



**The role of the Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC
in restoring and maintaining family links in times of
armed conflict.**

International Committee of the Red Cross

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The International Committee of the Red Cross

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. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. 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. With its HQ in Geneva, Switzerland, the ICRC is based in around 80 countries and has a total of more than 12,000 staff.

War and family links: general overview

Restoration of family links between victims of armed conflict is one of the most longstanding activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and of the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Active hostilities, the existence of front lines and security imperatives dictated by the parties to the conflict generally lead to a breakdown in traditional means of communication (postal services, telephone links, etc.) and, at the same time, restrict or prohibit people's freedom of movement.

This, in turn, leads to loss of contact between family members, when certain relatives:

- live on opposite sides of the front line;
- have fled their homes, have become displaced or have sought refuge in another country;
- have been captured or arrested on account of the conflict;
- have died.

The suffering of the families torn up by the war is huge, and the task to reestablish and maintain family links between separated family members is immense. To remedy the situation and make up for the absence of normal means of communication, during the conflict the ICRC sets up and coordinates a network for the restoration of family links, both in areas directly affected by the conflict and in those receiving displaced people and refugees.

Restoring and maintaining family links

Restoring family links means carrying out, in those situations, a range of activities that aim to prevent separation and disappearance, restore and maintain contact between family members, and clarify the fate of persons reported missing. It involves collecting information about persons who are missing, persons who have died, and vulnerable persons such as children separated from their families and persons deprived of their freedom. It also involves tracing persons unaccounted for, organizing the exchange of family news and the transmission of documents when normal means of communication have broken down, organizing family reunifications and repatriations, and issuing travel documents and attestations.

These activities are carried out by the worldwide Family Links Network constituted by the ICRC and the tracing services of the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies. The ICRC acts both in its direct operational capacity and in its lead role for restoring family links within the movement.

This network is both a postal service which collects and delivers family news and a tracing service, as the distribution of family messages, for example, involves locating addressees who have fled, have been displaced or are refugees.

ICRC strategy focuses primarily on offering to the persons directly affected by the war (i.e internally displaced persons, refugees, inhabitants remaining in the conflict zones, etc) different means, so they can reassure their relatives who are living in non conflict areas and inform them of their whereabouts. The means vary from one emergency context to another, depending on the prevailing political and military situation, on existing needs and on the resources available. These means aimed at simple,

highly efficient and relatively inexpensive means of communication that do not require any follow-up involving data processing.

- Refugees and displaced persons can use **Red Cross mobile phones** to inform their relatives, as a first contact, of their whereabouts and give them their new location.
- Names and address of displaced persons and refugees who wish so can be broadcast over local and international radio networks. This **radio broadcast** of names is specially important for families remaining in isolated areas and who might be anxious to know if their next of kin arrived safely at destination. Radio broadcast is also used for particular cases, such as unaccompanied children or elderly persons. Their names are being broadcast in order to search for their parents or relatives.
- Names and address of persons who wish so can also be publish in **news papers, or notice boards**.
- Persons who have been displaced, are refugees or still moving can also register their name and address in the **ICRC Family Links web site on internet**. This medium is also used for transmission of family news (electronic Red Cross messages). However, the deployment of such a mean in conflict areas, where usual communication systems are disrupted needs carefull assessment.
- The most frequently medium used for family news is the **Red Cross message**. These unsealed messages are in general not held up by front lines or by security problems affecting communications in wartime; their content can be censored by the parties to the conflict at any time. Once the first contact has been established, the families will be able to maintain it as long as necessary, and to regularly exchange family news through the Red Cross messages international network.

The choice of one method over others and the way it is used are always based on a preliminary analysis which takes account of the desired aim, the context, the resources available and those required to achieve the aim. The means used should in no way risk causing harm to the persons concerned; any action taken must be in the interest of the victims and appropriate to local conditions.

Red Cross Messages (RCMs): 2007 Figures

	World	Africa	Asia	Europe & Americas	Middle East & North Africa
RCMs Collected	256,772	165,700	23,604	10,606	56,862
of which from detainees	49,717	6,307	11,537	6,630	25,243
of which from unaccompanied/separated childrens	2,286	2,277	9	-	-
of which from civilians	204,769	157,116	12,058	3,976	31,619
RCMs distribued	229,150	154,036	20,155	7,978	46,981
of which to detainees	41,964	4,859	6,136	4,270	26,699
of which to unaccompanied/separated childrens	1,778	1,771	5	1	1
of which to civilians	185,408	147,406	14,014	3,707	20,281

Other means of family contact: 2007 Figures

	World	Africa	Asia	Europe & Americas	Middle East & North Africa
Telephone calls made to relatives	4,228	416	-	18	3,794
Name published in the media	28,453	27,641	812	-	-
Names publish on the ICRC website	82,641	55,636	812	16,795	9,398

Unaccompanied children and other vulnerable persons

In almost all emergencies - armed conflicts, mass population displacements, and other crisis situations - children get separated from their parents, families and other responsible adults. Because their status is seldom immediately clear, they are referred to as 'separated or unaccompanied children' rather than 'orphans'. The term 'orphan' should be avoided, as long as the fate of a child's parents and/or other close relatives cannot be determined or settled.

