ICRC and individual National Societies, and to accentuate the differences in purposes and structure of the various Red Cross organs. Which approach is adopted at any given time seems dependent upon what serves the best immediate need of the Red Cross organ involved. . .

Yet the term has real meaning in the eyes of the public, of governments, and of Red Cross members themselves—meaning well beyond the convenience of the words. It stresses what to many people is the most distinctive quality of Red Cross: its international character. Further, this quality should become even more distinctive of Red Cross in the future than it has been in the past.

There seems little doubt that the term can be used as a Red Cross asset more effectively than it has been to date. . .

In summary, as a means of reinforcing the image of Red Cross as a movement, as a means of strengthening that movement and emphasising its international character, the concept of International Red Cross should be applied as widely as possible, in thought and in use. Only as members

of a movement will the separate parts achieve their maximum effectiveness (p. 118-119).

2. Collaboration between the League and the ICRC

Until now the League and the ICRC have been entirely autonomous in drawing up and developing their respective policies on information and public relations. On day-to-day matters, however, good collaboration has been established over recent years: those in charge of information and public relations in the League and the ICRC have maintained close and regular contact enabling them to exchange opinions and experience, while joint action has gradually taken definite form. For example, the ICRC has been regularly invited to meetings organized by the League for those in charge of information and public relations in the National Societies. The ICRC, in turn, frequently lends its audio-visual equipment to the League.

3. Special features of the present system

1. In establishing and developing their policies on information and public relations on separate and autonomous lines, the League and the ICRC have been intent on stressing their own identities and implanting awareness of their individual natures in the public mind.

This distinctive attitude of the League and the ICRC is especially marked in Geneva, in the relations of the two institutions with the representatives of the world's press. It is less noticeable among the National Societies, many of them preferring to speak of "the International Red Cross" when describing the activities of the League and the ICRC to people in their own countries.

2. Until now, each institution has gone to the trouble of developing its own information media (publications, audio-visual material, etc.). This has sometimes led to duplication, dissipation of effort, a less than rational use of the already meagre human and material resources available. These weaknesses have been accentuated by what might be termed the "objective difficulties" inherent in information and public relations work for the Red Cross at international level:

— the many and varied kinds of audience, each with its own language, culture and social system;

- the wide divergences in the levels and effectiveness of information and public relations services in different parts of the world and the consequent inequality in the dissemination of facts;
- rival claims for information by those National Societies directly involved in “current affairs”, on the one hand, and the international mass media, on the other;
- the very limited resources in staff and money as compared with the huge needs to be met.

4. Towards greater collaboration

1. In the existing organization of the International Red Cross, taking into account the distribution of functions between the League and the ICRC it would appear difficult to refer systematically to both or either as the “International Red Cross”, instead of “the League” or “the ICRC”, as the case may be.

Nevertheless, as the Tansley Report makes clear, it should be possible, in certain cases, to make wider use of the concept of International Red Cross—in particular, where the League and the ICRC have occasion to conduct a joint operation.

In addition, within their own spheres of public relations, the League and the ICRC ought to try to make evident not so much the qualities which differentiate the various Red Cross bodies but the unity of the movement and the universality of its principles. There should be regular consultations between the two institutions, in particular when settling their objectives in respect of information and public relations, to ensure that their planned activities tend in the same direction and complement each other. It would be extremely useful if the League and the ICRC were to present to the National Societies a joint proposal on the best way to inform the general public on the organization and the international activities of the Red Cross. In fact, according to some National Societies, such information is not merely desirable but imperative.

2. More systematic joint planning of this kind should be accompanied by efforts to standardize their means and methods in the sphere of information and public relations and to use them in a more rational way. With the existing resources and staff available, it would be possible to make considerable progress towards this end in the near future. Below are a few examples.

a) Audio-visual

This is undoubtedly the field of activity in which the opportunities for collaboration are most obvious. In fact, although the audio-visual services of the League and the ICRC cater for the same audiences (National Societies, mass media, publishers, etc.) and are required to meet the same kinds of need, each institution has its own photo and film libraries, and its own material and teams for producing the required material. It might therefore well be asked whether it is not time that the two institutions pooled their resources, with a view to creating a joint audio-visual centre to produce photographs, films, video tapes, exhibition materials, and so on.

On the same subject, it should be pointed out that the movement urgently needs a documentary 35/16 mm film on the Red Cross in general. This film could be made jointly by the League and the ICRC before the Twenty-fourth International Red Cross Conference in 1981. Finance could be obtained by subscription from the National Societies.

b) Broadcasts and radio programmes

RCBS (Red Cross Broadcasting Service), the radio station of the ICRC could be opened up to the whole of the Red Cross. The journalistic content could be devised and prepared in conjunction with the League, but production would remain in the hands of the ICRC. The League would contribute 50 per cent of the costs of production and transmission (depreciation of equipment, fees to announcers, etc.).

c) Publications

The League and the ICRC could devise and produce a joint report every two years as a public relations document for widespread distribution, describing with the aid of numerous illustrations and diagrams the work of the Red Cross at international level. The first issue could appear in autumn 1979, for the meeting of the Council of Delegates. Production would be by the League and the ICRC in collaboration.

d) World Red Cross Day

World Red Cross Day is an unrivalled opportunity for National Red Cross Societies to publicize their organizations within their own countries. The League, which has so far chosen the theme for the World Day and prepared the basic material for the National Societies, will in future consult the ICRC more closely in making the arrange-

ments, as has already been done, in fact, for World Red Cross Day 1978.

3. Strengthening the information and public relations structures at regional and national levels

The information sent out from Geneva through the international mass media is of prime importance for the League and the ICRC. Each National Society plays a no less vital role in imparting knowledge of the movement. Once there is awareness in a country of the profound interdependence of the international and national manifestations of the Red Cross the National Society becomes the voice of the whole movement for the public in that country. Such solidarity requires very close links between the League and the ICRC, and between these two institutions and each National Society.

If National Societies are to be capable of providing the best possible public relations and of discharging fully within their countries the mission of transmitting news of the two international Red Cross organizations, they must have at their disposal an efficient information service run by one or more professional public relations staff. The League's development programme is helping to achieve this aim. But as part of the joint effort described throughout this Report, the ICRC should make a specific contribution to this particular aspect of the League's programme, for instance by offering the services of some of its experts to speak at courses and seminars organized by the League.

It is necessary for the League and the ICRC to adapt their information policy and material (substance as well as form) to the needs and circumstances of the National Societies, which will have to be consulted regularly for the purpose: hence the importance, for those in charge of information and public relations services in National Societies with similar needs and a common culture, of regular meetings, technical seminars, editorial conferences, etc. As in the fields dealt with above, it is the League which must take the initiative, but again the ICRC ought to be closely associated with the work of its fellow institution.