

## RED CROSS SERVICE

### Special activities

*The general theme for this issue of International Review, published shortly before 8 May, the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry Dunant, is "Red Cross Service". Three examples which are somewhat out of the general run of activities organized by National Red Cross Societies illustrate how some Societies endeavour to provide assistance and service.*

#### Thailand

##### *The Red Cross and antivenin production*

Thailand, being a tropical country, abounds with a variety of snakes, some species of which are venomous (Cobra, King Cobra, Banded Krait, some species of Vipers and Sea Snakes), and each year a large number of casualties are caused by their bites.

The Thai Red Cross Society therefore founded in 1923 an institute and a snake farm for the production of antivenin vaccines and sera.

The Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute in Bangkok constitutes the Science Division of the Thai Red Cross Society and its snake farm is an attraction for tourists from all parts of the world.

In 1977, it contained 2,614 snakes, with six poisonous species. These are brought in alive by snakecatchers, most of whom are farmers, who are paid for their catch. Snakes in captivity do not take food by themselves and are liable to die of hunger, so they have to be force-fed by hand.

It is also by hand that the venom is extracted. A small receptacle is inserted in the snake's mouth; the venom glands behind each eye are gently squeezed and the venom flows into the receptacle.

This liquid is injected in horses in carefully controlled doses. After prolonged treatment, the serum from the blood of the immunized horses is effective in neutralizing the action of venom. In 1977, the Thai Red Cross Society had 275 horses for the production of serum.

The antivenin sera are freeze-dried (lyophilized) in the Society's laboratories and stored in vials. In 1977, more than 37,000 vials of various types of freeze-dried antivenin were produced by the Thai Red Cross Society.

The greatest part of the production is sold at a minimal price to the Ministry of Public Health, which distributes it throughout the country. In this way, hospitals and dispensaries have fresh serum for the treatment of snake bites. Only the surplus is exported to countries which have the same species of venomous snakes as those in Thailand. In 1977, over 2,000 vials were exported to Malaysia, the United States and to some countries in Europe where snakes are kept and where accidents are likely to occur.

A large staff is required for all these operations, ranging from the upkeep of the snake farm to the production of sera: in 1977, the Thai Red Cross Society had 92 people on its staff, including several veterinary surgeons and assistants, and excluding administrative personnel. Annual expenditure was estimated to amount to approximately 160,000 US dollars.<sup>1</sup>

## Spain

### *Soldiers act as voluntary Red Cross first aiders*

In 1971 the Spanish Government agreed to a proposal of the National Red Cross Society that every year a contingent of voluntary Red Cross first aiders should be allowed to do their compulsory military service while working for the Red Cross.

This decision met a long-standing need. The work of the Spanish Red Cross for the prevention of accidents among the population, and its action in emergency and disaster situations had grown to such an extent that its operational potential, especially where staff and material were concerned, was insufficient. It was only thanks to a corps of enthu-

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<sup>1</sup> Documentation kindly sent by the Thai Red Cross Society.

siastic voluntary workers that the Spanish Red Cross could perform those services to the community, but for various reasons, in particular because the volunteers were busy at their normal jobs on weekdays, they could only be available on days when they were not at work.

The Spanish Red Cross plan to be ready to perform its tasks at all times and in as many areas as possible, on the roads and beaches and in the mountains, determined its decision to present to the government a study on the extension of its work for accident prevention and assistance. One of the conclusions reached was that the plan could not be put into practice unless the Society could count upon obtaining the services of a certain number of soldiers every year.

An agreement was reached in 1971 when an ordinance was issued by the Ministry of the Armed Forces, allowing Red Cross volunteers between the ages of 17 and 20 years, called up for military service, to apply for assignment to the Red Cross services, provided they had already been members of the Red Cross for not less than six months and had obtained their first aid certificate.

At present there are throughout the country about 4,500 conscripts doing their military service in the Red Cross. After spending two months in the recruit camps, where they receive the general military training which is compulsory for all Spanish soldiers, those volunteers who are accepted are detached to the Red Cross brigades for a period of eighteen months.

Considerable advantages are gained by this system. On the main roads, 280 permanent first aid posts have now been established, containing running water, electricity, telephone, radio communication and ambulances. In addition there are 43 similar fixed posts and 68 mobile squads in the mountain regions.

In all, the Spanish Red Cross has 750 ambulances and 198 auxiliary vehicles. Its first aid brigades number over 15,000 voluntary workers, including the soldiers made available by the government.<sup>1</sup>

## **Viet Nam**

### *The Red Cross and medicinal plants*

It is now some years since the Viet Nam Government expressed the hope that traditional medical practice could be utilized in the service of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper kindly sent by the Spanish Red Cross.

the population, hand-in-hand with modern scientific medical methods. The Ministry of Health therefore issued directives with the aim of encouraging the study of traditional practice and the use of pharmaceutical resources available in indigenous medicinal plants. It also appointed experts to undertake this study and transmit the knowledge thus obtained.

The Red Cross of Viet Nam very soon sensed the significance of those decisions, with regard to the scientific knowledge acquired and to its social applications, and has taken an active part in their development. It has added the cultivation of medicinal plants to its list of activities and encourages its members to grow some of these plants. Every year, the Society makes a survey of what has been done and gives prizes to Red Cross units and members who have obtained the best results.

National Society members are instructed by specialists how to grow and gather the plants and are taught the best ways of administering them to patients suffering from various common ailments. Once they have learnt and put into practice these methods, the Red Cross members become instructors in their turn and show people how to grow and apply the plants to their own use.

Experience has shown that some common ailments (such as influenza, various forms of food poisoning, coughs, diarrhoea, dysentery, rheumatism, and certain women's illnesses) can be cured by these methods and that the use of medicinal plants suits the mentality and general way of life of the rural inhabitants in Viet Nam.

Some of the plants which can be employed for their therapeutic properties are widespread and well known, either because they are fruit trees (like the guava or lemon), or because they are widely employed as spices, such as mint, ginger, citronella, euphorbia, etc. They are generally easy to grow on relatively small plots of land and do not need any special care or fertilizers. They can be planted in a herb garden or on strips of land alongside hedges or around ponds.

Some sections of the Red Cross of Viet Nam have communal gardens, where all their members join in growing medicinal herbs. Some may yield as much as several tons of dried pharmaceutical products every year. In certain areas where school-teachers are members of the Red Cross, they and their pupils grow such plants in the school garden. In recent years the number of Red Cross members who grow a few selected herbs in their own gardens has substantially increased.

Seedlings may be obtained from the communal medical centre, or else on the local market, or by exchanging them with a neighbour. Crops, after drying, are delivered to the provincial pharmaceutical service. Some plants yield substances which are converted into pills or are made

available in powdered form, while other herbs are merely cut up for infusions.

These activities have given most encouraging results. For instance, in the province of Vinh Phú alone, Red Cross members in 1972 grew twenty-one species of medicinal plants on a total surface of three hectares, while in 1975 this area was five times as much. Similar results have been observed in each of Viet Nam's provinces.

The National Red Cross Society is very keen on increasing still more the production of medicinal plants and herbs, which can but improve the general state of health of the country's inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Article based on documentation provided by the Red Cross Society of Viet Nam.