Most separated or unaccompanied children can be reunited with parents, siblings, extended family, relatives, or other adults whom they know and who are willing to provide for their care.

This suggests four basic intervention objectives, which the ICRC, in cooperation with other organisations, aims at:

- to identify separated and unaccompanied children as quickly as possible, and register them;
- to ensure their survival and well-being through interim care which meets their developmental needs;
- to trace their parents and relatives, and to reunite them with their families as soon as possible;
- to secure appropriate long-term care for those children who cannot be reunited with their own families.

Other persons, such as the elderly or disable persons, might as well be in a difficult situation during a conflict. They might remain behind, be isolated and separated from their relatives and unable to take care of themselves. Because of their particular vulnerability, the ICRC will undertake, when necessary, specific interventions aimed at their protection and family reunification.

A network for prisoners and their families

In accordance with its mandate, the ICRC makes every effort to obtain information on persons deprived of their liberty because of the conflict and to visit them in their places of detention. Such visits enable ICRC delegates to reassure families about the fate of their relatives and, by means of the Red Cross message network, allow the prisoners and their families to correspond.

Eversince 1915, the ICRC has been visiting people deprived of their freedom in times of conflict. During the Second World War ICRC made over 11,170 visits to camps housing prisoners of war and civilian internees in the hand of states party to the 1929 Geneva Convention. In 2007, the ICRC delegates visited 518,277 detainees held in 2,425 places of detention in nearly 80 countries.

Informing families of the death of a relative

The ICRC also takes steps to obtain death certificates and lists of people who have died while in the power of the adverse party, and gathers the accounts of witnesses. All these documents enable it to inform families of their relatives' fate.

Persons unaccounted for

At the end of a conflict, many families still suffer the anxiety of not knowing what has happened to one or more of their members. When enquiries sent via Red Cross messages to those who may have information on the missing person have not yielded any results, when the missing person cannot be found at his/her place of residence or among displaced people or refugees, and when he/she is not listed as having been arrested or as having died, then such a person is said to be unaccounted for.

When the peace process is under way, the former belligerents have the responsibility to take measures aimed at ascertaining the fate of persons unaccounted for. They must, in particular:

- agree on a procedure to be followed and on a time-frame during which all information in their possession which might help elucidate the fate of persons unaccounted for will be assembled, so that the families may be informed;
- where necessary, identify mortal remains;
- decide upon a date on which files regarding persons still unaccounted for will be closed, and take the legal measures necessary to enable relatives to settle questions relating to civil status, etc.

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the ICRC may offer assistance to families and the former belligerents in its capacity as mediator and neutral intermediary. Such assistance helps attenuate the

feelings of hatred and resentment and the thirst for revenge which unfortunately accompany every conflict situation.

In 2007, the ICRC undertook or pursued activities for missing persons and their families in places such as the Balkans, Colombia, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Peru, the Southern Caucasus and Timor-Leste.

CTA activities in recent conflict

4 The Balkans

Over 18 million Red Cross messages (RCMs) were exchanged in the former Yugoslavia 1991 and 1995, enabling thousands of people to restore and maintain contact with the relatives and to rejoin their families. During the 1999 Kosovo crisis the ICRC launched its Family Links Website on the internet. Family members exchanged 1,280 RCMs via the web and 13,260 persons registered their names so that their relatives could locate them.

4 Rwanda

Since 1994, some 70,000 family reunifications have been organized and some 1.4 million RCMs have been exchanged. Fewer and fewer reunifications occur every year; from several thousand annually in the 1990s there were only 45 in 2006. ICRC delegates have also visited 120,000 detainees in Rwandan prisons.

4 Afghanistan

Between 2001 and 2003, over 22,000 Red Cross messages were exchanged between civilians, enabling them to restore and maintain contact with relatives. In addition, over 35,000 messages were exchanged between people deprived of their freedom and their families. In addition in January 2008, the ICRC set up a video-teleconferencing programme which allowed detainees in the US detention facility in Bagram to see and speak to their families. The programme has been a major success, with nearly 1,500 calls made over the last eight months between persons held in Bagram and their families, who had come to the ICRC delegation in Kabul from around the country.

