

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

Smithsonian National Postal Museum
September 27, 2008

Jens-Martin Mehler, *Detention Coordinator*
International Committee of the Red Cross, Washington



ICRC

War and family links: General Overview

Restoring family links between victims of armed conflict is one of the most longstanding activities of the ICRC and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

▶ The situation

Families split up, children alone with no one to look after them, parents who are imprisoned or dead or whose fate is unknown.

▶ The needs

- To restore and maintain contact between family members.
- To reunite families
- To ascertain the whereabouts of detainees and find out what has happened to missing persons.



War and family links: General Overview

▶ The methods

- Exchange of family news
 - Red Cross mobile phone
 - Radio Broadcast
 - Newspaper, notice boards
 - Family links website
 - Red Cross Messages
- Find out what happened to people reported missing
 - identification process; participation in commission
- Organize the reunification of families accross front lines and national borders.
- Individual research
 - tracing request

Macedonia



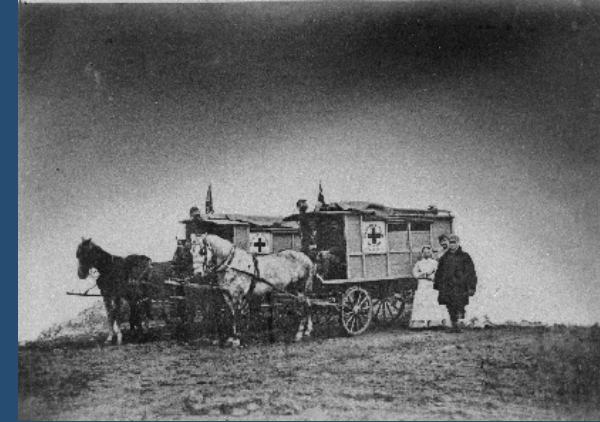
Afghanistan



Indonesia



The Agency between 1870 and 1914



Ambulance: Turkish War 1876

- Franco-Prussian War 1870-71

- Creation of the **Basle Agency**

- ▶ Creation of the **first bureau of correspondence and information** within the Basle Agency.
 - ▶ Agency facilitates the exchange of communication and transmission of relief to sick and wounded prisoners of war.

- Russian-Turkish War 1877

- Creation of the **Trieste Agency**

- Balkans War 1912 -13

- The ICRC organizes the **Belgrade Agency**

- ▶ Transmission of money benefit also to some civilians
 - ▶ Transmission of letters, money, personal belongings and food items benefit also to valid POWs
 - ▶ Use of capture cards by RC societies.





The Agency during World War I

- In 1914, the ICRC organizes the **International Prisoners of War Agency (IPWA)** based in Geneva.
- ▶ The Agency organized sending of family mail to POWs but also to civilians in occupied territories, and organized repatriations.
- ▶ After the first major battles in Belgium and France, the ICRC started receiving an average of 30,000 letters a day.
- ▶ Between 1914 and 1918, millions of messages reached the Agency, which also received about 120,000 visitors.
- ▶ By the end of the war, 7 million files had been opened by the Agency.
- ▶ In 2007, Archives recording the fate of about 2 million prisoners captured during World War I have entered UNESCO's Memory of the World.



The Agency during the Spanish civil war (1936)

- ▶ Opening of Spanish Special Service in Geneva.
- ▶ ICRC deploys research activities on the ground
- ▶ RCM widely accepted between prisoners and their families and between civilians
- ▶ some 30'000 tracing files opened

Dr Junod distributing aid to prisoners in Salamanca.





The Agency during World War II

French POW in Germany

- **The Central Prisoners of War Agency (CPWA) is opened in september 1939**
 - ▶ up to 100 000 communications treated per day.
 - ▶ 36 millions parcels distributed.
 - ▶ 120 millions letters exchanged between POW and their families and 23 millions between civilians in countries at war.
 - ▶ 4000 employees





International Tracing Service

- ▶ Mandate to reunite, file, keep and exploit documents containing individual data concerning civilians victims of persecution by the 3rd Reich
- ▶ 11 countries have responsibility over ITS (Germany, Belgium, France, USA, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxemburg, NL, UK and Poland).
- ▶ In 1955, Bonn agreement. Member States give the direction and administration of the ITS to the ICRC.
- ▶ The ITS archive contains over 50 million reference files relating to 17.5 million people.
- ▶ In 2005, 226'535 replies were given by the ITS, mainly to requests from European countries. The number of replies since its creation now tops 11 million.
- ▶ Files of missing children during WWII. Out of 200,000 cases, only 20% of the children have been found and reunited with their family.
- ▶ The general public has been granted access for research purposes since 28th November 2007.



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

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.

2) Inquiring into the whereabouts of missing persons (Art. 33, Protocol I; and Art. 26, Fourth Convention).

3) Reuniting dispersed families (See Art. 74, Protocol I; and Art. 26, Fourth Convention).



Activities of the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency after the Rwandan crisis of 1994

- ▶ An estimated two million rwandans fled to neighbouring countries.
- ▶ Since 1994, over 67,000 family reunifications have been organized.
- ▶ 1.4 million Red Cross Messages have been exchanges.
- ▶ ICRC delegates have visited 120,000 detainees in Rwanda prisons.



Activities of the ICRC in Afghanistan

- ▶ Between 2001 and 2003, over 22, 000 Red Cross messages were exchanged between civilians enabling them to restore and maintain contact with relatives.
- ▶ Over 35,000 messages were exchanged between people deprived of their freedom and their families.
- ▶ In Januray 2008, the ICRC set up a video-conferencing programme which allowed detainees in US detention facility in Bagram to see an speak to their families.
- ▶ In September 2008, the ICRC and the US military authorities have announced the start of the first face to face visits between individuals currently held in Bagram and their respective relatives.





HELP THE ICRC DONATIONS

English Français Español
Search OK
Contacts | Advanced Search

QUICK LINKS

- Français, Español, Pages in عربي and Português
- Discover the ICRC
A brief overview of the organization's major activities
- FAQ
Frequently asked questions about ICRC operations and issues
- The Geneva Conventions
The basis of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)
- IHL Databases
Treaties and National implementation
- Jobs at ICRC
Employment opportunities and information
- ICRC Catalogue

International Committee of the Red Cross

Overview of ICRC operations

www.icrc.org

of non-state actors and questions on the relevance of international humanitarian law and the legitimacy of humanitarian action.

Guantanamo Bay: one year on

In the 12 months since they began arriving there, the ICRC has been regularly visiting internees held by the United States at its Guantanamo Bay base. Although the ICRC visits prisoners and detainees worldwide, the Guantanamo operation has attracted special interest. ICRC delegate Daniel Cavoli was in charge of the visiting team: he reflects on his work in a BBC radio broadcast.

Biotechnology, weapons and humanity

The ICRC is particularly alarmed by the potential hostile uses of biotechnology and has launched an appeal calling on States, the scientific community, the biotechnology industry and civil society

News

- "Children in war" kicks off in... 22-1-2003
- Future Meeting of Technical Committee on persons unaccounted for since the Gulf War
Press Release 22-1-2003
- Ethiopia: Food distributions continue
ICRC News 22-1-2003
- Sudan: ICRC reunites children with families
ICRC News 21-1-2003
- Côte d'Ivoire: Red Cross meets in Korhogo
ICRC News 21-1-2003

More news

Operational Updates



Q&A



ICRC