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Communication to the press No. 98/01
Geneva, 12 January 1998

ICRC DEPLORES MURDER OF EMPLOYEE IN SRI LANKA

Geneva (ICRC) - In the early hours of 10 January, Mr Gnapiragasam Thimoty Raveenthiran, working as a night watchman at the ICRC sub-delegation in Vavuniya, was murdered when the sub-delegation's offices were robbed and ransacked. Mr Raveenthiran, who had been employed by the ICRC since June 1997, was 37 years old. He is survived by his wife and two children.

As soon as the crime was discovered the next morning, an investigation was opened by the military authorities and the police. Mr Raveenthiran's body was taken to the hospital in Vavuniya and was later handed over to his family. A funeral service held on Sunday was attended by many of the victim's friends and colleagues, and by the head of the ICRC delegation in Sri Lanka.

The ICRC deeply deplores this tragic event. In its capacity as a neutral intermediary between the parties to the conflict, the ICRC has been working in Sri Lanka since 1989, where it visits persons deprived of their liberty, restores contact between dispersed family members, assists the civilian population and teaches the rules of behaviour in combat to the belligerents.

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Communication to the press No. 98/02
Geneva, 13 January 1998

ICRC DENOUNCES KILLING OF EMPLOYEE IN KINSHASA

Geneva (ICRC) - On Monday 12 January Mr Sylvain Mutombo, a driver employed by the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, was murdered in the course of his duties. At about 4 p.m. he was in the city centre on official business when he was killed by gunmen who then stole the ICRC vehicle. An inquiry has been opened by the relevant authorities.

Sylvain Mutombo, who was 43, leaves a widow and five children. He had been working for the ICRC since November 1993 and was an especially loyal employee of the Kinshasa delegation. After the attack his body was taken to the Kinshasa general hospital and subsequently to his home. The funeral is due to take place in Kinshasa on 14 January and will be attended by ICRC staff.

The ICRC denounces this tragic event. Over the past six months ICRC employees have twice fallen victim to attacks aimed at stealing Red Cross vehicles. The international humanitarian organization has been working in Congo-Kinshasa since 1961 to bring aid to those affected by the different conflicts in the country.
SUDANESE MINISTER FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS VISITS ICRC

Geneva (ICRC) - On 22 January 1998 Mr Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), received H. E. Mr Ali Othman Mohammed Taha, Minister for External Relations of the Republic of the Sudan, at ICRC headquarters.

President Sommaruga welcomed the recent decision by the Government of the Sudan to lift the accusations against the ICRC now that the investigation into the November 1996 incident involving an ICRC plane has been completed. Both sides agreed that ICRC field activities should now resume as soon as possible for the benefit of the victims of the conflict in the Sudan.

With a view to furthering their mutual cooperation, the ICRC and the Government of the Sudan confirmed that ICRC activities are carried out in accordance with the organization's mandate as a neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian institution conferred on it by the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The two sides also confirmed that their cooperation is being conducted with transparency and full respect for national sovereignty.

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Communication to the press 98/04
26 January 1998

ICRC CONDEMNS BOMB ATTACK IN KANDY

Geneva (ICRC) - The bomb attack on the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, 112 km east of Colombo, on 25 January left 13 people dead and more than 20 injured, and damaged Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist shrine. Most of the victims were civilians.

The ICRC strongly condemns this deliberate attack on civilians and a place of worship. This constitutes a serious violation of the rules of international humanitarian law, which forbid indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population. Humanitarian law also specifically prohibits the targeting of cultural monuments and places of worship. The ICRC urges respect for these rules, so that civilians will no longer be targeted by such acts.

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Communication to the press 98/05
2 February 1998

BAN ON BLINDING LASER WEAPONS TO BECOME BINDING INTERNATIONAL LAW

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) wholeheartedly welcomes the 20th ratification on Friday 30 January 1998 of Protocol IV (Blinding Laser Weapons) to the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons. This 20th ratification, by the government of Hungary, means that this landmark international humanitarian law agreement will enter into force in six months' time.

"The Protocol highlights the role of international humanitarian law in preventing a horrific new form of suffering for soldiers and civilians alike. By prohibiting both the use and the transfer of blinding laser weapons in armed conflict, the Protocol may also prevent their falling into the hands of those who might use them for terrorist or criminal purposes", said Louise Doswald-Beck, Deputy Head of ICRC's Legal Division.