4 Angola

Since May 2002, over 190,000 Red Cross messages have been exchanged between family members, enabling them to restore contact after the long civil war. Over 10,000 names of people sought by their families can be found on the ICRC's family links website and in a book widely distributed both within and outside the country. Over 1,500 children separated from their families have been registered, and over 600 of them have already been reunited with relatives.

4 Iraq

Since March 2003, over 31,000 Red Cross messages have been exchanged, 11,000 of which were written by people deprived of their freedom. In addition, over 30,000 satellite telephone calls have been made to 76 destinations worldwide. Nearly 8,000 names of people sought by their families or seeking their relatives can be found on the ICRC's family links website.

4 Democratic Republic of the Congo

Between 1998 and 2003, over 1,338,000 Red Cross messages were exchanged between civilians enabling thousands of them to restore and maintain contact. Over 6,000 children separated from their families were registered, and over 4,400 of them were reunited with relatives.

4 Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

Since the ICRC started visiting the Guantanamo internees in January 2002, it has facilitated the exchange of almost 40,000 Red Cross messages between those held captive and their families. For more than a year, Guantanamo internees have been allowed to telephone their families in special circumstances, such as when a death has occurred in their immediate family. Since 3 April 2008, they have also been authorized to make a one-hour call to their families twice a year. These phone calls are facilitated through ICRC offices around the world.

What does humanitarian law say with regard to the restoration of family links?

As a consequence of armed conflict, prisoners of war and civilian internees are separated from their loved ones, families are split up and people go missing. The Geneva Conventions and Protocol I contain a number of provisions for the protection of these victims. They apply in the event of international armed conflicts and empower the ICRC to carry out the following tasks:

- 1) Forwarding family messages and other information (Art. 25, Fourth Convention). This includes:
 - receiving and registering prisoner-of-war capture cards and civilian internment cards, the duplicates of these cards being sent to the captives families;
 - forwarding mail between people deprived of their freedom and their families;
 - forwarding family news (Red Cross messages) between separated members of a family when normal postal channels are unreliable;
 - receiving and transmitting death notices.

More generally, the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency acts as an intermediary between the parties to the conflict or, more accurately, between their national information bureaux for the transmission of information on people protected by humanitarian law.

- 2) Inquiring into the whereabouts of missing persons.

Under Article 26 of the Fourth Convention, the warring parties must facilitate enquiries made by members of families dispersed as a result of the conflict so as to help them restore contact with one another and try to bring them together again. The parties to the conflict must also encourage the work of organizations engaged in this task.

Article 32 of Additional Protocol I states that families have the right to be informed of the fate of missing relatives. Under Article 33 of the Protocol, the parties to the conflict must search for persons reported missing by an adverse party. Article 34 contains rules relating to the remains of the deceased.

- 3) States must facilitate in every possible way the reunification of families separated as a result of armed conflict and must provide support for humanitarian organizations engaged in this task (Art. 74, Protocol I).

History of the Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC

The agency from 1870 to 1914

The story of the Central Tracing Agency goes back to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. In the Swiss border town of Basel, a reception area was set up to which casualties from both sides were brought for treatment. A doctor caring for the soldiers found that most of them were in a state of distress because their families had no idea whether they had been killed or taken prisoner.

The ICRC's representatives soon realized that it was indispensable, in time of conflict, to set up some sort of information bureau on neutral territory. For indeed, the victims of a war are not only the sick, the wounded or the starving; there are also the prisoners in enemy hands, who are separated from their families and suffer psychologically.

It very quickly became clear that the morale of internees went up as soon as they could send letters to their families. The Information Bureau of the International Relief Agency for Wounded and Sick Soldiers in Basel therefore went one step further, transmitting lists of prisoners provided by the belligerents: for the first time in history, the relatives of captured soldiers heard that their sons, fathers, brothers were alive but in enemy hands. The 1864 Geneva Convention had made no provision for unwounded prisoners, and this historic step was the first in a long series of measures taken on their behalf. Seven years later, the victims of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, for whom a tracing office had been opened in Trieste, benefitted from similar assistance.

