

ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

Training volunteer workers for international missions of the French Red Cross

To illustrate the role played by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in humanitarian aid activities, the Review is happy to offer its readers an article on the training of volunteer workers for international missions carried out by the French Red Cross. The text is part of a document entitled "Volontaire des missions internationales" (the volunteer in international missions) prepared by Miss Mireille Desrez, French Red Cross director of technical personnel and missions in the national interest, and Mrs. Hélène Delpon de Vaux of the same department. The article deals with the recruitment, training, preparation and management of French Red Cross volunteers who take part in international missions.

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THREE TYPES OF SEMINARS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED TO IMPROVE THE STATE OF READINESS OF VOLUNTEERS:

Compulsory basic seminar

By decision of the Administrative Board of the French Red Cross, this preparatory seminar must be attended by *all volunteers*. It is a five- to six-day residential course during which the participants live together, get to know and accept one another, share knowledge and prepare to function as a team.

The aim of the basic seminar is to prepare voluntary or permanent Red Cross staff gradually to assume functions in the field, at all levels and degrees of responsibility.

Its objectives are to enable participants to:

- learn how to adapt knowledge and professional techniques to new situations (case studies, practical exercises, epidemiological surveys, etc.);
- learn emergency techniques (application in simulated disaster situations);
- learn about Red Cross missions and the institution's components at the national and international levels;
- become familiar with Red Cross policy and the specific nature of the institution: international humanitarian law, fundamental principles, doctrine (lectures, case studies, sharing of experience);
- explore personal motivations for commitment to the Red Cross (professional requirements, concrete implications, etc.);
- study the cultural background against which missions take place in order to foster respect for different peoples, traditions and customs (introduction to anthropology, ethnology and traditional medicine and practices).

Seminars on special subjects

These seminars are a sequel to the basic training received by all those wishing to assume a function within the Red Cross, and are designed to enable participants to study a particular aspect of a given area in greater detail. They constitute the first step in acquiring a specialization or a particular technique within the Red Cross, such as paediatrics, emergency and disaster relief, public health and primary health care, topography, international radio links, etc. They provide an opportunity for participants to adapt their knowledge and skills to specific needs in the field.

The objectives of these seminars are to enable participants to:

- become efficient technicians in their chosen fields of activity;
- consider the moral and human implications of the techniques used;
- adapt various techniques and specific activities to Red Cross aims (overall view of the action taken and awareness of its meaning);
- organize emergency drills and manœuvres in simulated conflict or disaster situations in order to prepare individuals and teams for action.

These seminars prove highly revealing of human behaviour in the face of emergencies and decision-making. They separate undesirable or immature candidates from potential leaders.

Specific seminars

These seminars are designed to prepare Red Cross personnel to function as chiefs of mission or as logistics, administrative or technical delegates and co-ordinators.

Senior Red Cross officials must be capable, in both technical and humanitarian terms, of facing and efficiently handling increasingly complex situations and environments.

The objectives of the specific seminars are to:

- learn operational methods appropriate for different types of mission;
- study various subjects and techniques useful to managers and leaders in specific contexts (administration, communications, organizational skills, medical techniques, ethics, human relations);
- pinpoint and define what is involved in the exercise of a managerial or leadership role in Red Cross missions.

Selection of future leaders

After they have participated in several field missions, certain volunteers are proposed as candidates for leadership posts within the ICRC, the League and the French Red Cross. Their qualifications generally correspond to the criteria required for managerial posts, and include knowledge of languages, professional training and experience, previous mission work and participation in social and organizational activities within the Red Cross.

In addition to their complementary professional training, they must be capable of establishing working relationships with the delegates of national, international, public and private agencies. They must also be capable of analytical and deductive reasoning, rapid assessment and implementation, organization, and objectivity towards situations and people; they must have a taste for adventure and be diplomatic and adaptable; they must show leadership, respect for and confidence in others and to be able to delegate authority. They must likewise be levelheaded, receptive, good listeners, modest, self-critical and conscientious, and must fully comprehend their roles, duties and rights.

Training schedule

Each September, the schedule for the next series of training courses is established. It is automatically sent, together with a pre-registration form, to all volunteers.