Blinding laser weapons, which can be as small as an ordinary rifle and were on the verge of large-scale production before the adoption of the new Protocol, emit a laser beam which can cause immediate and irreversible blindness over distances of up to several kilometres. The Protocol prohibits the use and transfer of laser weapons specifically designed to cause permanent blindness. It also requires States to take all feasible precautions, including the training of their armed forces, to avoid permanent blinding through the legitimate use of other laser systems, such as range finders and targeting devices. This is only the second time in history that a particularly heinous means of warfare has been prohibited before it has been used on the battlefield (exploding bullets were banned soon after their development in 1868).

"The Protocol on blinding laser weapons clearly demonstrates that blinding is a totally unacceptable form of warfare", added Louise Doswald-Beck. The ICRC reiterates its call to all States which have not yet done so to adhere to the Protocol as soon as possible and to adopt national measures to prevent the production, transfer, use and proliferation of blinding laser weapons.

The 20 States which have notified the depositary, the UN Secretary-General, of their ratification of the Protocol are: Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Cape Verde, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, the Philippines, Spain, Sweden, and Uzbekistan.

For further information, please contact Louise Doswald-Beck (++41 22 730 2664) at the ICRC's Legal Division or Stuart Maslen (++41 22 730 2533) at the Mines Unit.

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Communication to the press No. 98/06
10 February 1998

SIERRA LEONE: ICRC URGES RESPECT FOR CIVILIANS

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is extremely concerned by the plight of the civilian population of the Sierra Leone capital Freetown following the resumption on 5 February of clashes between troops of the junta in power and ECOMOG forces. The city's residents are again trapped by the fighting, which has become even more intense today according to ICRC delegates on the spot.

The ICRC appeals to the parties to the conflict and any other entities and individuals who have taken up arms to comply with the rules of international humanitarian law. It stresses in particular the duty to respect and protect civilians and the prohibition on launching indiscriminate attacks, terrorizing the population or using civilians for military purposes.

The ICRC also urges the parties to treat captured persons humanely, to ensure that the wounded and sick have access to medical care, to protect medical facilities and their staff and to respect the Red Cross and its emblem.

The ICRC has been working in Sierra Leone since 1991 and currently has 27 expatriate staff in the country, 15 of them in Freetown.

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COMMUNICATION TO THE PRESS

Communication to the press No. 98/07
13 February 1998

EARTHQUAKE IN AFGHANISTAN: ICRC LAUNCHES APPEAL FOR 5.6 MILLION SWISS FRANCS

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) today launched an urgent appeal for 5.6 million Swiss francs to fund aid operations for victims of the earthquake which rocked north-eastern Afghanistan last week. The amount is also intended to cover the work being done on the spot by the Afghan Red Crescent Society for an initial period of two months, and the support being provided by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for the operations currently under way.

Ten delegates - seven from the ICRC and three from the Federation - have been based in Rostaq, a town close to the epicentre, since Sunday 8 February. Despite enormous logistic difficulties they have succeeded in reaching the seven most densely populated of some 30 villages in the stricken area. The relief effort has been severely hampered by landslides which have destroyed the roads in this mountainous region, situated at an altitude of over 2,000 metres, and recent heavy snowfalls have further slowed progress. On 12 February a team of ICRC delegates and members of the Afghan Red Crescent reached a village about 15 km from Rostaq by jeep, saving 1,800 quake survivors from certain death in the severe conditions. In Rostaq itself, 4,300 displaced people have been housed in public buildings, and the number of people without shelter is estimated at more than 20,000.

Two surgeons from Médecins sans frontières and one from the ICRC are operating on the injured at Rostaq's small hospital. Since the arrival of the first relief teams, the hospital has treated over 600 casualties, many of them suffering from fractures and concussion. In a provisional estimate issued on Thursday 12 February the local authorities put the number of dead at 4,750.

The main challenge now facing the humanitarian operation is logistics, and the main enemy the weather. While several road convoys carrying food and other relief items (tents, blankets and clothing) have arrived in the stricken region, the fog, rain and snow are holding up attempts to bring in supplies by air. The ICRC, in cooperation with United Nations agencies, is considering the possibility of using air-drops as soon as weather conditions permit.

