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Red Cross responsibilities in the field  
of Nursing

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Report submitted by the International Committee of the Red Cross



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## RED CROSS RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE FIELD OF NURSING

### Introduction

The ICRC has repeatedly called the National Societies' attention to their responsibilities in nursing matters and the rôle they should assume in recruitment and training of nursing personnel. They were reminded, at the last two International Conferences of the Red Cross, that the movement was originally founded a century ago to strengthen the Army Medical Services by providing them in time of conflict with personnel trained during peace. The ICRC emphasized that even if this particular aim had now become less of a priority in some countries, in others it remains just as valid and important.

Several of the National Societies, however, still apparently feel some hesitation, because they are not sure of the precise nature and limits of the responsibility they can and should assume in nursing matters. The ICRC is therefore once more reverting to the different elements of the whole problem in the present document.

### Evolution of the rôle of the Red Cross

The National Societies, originally established for the relief of military war victims, as auxiliaries of the Army Medical Service, were almost compelled to entrust medical duties to their nursing personnel already in peacetime, not only for the sake of experience but also to permit the nursing services to develop, or even simply continue in existence. This led the Societies from the very early days to step outside the narrow limits of their conventional duties by degrees and extend their help to civilians, victims of a host of different circumstances. The scope of these civilian activities expanded in proportion to the length of the peaceful interludes enjoyed by the various countries and prevented the Red Cross from gradual decline through inaction.

Since the end of the last century, the personnel, equipment and general efficiency of the Army Medical Service have steadily improved in many countries. This is especially so among the Great Powers and can be attributed to medical and technical progress. The National Societies concerned have naturally come to feel that they are less indispensable to the armed forces and freer to devote more of their attention to activities which can help civilians. The latter's constant needs, which increased with the swelling of the population while those of the army became less acute and more infrequent, have naturally inclined these societies to transform themselves essentially into auxiliaries of the civilian authorities in peacetime, thus losing sight of the original purpose of the Red Cross movement.

### Responsibilities of Young National Societies

The newly established National Societies have generally modelled themselves on their predecessors and taken their programmes as a basis for activities. In some cases they have more or less inherited a programme, when they have succeeded the local Branch of the National Society of the former sovereign State, on their country's accession to independence. These inherited activities did not of course include assistance to the Army Medical Service, which was a matter for Headquarters, but consisted solely in various social services for the benefit of the local population. Consequently, these young Societies usually remain outside the difficult problems which confront the State in organising and expanding the Medical Services of the new armies, and above all in the recruitment and training of qualified medical personnel.

This may seem an unfortunate situation. While there is no lack of competent relief agencies for the population of any country, the National Red Cross Society is the one and only organisation authorised to lend its good offices to the Army Medical Service and assist it in training nursing personnel and preparing medical equipment. Probably most of these young societies do help to train nursing personnel (first-aiders, nurses, etc.) but merely with a view to immediate civilian needs. Only a slightly increased effort would be necessary for such personnel to receive additional training, enabling it, under the terms of special agreements, to provide the armed forces with valuable assistance at the right moment.

### The Red Cross and emergency situations

One of the National Society's main duties is to assist the public authorities in the event of serious and exceptional circumstances with which the latter cannot deal unaided.

#### I. In peacetime

Emergency situations may at any time crop up unexpectedly: natural disasters, widespread epidemics, sudden influx of refugees etc. New needs for professional and auxiliary nursing personnel suddenly manifest themselves on these occasions and it is the National Society which, first and foremost, will be required to take all appropriate steps to cover them. It should therefore arrange from its earliest days, in conjunction with the public health authorities, to train as many people as possible. The International Red Cross organisations, especially the League, can provide all the necessary support and advice required for this very important duty.

## II. Conflicts

The National Society is the only organisation among the relief agencies with the specific duty of meeting emergency situations due to war. This was the very reason for which it was established.