When war engulfed the Balkans in 1912, the ICRC set up an international agency in Belgrade, which immediately transmitted to the prisoners parcels and money sent by their families. Another innovation, of great importance today, was the introduction of capture cards sent to the Red Cross Societies of the five belligerent States with a view to obtaining standard information on the prisoners. The Serbian Red Cross proved the most adept: it sent the Agency information on 10,500 Turkish prisoners, including name, rank and serial number. It was also during the conflict in the Balkans that the ICRC was for the first time confronted with language and phonetic obstacles. It therefore hired the necessary personnel to decipher and translate information on Serbian, Greek, Turkish and Bulgarian prisoners.

Activities during the First World War

When war broke out in 1914, the ICRC set up the International Prisoners of War Agency provided for in The Hague Convention of 1907. The ICRC was not specifically required by this treaty to organize such an agency, but its unique experience in previous wars made it the ideal organization to do so. In addition, at its world conference in Washington in 1912, the International Red Cross had already officially conferred this task on the ICRC in the event of any future war.



International prisoners of War
agency, Rath Museum, Geneva

At the outbreak of hostilities, members of the ICRC personally took charge of setting up the Agency and handled all correspondence themselves - but they had no idea how widespread the war was going to become and soon had to hire additional staff. After the first major battles in Belgium and France, the ICRC started receiving an average of 30,000 letters a day. In September 1914, the Agency had two hundred employees; several months later the staff was increased six fold to cope with the flood of family messages and tracing requests pouring into its offices.

Between 1914 and 1918, millions of messages reached the Agency, which also received about 120,000 visitors who came in person to explain the reasons for their tracing requests and give additional information. By the end of the war, 7 million files had been opened by the Agency. It had also sent family parcels to prisoners of war and civilians in occupied territories, and organized the repatriation of victims.

On 12 October 1914 the Agency began operations in the Rath Museum in Geneva, setting up a system for processing information which allowed it to deal quickly and efficiently with the 5,000 requests it received daily using the lists of prisoners of war provided by the warring States as a basis, the Agency made out an index card for each prisoner. These cards were classified by nationality, in files which also contained requests for information.



Index cards of General De Gaulle

As soon as a piece of information was matched with a request, the Agency was able to send a reply to the family or the place of origin of the prisoner of war concerned. In order to obtain even more precise information about prisoners of war, the Agency set up two further files: a topographical file showing the grave sites of dead soldiers and a regimental file. In addition, at the start of the war the Agency handled the correspondence, gifts and money orders sent to prisoners of war. These activities were subsequently taken over by the postal services of the neutral countries, i.e. Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden. During the war the Agency made out 4,805,000 index cards and dispatched 1,854,914 parcels and consignments of collective relief.

Despite a number of administrative obstacles, a gigantic humanitarian endeavour had been accomplished. The recipe for this success: the perfect organization of the Agency, exemplary co-operation with the National Red Cross Societies and semi-official and aid organizations, and the contacts with POW camp commanders and the POWs themselves.

Although peace had been restored, the work of the Tracing Agency continued: countless civilians were displaced when the map of Europe was redrawn. Moreover, regional conflicts, such as the Greco-Turkish war and the civil war in Spain, continued to mobilize its services. In 2007, Archives recording the fate of about 2 million prisoners captured during World War One have entered UNESCO's Memory of the World.

Activities during the Spanish Civil War

Civil wars usually release a tide of hatred, and the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936, was no exception. The first clashes left few prisoners, as most of them were executed on the spot or forced into the enemy army.

The Spanish Civil War marked yet another stage in the work of the Agency: for the first time, ICRC delegates did tracing work in the field. This is now standard practice in similar conflicts, such as those in Lebanon and El Salvador. In Spain, neither of the rival governments would accept the ICRC's offer to set up information bureaux to exchange details on prisoners. The two sides did pass on lists, but only to bring about exchanges of prisoners.



Dr Junod distributing aid to prisoners in Salamanca.

During the conflict, the Agency obtained its information from indirect sources (prison directors, camp commanders, military and civilian administrations, the prisoners themselves). Unlike in previous conflicts, the delegates started tracing and mailing services for combatants

and civilians, and at no time was this questioned by either side despite the fact that the ICRC had no legal basis to do so because the two Geneva Conventions in force at the time covered only military victims of international armed conflicts. Gradually the organization became able to visit all of the persons detained in given places and to repeat these visits with a degree of regularity on both sides.

Though this practice remained dependent on the goodwill of the authorities, the ICRC was eventually able to visit 89,000 prisoners by 31 December 1938.

These visits to places of detention were continued on the Republican side up to the end of the war, whereas the military junta put a stop to them in August 1938. Delegates were never able to gain access to all places of detention on either side. While the ICRC also tried to organize exchanges of captives, the results obtained were not commensurate with the efforts required, with only a few hundred civilian and military prisoners being freed through the ICRC's good offices.