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KOSOVO: ICRC CONCERNED ABOUT ESCALATING VIOLENCE

Geneva (ICRC) - Following the recent serious incidents in Kosovo, in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, there are fears of further escalation in the violence in the region. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is most concerned about these developments and reminds the relevant authorities of their duty to exercise restraint and to act with discernment, especially towards civilians who are not taking an active part in the disturbances and persons arrested in connection with the situation.

The ICRC notes that the recent clashes have given rise to humanitarian needs, particularly in the medical field. It has therefore strengthened its presence in Pristina, Kosovo's main town, and has started to provide several health facilities with medical assistance. The organization hopes soon to be able to reach all communities affected by the violence. However, representations made to the authorities in this regard have been unsuccessful so far.

Moreover, the ICRC intends to gain access to all persons arrested in connection with the disturbances. At present, its delegates are authorized to visit such persons only once they have been sentenced by a court of law. It is therefore essential that they also be allowed to visit people in preventive detention or under investigation without delay.

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ICRC APPEALS FOR 20 MILLION SWISS FRANCS TO HELP LANDMINE VICTIMS

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) today launched a Special Landmines Appeal for 20,225,000 Swiss francs (13,815,000 US dollars) to governments, supranational organizations, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and private and public donors worldwide. The funds will be used to provide proper care for victims of landmines, reduce the risk of mine-related incidents, and promote universal adherence to and full implementation of the Ottawa treaty banning anti-personnel mines.

"Although the Ottawa treaty represents a prescription for ending the epidemic of mine injuries, the cure will require sustained and costly, long-term efforts," stressed ICRC Mines Campaign coordinator Catherine Hubert during the meeting of Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in Geneva at which the appeal was launched.

More than 80% of the funds will be allocated to ICRC programmes which provide surgical care, medical assistance and physical rehabilitation for mine victims within the context of the organization's overall assistance to the war-wounded. The ICRC is about to open three new limb-fitting centres in Tajikistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. It also provides direct medical assistance to health facilities and appropriate training for nurses, doctors and surgeons treating mine victims. At present such programmes exist in Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

In cooperation with a number of National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC currently runs mine-awareness programmes in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Similar programmes are being drawn up in Angola, Georgia and Sudan. They aim to reduce the risk of mine-related death or injury by providing people in mine-affected areas with information on the precautions to be taken until the mines can be cleared.
The ICRC will also continue to promote the establishment of a "mines information system" in mine-affected countries, involving cooperation and the exchange of information among governments, NGOs, UN agencies, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the ICRC itself. It includes standardized data collection, the promotion of humanitarian criteria for setting operational priorities in mine-affected areas, and cooperation among those engaged in mine clearance, assistance to victims, mine-awareness, and decision-making at government level.

The entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will do its utmost to ensure that the Ottawa treaty comes into force as quickly as possible. To date 124 States have signed the treaty, and five of them have ratified it. Forty ratifications are needed for it to come into force. The Movement will also actively promote the treaty among States which have not yet signed it.

The European Union (EU) has agreed to co-finance the 1998 ICRC Special Appeal. Every donation to the appeal results in an additional contribution from the EU. This will cover up to 40% of the value of donations received. A sum of 8 million Ecus (12.8 million Swiss francs) has been made available for this purpose.

Further information: Bea Vanhove, ICRC Geneva, tel. ++41 22 730 25 92
Communication to the press No. 98/10
20 March 1998

KOSOVO: ICRC POSITION ON INVITATION TO HEAD INVESTIGATION

Geneva (ICRC) - The authorities of the Republic of Serbia have approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to open an ad hoc investigation into the recent events in Kosovo. The ICRC wishes to make clear that it has informed the Serbian authorities that acting as a fact-finding commission does not lie within the scope of its mandate.

The ICRC believes that taking on such a quasi-judicial task could jeopardize its primary humanitarian duty to assist and protect the victims of armed conflict or internal strife. It has recommended to the Serbian authorities that they contact an international expert in the field of international law to help them set up such a commission.

The priority for the ICRC remains to fulfil its humanitarian role in Kosovo. A team led by the ICRC and including a delegate from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies travelled to Pristina on Wednesday to look further into the possibilities of assisting people affected by the present crisis.

For further information, please contact Amanda Williamson, ICRC Geneva, on ++4122 730 2678, or Thomas Merkelbach, ICRC Belgrade, on ++385 11 761 063

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MULTI-DRUG-RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS GAINING GROUND IN CIS PRISONS

Geneva (ICRC) - Until recently it was generally believed that tuberculosis was under control in Europe. However, the development in recent years of a multi-drug-resistant strain in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is growing into a major threat to the people of the region. The situation is particularly alarming inside prisons, where the incidence of this serious infectious disease is five to 50 times greater than the national average. This results from malnutrition, poor hygiene, overcrowding and other problems relating to health and conditions in detention. It is also due to randomly administered treatment.