This method presents two advantages: it enables the volunteers to adapt their work schedules to the courses they wish to attend and it enables the training service to send participants registration forms and draft programmes five to six weeks before the beginning of the course.

Over the years:

- Programme content is improved on the basis of assessments made by participants and instructors.
- New subjects are added, such as broadcasting, orienteering and topography. These are chosen on the basis of mission reports and at the request of many volunteers returning from fieldwork.
- The basic seminar is periodically modified to keep pace with changes in the type of mission undertaken and to meet new needs that arise in the field.

The instructors, leaders and organizers are all unpaid volunteers passing on knowledge and experience they have gained on mission to new volunteers being prepared for departure.

Self-training methods have been adopted in all the seminars of the French Red Cross.—The seminars are all multidisciplinary and include all categories of professionals who will meet and interact as members of field teams; namely, surgeons, doctors, nurses, field technicians, radio operators, experts in logistics, administrators. Each trainee receives the same basic instruction and participates in the same practical exercises, but the length of their course varies according to their profession.

Of course many trainees, over 300 a year, participate in these seminars, practical exercises and workshops on a voluntary basis, paying their own travel and living expenses. The investment in time, energy and money is a deliberate choice on their part, which makes some of them feel that they have a sort of “right to departure”. During the practical exercises, interaction and exchanges, some become aware of their own limitations and the distance between their dreams and reality. Many more are strengthened in their resolve to leave on mission. It is not always possible to fulfil their wishes rapidly. Impending missions may not correspond to their qualifications and suitable missions may not come up for several months. This may lead to resentment and disappointment. Volunteers belonging to several humanitarian associations often leave on mission with another one. This is all to the good, since volunteers who have been steeped for several days in Red Cross principles and international humanitarian law and its application are eminently prepared to pass that knowledge on to others. This is clearly demonstrated by the lasting bonds forged with such volunteers.

Invaluable assistance in training activities is provided by the ICRC, the League and the Henry Dunant Institute, while medical, surgical, administrative and logistics specialists from the Army and public and private bodies help enhance the educational quality of the courses.

Specialized teams

In addition to dealing with disasters in France itself, the French Red Cross has always taken a prominent part in providing relief in the event of catastrophes or conflicts elsewhere in the world, particularly during two critical periods: the Biafra war from 1967 to 1970, and the events in Kampuchea in 1979.

As a result, it was obliged to go beyond its small-scale, *ad hoc* approach to relief operations and create a highly diversified and competent corps of professional volunteers, well versed in the Geneva Conventions, the fundamental principles and the rule of discretion.

The French Red Cross is thus in a position to meet requests from the ICRC, the French Government (Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Co-operation and Health, and Ministry of Defence for the Armed Forces Medical Services), as well as organizing its own missions.

Over the past few years, in response to specific demands, the French Red Cross has had to set up special extreme emergency teams to increase its efficiency still further. Highly qualified and competent volunteers with experience in emergency missions are selected and trained for team work in a given context.

Three types of operational teams have thus been established. They may operate at the request of the League, the ICRC, other National Societies (bilateral aid) or the Government. The three types of team are:

- **An emergency medical and surgical or health-care team**, which is ready to travel with its own surgical or medical unit;
- **A disaster assessment team**, which prepares and implements relief programmes; and
- **A paediatrics team**. This team may be called upon to perform humanitarian work under the Military Rapid Intervention Units, which depend on the central authority of the Armed Forces Medical Services.

The teams share the following characteristics:

- They must be ready to go within six hours of the alert;
- They have both individual medical kits and collective equipment (medical chests), as well as surgical units;

- They are called upon to intervene rapidly, that is, within a maximum limit of 12 hours, and have enough equipment to act independently for two days to treat approximately 100 wounded, or to work for 15 days with medical cases;
- They comprise, according to their type, different categories of health personnel (surgeons, doctors and specialized health-care workers), logisticians, liaison or information delegates and the appropriate technicians;
- They may have a nucleus of two to three volunteers and be enlarged as needed;
- They may be called upon in the first hours of the mission to assess the situation and draw up a programme;
- They are capable of coping with priority cases and setting up an infrastructure then handing over to other teams or national services or, where necessary, expanding their activities to meet real needs.
