

In the Red Cross and Red Crescent World

A Vietnamese reader has just sent the Review an article entitled "A look at the Red Cross of Viet Nam". He tells us of the challenges Viet Nam is currently facing, especially in view of its new open policy towards the other countries in South-East Asia. We are publishing below some extracts dealing directly with the work of the Red Cross of Viet Nam, while preserving the author's very individual style.

A look at the Red Cross of Viet Nam

I should like to talk about the efficiency which consolidates, strengthens and embellishes the work of the Red Cross of Viet Nam in the most trying of times, such as the present. Whether it is a question of protecting human lives and alleviating suffering, combating hunger and disease, or promoting tolerance and solidarity, the same attitude always prevails. This attitude is based not only on the moral grounds for and the urgency of a humanitarian operation, but also — in the interests of all — on whether it is appropriate and necessary.

Everyone knows that each year a dozen typhoons from the Pacific Ocean wreak havoc on almost all Viet Nam's seaboard provinces, from the north to the south. Moreover, the Mekong Delta, which is the country's granary, is repeatedly devastated by flooding. The immense losses for the population caused by such disasters, which recur year after year, are estimated at tens of millions of dollars and are difficult to recoup.

Nevertheless, the victims do not give up in despair. As soon as the worst is over, the farmers go back to their fields and start again from scratch. Initially this seems an impossible task, for they are left with nothing: no food, no homes, no clothes or farming tools. Never mind, they get by with whatever they can find on the spot: they fish, gather edible plants and catch anything that can be eaten in order to survive. With the aid of their fellow countrymen living in safer areas, they make up what has been lost and through sheer hard work transform the barren soil into

a rich storehouse. The plains, shimmering with golden rice as far as the eye can see, are dotted with plantations and all kinds of orchards, which are the wealth of the nation. Such is the landscape. But what is behind this appearance of confidence, conscience and optimism? In fact, it is all due to the efficiency of mutual aid. The population is united; joys and sorrows are shared and dangers and perils are faced together. As a result, although utterly destitute, people manage to live for months on end without anyone going hungry. They help each other and eat whatever comes to hand. What is particularly praiseworthy in these efforts is that as well as demonstrating remarkable courage these people have always acted in the most rational way, showing the greatest understanding among themselves and vis-à-vis the world community.

In 1995 there was widespread flooding along the Mekong River and an extremely violent typhoon caused devastation that will take years to repair. Organizations like the Red Cross did not launch appeals for aid to the world at large because they believe it is more decent and reasonable to start by meeting their own needs, whatever the circumstances. Nevertheless, external voluntary aid is always appreciated; it is no surprise that several friendly nations provided assistance which in a way constitutes the cement that holds together the house of humanity. Relief supplies of all kinds will be pouring in, but it is most unlikely that the adverse effects of aid provided for the victims of natural disasters will occur this time. There is no sign of long-term dependency, or of disruption to the regional economy with the arrival of large amounts of food and medicines; and no social upheaval has been invented by any undesirable intruder. The hapless victims do nothing that might harm the community; indeed, their attitude is worthy of the highest praise.

So what can explain this fortunate outcome, rather than the disturbances that were feared? The real reason lies in the spirit of discipline and solidarity that is deeply rooted in the history of this people, whose glorious episodes and laurel wreaths have always been etched in blood and sweat. The same spirit imbues the Red Cross. Wherever there are people in need of help, there too is the Red Cross. It is present in schools and factories, on farms, in railway stations, in villages - in short, at the heart of society. In this country, the tenets of the Red Cross are indistinguishable from the spirit of solidarity and human kindness which shines out like a jade gemstone — a *leitmotiv* — set in the altar of Vietnamese traditions. First and foremost, the Red Cross is very much involved in education. This is the way to inculcate moral qualities such as humanitarianism, a sense of responsibility, active involvement in society, a capacity for organization and for doing one's duty. Involving the Red

Cross in teaching creates a climate which makes it easier for schools to organize their educational activities and thereby expect to achieve good results among young people.

After describing various needs in the health sector, the author concludes:

Clearly, lack of the necessary resources and funds [...] has placed severe limitations on the social work done by the Red Cross of Viet Nam to help people in distress. Nevertheless, this humanitarian institution is increasingly active, alongside governmental and non-governmental organizations, among the most underprivileged people in the country.

As well as inculcating proper principles and providing health education, schools must stress the benefits of gymnastics and sport. Sporting activities raise the general level of health and well-being and increase efficiency at work. Sport transforms men and women by endowing them with strength, endurance, vivacity and courage. Every school, every group of pupils living in a given region must create its own climate of well-being and *joie de vivre*. Each morning at sunrise, young and old alike must assemble to do gymnastics or practise various sports such as badminton or Olympic disciplines. All these activities provide a background against which young people can learn to live healthy lives and promote among the population the desire to establish a new culture.

Promoting and disseminating knowledge relating to health protection and physical culture are thus vital aspects of Red Cross teaching activities. Each school can teach these precepts during school hours and put into practice what has been taught afterwards. It is constructive and humanitarian work which directly inculcates moral values in schoolchildren.

At the moment both schoolchildren and students are quite actively involved in Red Cross programmes: they help with the medical treatment provided every weekend and during the holidays for poor people in crowded city areas and in remote villages. It goes without saying that, without being asked, young people have become the most dedicated and active "shock troopers" of the Red Cross. Their participation in other campaigns and movements with set objectives has highly significant effects on the population's everyday life.

And this is the crucial factor that has transformed the Red Cross of Viet Nam from a simple movement into an organization which quite naturally forms part of an ongoing tradition.

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