Confronted with this problem among the prisoners they visit in a number of CIS countries, ICRC doctors have warned that unless infectious detainees receive complete, supervised and effective treatment, prisons in the region will become a major breeding ground for TB - in particular the multi-drug-resistant variety - among the general population.

Since 1995, a total of 514 infectious detainees in Baku's central penitentiary hospital have been treated under the ICRC anti-TB programme run there in conjunction with the Azerbaijani Ministry of Justice. The "directly observed treatment, short course strategy" (DOTS) recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) requires medical staff to ensure the daily intake of medicines by each patient for the full course of treatment (minimum six months). Of the 198 patients taking part in the programme in 1997, 160 completed their course of treatment. There was a mortality rate of 7.5% and an abandon rate of 11.6%, including those individuals released from detention. Though medical staff in the prisons find it very difficult to make the patients comply with the strict requirements of the DOTS strategy, results are nevertheless encouraging and the ICRC is confident that the authorities concerned will understand the importance of having all TB patients in the central penitentiary hospital benefit from DOTS.

Tuberculosis is also the main threat to health inside Georgia's prison system and needs to be addressed urgently. At this stage, a study begun by the ICRC in 1997 to assess the disease's incidence and resistance to drug treatment in Georgian prisons shows that the infection rate is 8% with a 10-30% level of resistance to existing treatment. The country's authorities have been closely involved in the study and preparations are under way for a treatment programme in the central penitentiary hospital.
The TB epidemic in CIS prisons poses a danger for the entire population of those countries. The only effective way to fight it is a coordinated effort by all the authorities concerned. Not only must detainees be included in the national struggle against TB, the authorities must also understand that applying treatment randomly and failing to complete the full course of drug therapy is actually worse than providing no treatment at all, as it will make the disease incurable.


**Persons to contact for more information:**

- Dr Christine Mathieu, in charge of the ICRC TB programme in Azerbaijan;
- Dr Ann Aerts in charge of the ICRC TB programme in Georgia;
- Dr Gillian Biddulph-Ackermann in charge of ICRC medical activities in Europe.

Requests for interviews in Azerbaijan and Georgia should be channeled through:

Suzanne Berger, ICRC press officer for Eastern Europe and Central Asia  
++41 22 730 23 07;

Kim Gordon-Bates, ICRC News editor  
++41 22 730 23 02;

Dr Gillian Biddulph-Ackermann, coordinator for ICRC medical activities in Europe  
++41 22 730 29 86.
Communication to the press 98/12
26 March 1998

STUDY SHOWS THAT LANDMINES REMAIN SILENT MENACE IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Geneva/Budapest - A new ICRC/UNHCR-commissioned study on the impact of landmines in Bosnia-Herzegovina shows that although armed hostilities between warring factions officially ended in December 1995, mines continue to have severe human, medical, social and economic consequences.

The study, entitled "The Silent Menace: Landmines in Bosnia and Herzegovina", reports that every month landmines kill or injure 30-35 people, 80% of them civilians. The presence of these deadly weapons is hindering reconstruction, severely reducing food production and diverting resources needed to rebuild society. It is expected that the number of mine accidents among refugees and displaced persons will increase during 1998, as people return to their homes along the Inter-Entity Boundary Line - the most heavily mined area in the country. So far, only a small percentage of mine-contaminated land has been cleared according to humanitarian standards. Most minefields remain unmarked.

The study also provides an overview of the response to the country's mine problem and offers recommendations as to how the task can be accomplished more effectively. It recommends that mine clearance be guaranteed future funding, that attention be focused on identifying and marking mined areas, and that priority be given for clearance of land most needed for agricultural production and economic recovery. Mine-awareness programmes should be better coordinated and set up in host countries for returning refugees, donors should be firmly urged to commit themselves to improving physical rehabilitation clinics, and greater efforts should be made to address the psycho-social needs of mine victims.