The whole of the Red Cross is obviously the first to wish that war could at last be abolished. But it must be ready, in any eventuality, to assist possible victims of war if it is to fulfil a mission which in itself is already of a pacific nature. For that matter, war may quite well occur in neighbouring countries and not the Society's own State. As a neutral, impartial body it should be able to help sister Societies in war-stricken countries by supplying additional nursing personnel and equipment. This constitutes fundamentally pacific action.

The various types of conflicts which imply the intervention of the National Red Cross, owing to the large number of wounded involved, can be classified in order of size, which may also sometimes be the order of probability.

### A. Conflicts between neighbouring countries

We will first consider the type of conflict already mentioned above, which is in process on the other side of the frontier. Whether a civil war or a conflict between States, this can involve the exodus of populations and the mass arrival of military or civilian wounded. The main task of the National Society, in such an event, will lie in the rapid organisation of medical posts along the frontier line and in adjacent zones, to receive, treat, sort and evacuate victims to hospitals in the rear, in liaison with the civil and military authorities.

### B. Internal conflicts

Next come the internal conflicts which may divide the country itself.

We are living in an epoch where many former political, racial and social structures are being uprooted and there are a great many new States, which have not yet found their balance. Emotions run high and are easily aroused. It is hence the National Societies' duty to take immediate steps, especially as regards nursing personnel, for meeting any emergency situation and especially one of internal conflict. By reason of their neutrality and independence, and their strictly humanitarian character, they will probably be the only organisation which can remain outside such fratricidal struggles and assist all victims without distinction, while still being free from suspicion. If they have known how to win the confidence of every class of the

population from the beginning and convince the authorities of their impartiality, they will certainly be in a position to save many human lives, as recent examples have shown.

It is naturally impossible to suggest any definite plans of action in advance. These will no doubt have to be improvised, according to the needs of the moment.

### C. Limited warfare

We now have to consider the event of limited armed conflict between two or several States, including the country of the Society in question, where so-called conventional weapons are used.

That is doubtless one of the most serious situations a national Society can have to meet. It demands sustained effort, especially as regards nursing personnel. As the statutory auxiliary of the Army Medical Service, the Society would fail to carry out its mission, if it were not equipped to share the additional burdens weighing on the army services.

In time of war the contribution of the Red Cross is important. While the army services may have been considerably improved and strengthened, medical and technical progress call for ever larger numbers of medical and auxiliary workers of all categories. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of such personnel almost everywhere and especially in the developing countries, where it already raises serious problems in time of peace. In a few rare, privileged areas, there are a doctor and 2 nurses for every 400 inhabitants, while others only possess a doctor for 140,000 and a nurse for 100,000 inhabitants. The same differences are to be found in the armies. The strength of the Army Medical Service among some of the large powers represents approximately 10 % of the total strength of the armed forces. In other countries, which form a majority, this proportion may decrease to only 2 %. The armies of these latter are in a situation somewhat similar to that of Europe a hundred years ago, and if they were to be involved on a large scale, the Solferino disaster might well repeat itself.

It is therefore of primary importance for the National Red Cross Societies, at least in these countries, to revive the spirit which inspired Red Cross pioneers, the first Relief Committees for the wounded members of the armed forces; that they should devote all the strength and means they can afford to the support of their Army Medical Service, to assure the survival of the members of the fighting forces. They alone can do this. Several methods are open to them.

1. The Society can already establish training schools for nurses (men and women) and nurses' aids' in peacetime, providing complete professional education, plus theoretical courses on the most up

to date methods of first aid, and practical exercises to develop students' initiative and ingenuity in improvising makeshift equipment.

Nursing personnel so trained will be fitted to act in the most commonplace emergency situations. But if it is to second the army medical services effectively in time of war and be enrolled therein, its members must be given further education. In particular they must familiarise themselves with army discipline and rules, nursing methods employed in the army medical establishments, and the principles and rules of the laws of war, especially the Geneva Conventions.