The Red Cross message form, which had been introduced during the First World War, was also widely accepted in Spain as a means of communication between prisoners and their families and separated relatives living in different zones. Many of the Spanish Civil War tracing requests were still being handled by the Agency's Spanish Service, which during the war opened some 30,000 files, when the political situation in Europe began to deteriorate once again.

Activities during the Second World War

One year before the first shots were fired in the Second World War, the ICRC had set up a "Commission for war work" to pave the way for the resumption of tracing activities on a large scale. The Commission met 25 times before the war broke out and by January 1939, 30 Agency "veterans" of the 1914-1918 war had already volunteered for duty, should the need arise.



ICRC delegate visiting a French POW in Germany

The Central Prisoners of War Agency officially opened in September 1939, after the invasion of Poland. The enormity of the task the Agency was to face can be measured by the fact that in the first weeks of the war 600,000 Polish troops alone were captured by German and Soviet forces.

At the beginning of the hostilities, the ICRC officially informed all the belligerent parties of the Agency's existence and reminded them that under the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention it was their duty to open National Information Bureaux. The NIB were in charge of liaising with the Agency on POW matters, exchanging lists of names, messages, and news on individuals.

Faced with an unprecedented situation, the ICRC gave the Central Prisoners of War Agency the most modern means of communication and office material available at the time: photocopiers, calculators for statistics, etc. As revolutionary then as computers are today, these tools helped the 4,000 employees of the Agency, both in Geneva and elsewhere in Switzerland, to match the terse facts sent in from the battlefields and the prisoner-of-war camps with the moving and desperate letters from mothers, wives and children. The Agency and its 26 services sometimes dealt with over 100,000 items of mail in a single day.

By 1940, the Agency had persuaded almost all the parties to the conflict to use Red Cross capture cards. The cards did not replace the official lists sent by the detaining powers, but since the prisoners themselves filled the cards in, they contained fewer errors than the lists written by people who did not know the prisoners' language. Moreover, the cards sometimes arrived in Geneva weeks before the official lists, making it possible to inform the families more quickly that a relative had been captured.



ICRC warehouses: Geneva

During the conflict, the work of the ICRC also stretched beyond Switzerland's borders. Its delegates made about 11,000 visits to camps for prisoners of war and civilian detainees. Unfortunately, the Agency received little information from the eastern front. Not only had the Soviet Union not signed the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war, but both Germany and the Soviet Union refused to sign a reciprocal agreement on the exchange of information on POWS. Since

the parties to the conflict refused to extend the benefits of the 1929 Convention to civilians in occupied territories, the detainees in Nazi concentration camps were also deprived of protection.

However, the Central Prisoners of War Agency did everything in its power to bring what comfort it could to the millions of other victims of the Second World War. It distributed 36 million Red Cross parcels; it exchanged 120 million letters between prisoners of war and their families and 23 million letters between civilians in the different countries at war. According to one estimate, 700,000 people in Europe alone were reunited with their families thanks to the Agency.

It was only after the surrender of Germany that the Allied Forces High Command in Europe became aware of the full extent of the tragedy: millions of human beings exterminated, deported, evacuated, forced to flee or separated from their families. This was when the International Tracing Service (ITS) was founded under the auspices of the United Nations.

The International Tracing Service (ITS)

The International Tracing Service (ITS) was set up in Arolsen, in Germany. The ITS was first run by the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), then by the International Refugees Organization, before being finally handed over, in 1955, to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The purely humanitarian mandate under which the ITS works to help the former victims of the Nazi regime is derived from the 1955 Bonn Agreements, which set up the International Commission for the International Tracing Service, which today has 11 member States (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom, United States).

The ITS's archives concern the Germans and non-Germans who were held in Nazi concentration and labour camps as well as non-Germans who had to flee their homes because of the Second World War. The ITS archive now contains over 50 million reference files relating to 17.5 million people. The documents take up 25,000 metres of shelf space. There are almost 225,000 metres of microfilm and more than 100,000 micro files. Impressive as these statistics are, the documentary materials are far from complete and many requests for information cannot be met.



A tracing request addressed to the Ukrainian Red Cross concerning a woman deported during the Second World War.

In 2005, the ITS received 150,828 requests for documentation from former victims or their families, and issued 226,535 replies. Over the past two years, the ITS has issued over 950,000 certificates to enable people subjected to forced labour under the Nazis to obtain compensation. The general public has been granted access for research purposes since 28th November 2007.

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