The study was made public today in the Hungarian capital Budapest prior to the opening of a major regional conference on anti-personnel mines. As part of this conference, the ICRC is hosting a seminar on the human costs and military utility of anti-personnel mines for senior defence and foreign affairs officials from 19 central and eastern European countries. The organization hopes that the conference will help promote adherence to the Ottawa treaty, a new instrument of humanitarian law banning the production, transfer, stockpiling and use of anti-personnel mines.

"The Silent Menace: Landmines in Bosnia and Herzegovina"
can be found on the ICRC web server at http://www.icrc.org

For further information, please contact Zoltán Toth, ICRC Budapest, ++361 315 05 00
or Bea Vanhove, ICRC Geneva, ++ 41 22 730 25 92
SIERRA LEONE: ICRC DEPLORES STAFF MEMBER'S DEATH

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is deeply saddened by the death of Mr Denis Momoh, a Sierra Leonean staff member killed during continuing fighting near the town of Segbwema. According to initial reports, Mr Momoh was killed in an exchange of artillery fire between ECOMOG forces and the AFRC/RUF (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council / Revolutionary United Front) on Sunday 22 March. One of his children was also killed in the shelling.

Mr Momoh was a much-valued member of the ICRC team in Segbwema, which he joined in late 1996 to supervise relief distributions. The fate of his wife and two other children remains unknown.

The ICRC and its staff deplore this tragedy and extend their heartfelt sympathy to Mr Momoh's family. Flags at ICRC offices in Sierra Leone and at the organization's Geneva headquarters have been placed at half-mast.
Communication to the press 98/14
7 April 1998

IRAN/IRAQ – THOUSANDS OF PRISONERS OF WAR REPATRIATED

Geneva (ICRC) - Between 2 and 7 April, 5,584 Iraqi prisoners of war held in Iran and three Iranian prisoners of war as well as 316 other Iranians held in Iraq were repatriated under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In the biggest repatriation of POWs since 1990, the ICRC registered and checked the identity of all those involved and ensured in private interviews with each of them that they were returning to their respective countries of their own free will.

The repatriation took place under a bilateral agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Iraq. Most of the prisoners had been in captivity for over 15 years. The ICRC believes that this important event heralds a humanitarian solution for all POWs from the Iran-Iraq war, which came to an end in 1988. In order to achieve a comprehensive solution, however, ICRC delegates must be allowed to check the situation of the remaining POWs in order to ensure that it is consistent with the status which the parties to the conflict declare has been granted to them. The ICRC must be able to determine once and for all whether those who have not been repatriated do in fact wish to remain where they are. This final step is not only viewed as indispensable by the ICRC but is in accordance with the agreement reached by the parties themselves.

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SOMALIA: RED CROSS / RED CRESCENT STAFF KIDNAPPED IN MOGADISHU

Geneva (ICRC) - Eight Red Cross / Red Crescent staff and two pilots were kidnapped this morning in Mogadishu North immediately after their ICRC-chartered aircraft landed at Isley airstrip. They were taken away by armed men in four vehicles mounted with machine guns. Two of those abducted are working for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, one is employed by the Somali Red Crescent, and the remainder are ICRC expatriates.

At this stage, the ICRC has no further information on this serious incident. The organization has not yet been approached by the kidnappers and is unaware of the reasons for their action.

The Somali Red Crescent Society and ICRC staff in Mogadishu North and Nairobi are taking every possible step to establish contact with those responsible in order to find a solution to this crisis.

The flight was one of many made on a regular basis from Nairobi to Mogadishu and other places in Somalia. Some passengers were bound for Mogadishu itself, while others would have continued to various destinations. The red cross emblem was clearly displayed on the outside of the plane.

The ICRC and the Federation deplore this serious incident targeting a humanitarian organization and request that all the kidnapped personnel be released immediately.

For further information, please contact Michael Kleiner, ICRC Geneva, tel. ++41 22 730 22 81
Communication to the press 98/16  
20 April 1998

SOMALIA: ICRC AND INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION EXTREMELY CONCERNED BY THE PLIGHT OF ABDUCTED STAFF

Geneva - Following the broadcast of TV pictures, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) are extremely worried about the situation of their staff members abducted in Mogadishu.

The pictures showed a man threatening an ICRC delegate with his gun and issuing a ransom demand together with an ultimatum.

Shocked by this spectacle, the ICRC and the International Federation appeal to all parties concerned not to expose the ten captives to public curiosity.