Personnel which has been trained in this way will be placed at the disposal of the Army Medical Service from the outbreak of hostilities, in proportion to needs and in line with agreements passed between the Army and the National Society.

2. In many countries, the National Society lacks means or teachers to establish or run a nursing school of its own. Usually only the State, sometimes large private organisations, can do this. On the other hand, the Society is qualified to take responsibility for some of the courses given in these schools - or to assure that they are provided - in particular those on first-aid, Red Cross principles, and the Geneva Conventions.

3. So far as possible, the National Society will also undertake the training of auxiliary volunteers, who form valuable and indispensable nursing aids in time of conflict. This mainly consists in theoretical courses and practical nursing under the supervision of a qualified nurse, apart from home nursing, which is so useful in peacetime; male volunteers will primarily be given courses in stretcher-bearing.

4. It should further be noted that the National Societies can play an important rôle in giving stretcher-bearing courses to some of the military detachments, whose men could act as nurses if large numbers of wounded so require. They can further offer to help the army in the first aid courses which are increasingly often given to the members of the armed forces.

#### D. Total warfare

Up to now we have examined the nursing responsibilities of the Red Cross in the event of natural disaster, internal conflict, conflicts in other countries and local conflicts conducted with conventional weapons. The ultimate possibility must now be faced, the situation of extreme emergency, the most tragic supposition, war where modern weapons of mass destruction would be employed and which, for that very reason, would probably assume a general character.

It is not without some hesitation that the ICRC ventures to touch upon this here. The assumption of a general, nuclear war, is indeed terrifying and neither the ICRC nor the Red Cross as a whole accept the idea of indiscriminate warfare which would destroy every form of life. They are the first to wish that it may never occur.

Nevertheless, this supposition cannot be cast aside, because States which possess the means to conduct this warfare do not exclude it. The Red Cross would be unfaithful to its mission if it were not prepared to save whatever still can be saved in all circumstances.

General war raises huge problems where nursing personnel is concerned, not only for the National Societies but for the States themselves. The so-called "advanced" States, which are very alive to these problems and have highly developed military and civil medical services, already know that to cover the medical needs in a total nuclear war would demand preparation as regards personnel and equipment which appear to be beyond present means.

The other States, especially those which are developing, are mainly concerned with becoming equipped to handle peacetime needs consequent on "normal" emergency situations to their best ability. Those of a modern general war raise problems of a scale which is completely beyond them. We fear that National Societies of these countries, to which the present Report is particularly addressed, may be discouraged right away by the proposal of a goal so entirely out of reach.

The ICRC nevertheless considers that every effort must be made for each country to be as well equipped as possible, according to its resources, to handle extreme situations. The apparent impossibility of meeting them adequately, with all the proper means as regards both personnel and equipment, is no reason for refusing to face them.

Moreover, the National Societies would not be undertaking any new responsibility, distinct from those already assumed in view of more "normal" emergency situations by preparing themselves as well as possible for the eventuality of a general war. These responsibilities are alike and the only difference between them lies in the size of preparations. If a Society holds itself ready to meet the needs of a localised conflict, it already disposes of no small means for helping to solve some of the problems raised by nuclear warfare.

So far as is at present known, assistance to victims of nuclear warfare raises three types of problem (1):

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- (1) We will not enter here into the rôle of the National Societies in civil defence properly so termed, since it has been dealt with elsewhere.

1. Availability of the largest possible qualified nursing personnel.
2. Organisation of the relief machinery (medical posts on the outskirts of large centres of population, sorting, evacuation, etc.)
3. Measures against radiation.

The first of these tasks is nothing new. It is only a maximum extension of the actual rôle of National Societies; to place medical personnel at the disposal of the public authorities.

The second has unfamiliar aspects. The nature of modern weapons demands a different geographical arrangement of medical establishments and first-aid posts and of their interconnection. Organisation cannot be submitted to such an upheaval in peacetime and very few countries exist where it would be possible to introduce new structures on a permanent basis in addition to the normal peacetime establishments.

But these must be examined, plans made now and, so far as compatible with resources and circumstances, put into effect. The National Societies cannot, of course, work unaided here. Schemes of this order can only be established on a government scale and for which the responsibility devolves on the military and civil authorities.

The third task is something new. Present-day nursing personnel must be taught protective and therapeutic methods for combating the effects of radiation. And not only nursing personnel, the whole population should be informed of the fresh dangers to which it is exposed and the elementary means of coping with them. These dangers must not be considered as related exclusively to atomic warfare, but as something which can occur at any moment, not only in consequence of experiments with atomic weapons on all sides but of the rapidly increasing employment of nuclear energy for pacific ends.

### Conclusions

The nursing responsibilities of the National Societies are entirely founded on their character of auxiliaries to the public authorities and the army.

In peacetime they add to the strength and efficiency of the public Health Services, Help and support is offered them in this work by the League of Red Cross Societies, which advises and coordinates.

They furthermore prepare themselves to help the authorities in meeting emergency situations from the medical angle, this is one of their specific responsibilities. Such situations are characterised by a sudden and large influx of victims, whether as a consequence of natural disaster or conflicts within the country or in other countries which must be helped. In the case of conflict, it is the International Committee of the Red Cross which is



competent to offer its support, advice and eventual intermediary to the National Societies in carrying out their relief action.

This general responsibility of the National Societies requires them to arrange, directly or indirectly, for the training of sufficient nursing personnel. The following measures can be considered for this purpose:

1. Close co-operation, in the first place, between the Society and the military and civil Health Services, which will take part in drafting plans and can help execute them.

2. Co-operation with the medical services and the national associations of members belonging to different medical professions, nurses, and also social workers.

3. The status of the nursing personnel to be placed at the disposal of the Army Medical Service must be laid down in detail in official texts. (1)

4. Schemes for action must at least provide suitable measures to assure:

- (a) recruitment of personnel
- (b) training of personnel
- (c) employment of personnel.

Recruitment is a very large task which can only be done on a national scale. It therefore requires close co-operation between the authorities concerned.

Training not only comprises ordinary professional training, but also special training for emergency situations, military nursing, the fight against radio-activity, instruction in Red Cross principles and the Geneva Conventions.

By the "employment of nursing personnel" should be understood not only its placing at the disposal of the Army, Public Health and Civil Defence authorities, and work in the ordinary hospital establishments of the country, but also the organisation of teams and permanent or mobile medical posts, capable of fulfilling their rôle in any emergency situation.

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(1) See Report submitted by the ICRC to the XVIIIth International Conference of the Red Cross (Toronto, 1952) document No. 20.

5. The Society's schemes for action should also provide for the possibility of international assistance, i. e. the despatch to one or several countries stricken by disaster or war, of medical teams composed of doctors and nurses (men or women), with or without medical equipment.

These teams can be placed either at the disposal of the armed forces of the country in question (eventuality provided for in Article 27 of the First 1949 Geneva Convention) or the National Society, or again the International Red Cross organisations (the ICRC or the League) to assist them in their humanitarian work.

6. The National Society should propose instruction in first-aid, under its own or other auspices, extended so far as possible to all the members of the fighting forces, the police and fire brigades.

7. Finally, the National Society should draw up a plan for first-aid instruction of the whole population, calculated to assure that within a certain time at least one person in each household possesses a minimum of this essential knowledge.

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The ICRC hopes that National Societies, especially the young, developing Societies, will give very serious attention to the problem of the training of nursing personnel and place it at the head of their programme. They are often the only relief organisations able to intervene effectively, especially when the country is a prey to hatred and party passions, owing to their neutral, impartial and independent character as members of a powerful and respected world movement. It is imperative for them to shoulder the dangers of all types now threatening mankind. In so doing they will be playing a rôle which fully corresponds to their particular mission.

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