The ICRC is in constant contact with elders of the Somali clans and with politicians and influential Somalis who are holding discussions with the kidnappers. No ransom demand has been made through these channels. The ICRC remains confident that it has adopted the right approach and in the commitment of all those involved to secure the unconditional release of the hostages.

The ICRC and the International Federation urgently request the kidnappers to respect the physical and moral integrity of the ten, and reiterate the call for their immediate and unconditional release.

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Joint communication to the press
Federation - ICRC No. 98/17

Geneva, 24 April 1998

SOMALIA: RED CROSS/RED CRESCENT PERSONNEL RELEASED

Geneva - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies confirm the release of the ten Red Cross/Red Crescent personnel abducted in Mogadishu a week ago.

The hostages were freed this morning and at 8.25 a.m. local time arrived at the Keysaney hospital run by the Somali Red Crescent Society on the edge of Mogadishu North. They are safe and in good health and are now on their way to Nairobi where they are expected this afternoon.

The captives were released unconditionally, and no ransom was paid. Since the beginning of the crisis the ICRC and the International Federation have relied on their Somali contacts (Somali Red Crescent Society, clan elders, Somali politicians and other influential figures) and on their experience in Somalia to find the most appropriate way of securing the release of the ten hostages.

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Communication to the press No. 98/18
27 May 1998

AGREEMENT CONCLUDED BETWEEN ICRC AND MEXICAN GOVERNMENT

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Government of Mexico reached an agreement on 26 May allowing the ICRC to resume its humanitarian work in the state of Chiapas. The agreement supersedes a previous accord dating back to January 1994.

The ICRC will begin by conducting an independent survey of needs in the communities affected by the events in Chiapas. In cooperation with the Mexican Red Cross Society and other members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, it will then launch a number of humanitarian activities to meet the needs observed.

The agreement also confirms ICRC access to all detainees falling within its purview. Visits to these detainees will be carried out in accordance with the ICRC procedures.

The ICRC welcomes the new agreement, which will help improve the plight of people affected by the situation in Chiapas.

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EARTHQUAKE IN AFGHANISTAN: ICRC PLANE LANDS IN FAIZABAD

Geneva (ICRC) - An ICRC Beechcraft carrying 12 passengers - three ICRC field officers and four expatriate ICRC personnel, two staff members of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, one from the World Food Programme and two from Médecins sans frontières - together with surgical supplies and a generator has landed in the town of Faizabad in north-eastern Afghanistan. This remote and mountainous region was once again rocked by a powerful earthquake shortly before 11 a.m. on Saturday 30 May.

Afghan Red Crescent staff and volunteers were immediately on the scene, rendering first aid and bringing emergency assistance to survivors. They have confirmed the death of at least 1,500 people and report that several villages have been totally destroyed. Further relief flights are being organized for the coming days.

Earlier this year (the night of 4-5 February) there was a similar tremor in the same region, with a death toll of several thousand. Experience from the previous quake has shown that logistics are of the utmost importance for a relief operation in rugged terrain at an altitude of over 2,000 metres. In February, a combination of airdrops and transports by helicopter, trucks and donkey caravans was used to deliver humanitarian aid to the survivors.

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Communication to the press No. 98/20
1 June 1998

EARTHQUAKE IN AFGHANISTAN: HUMANITARIAN AID REACHES SURVIVORS

Geneva (ICRC) - Two helicopters chartered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, reached the quake-affected area of Faizabad early this morning. They immediately began to ferry relief supplies to survivors in the villages hit by the disaster and to fly the wounded to the nearest field clinics. The helicopters have already landed in six villages, from which they evacuated 50 casualties, mainly women and children suffering from fractures, and delivered blankets and plastic sheeting.

ICRC delegates, working closely with staff of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and volunteers of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, report scenes of total devastation, and stress that the immediate priorities are to evacuate and give treatment to the wounded and to provide shelter and drinking water for the survivors.

Today the ICRC's Beechcraft plane flew a surgical team and medical supplies from Kabul to Faizabad to help local and international medical personnel at work in the area. Three field clinics are operational in the villages of Shar-i-Buzurg, Sha'ab - both of which are inaccessible by road - and the town of Rostaq, where the medical facility is already overcrowded. Two hospitals are also taking care of the wounded in Taloqan and Faizabad.

Various shelter construction materials, such as plastic sheeting and tarpaulins, are being transported to the disaster-stricken area, along with blankets and other urgently needed supplies from emergency stocks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan.
KOSOVO: ICRC URGENTLY REQUESTS ACCESS TO AFFECTED AREA

Geneva (ICRC) - Deeply disturbed by reports of escalating violence in the area of Decane, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has asked the Serbian authorities for immediate and unimpeded access in order to carry out humanitarian work there.

Since the crisis erupted in March, the organization's delegates have been performing protection and relief work throughout Kosovo. However, over the past two weeks they have been prevented from entering the Decane area despite a number of previous assurances from the highest authorities in Belgrade that the ICRC would be able to work unhindered in Kosovo.

According to information gathered by delegates in northern Albania from the newly arrived refugees there, thousands of civilians are fleeing their homes in Decane. The sudden worsening of the situation makes it absolutely imperative for the ICRC to reach the area without delay.

A team of delegates yesterday travelled to Bajram Curri, in northern Albania, where they will stay for some time to gather information from refugees there about the situation in Kosovo. Representatives of the Albanian Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are working with ICRC delegates to respond to the refugees' immediate needs in terms of food, medicines and other supplies.

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ICRC Belgrade, tel. ++ 381 11 761 063
SIERRA LEONE: ICRC CALLS ON FORMER JUNTA AND ALLIED REBEL FORCES TO RESPECT CIVILIANS

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is extremely concerned about the atrocities committed against civilians in recent weeks by the forces of the former junta and allied rebels ousted by ECOMOG in February 1998. The ICRC strongly condemns these practices, which are serious violations of international humanitarian law and will have a devastating impact on rural communities in Sierra Leone.

More than 1,000 wounded civilians have received treatment in the country's hospitals since April. Most of them were mutilated or had deep and multiple lacerations of the upper limbs and face.

To date more than 140 people have been treated following partial or total amputation of one or both arms. The mutilations were perpetrated during attacks on villages. On the basis of first-hand accounts by survivors, the ICRC estimates that hundreds of civilians have been killed in these attacks, and that only one wounded person out of four actually manages to reach a health centre.

The ICRC is about to dispatch a surgical team to Sierra Leone to back up local medical facilities, which are overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with these types of injury.

It calls on the forces involved to put an immediate end to such brutal acts and to show due respect for civilians.

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ICRC WELCOMES ENTRY INTO FORCE OF UN PROTOCOL
RESTRICTING THE USE OF LANDMINES

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) welcomes the twentieth ratification, on 3 June 1998, of amended Protocol II to the 1980 United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. The latest ratification, by the government of Lithuania, means that this instrument of international humanitarian law will enter into force on 3 December 1998. Amended Protocol II, which was adopted in 1996 after three years of negotiations, restricts the use and transfer of all landmines and the use of booby-traps and other explosive devices. The failure of States to agree on more stringent restrictions on anti-personnel mines led to the negotiation in 1997 of the Ottawa treaty, which bans the development, use, stockpiling, production and transfer of these indiscriminate weapons.

Although the ICRC considers that adherence to the Ottawa treaty is a top priority, it continues to encourage States to ratify amended Protocol II because this text also restricts the use and transfer of landmines, anti-tank mines and other weapons not covered by the Ottawa treaty. The ICRC is particularly concerned about the potential consequences in humanitarian terms that would arise from the widespread and irresponsible use of remotely delivered anti-tank mines. In addition, for those States not yet prepared to ban anti-personnel mines outright, Protocol II as amended represents a step forward as compared with the original text adopted in 1980.
COMMUNICATION TO THE PRESS

Communication to the press No. 98/24
12 June 1998

KOSOVO: HUMANITARIAN SITUATION CAUSING CONCERN

Geneva (ICRC) - On 10 June the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was able to reach Decane, the main town in the part of Kosovo affected by the recent fighting, for the first time since 20 May. Its access was, however, restricted to the town itself, largely deserted by its inhabitants and civilian authorities and bearing obvious traces of the clashes of the past few days. ICRC delegates could only go to the offices of the local Red Cross and were unable to establish direct contact with the civilians still remaining on the spot.

The ICRC is especially worried about the initial accounts received from people having sought refuge in northern Albania and Montenegro, who report artillery attacks, threats to the lives of civilians, and the destruction of houses and property. The conditions in which the exodus is taking place also give cause for concern: the people who leave - mainly women, children and the elderly - are forced to leave all their belongings behind and to make their way on foot, avoiding inhabited areas and travelling for several days and nights before reaching a place of safety.

The ICRC knows the Decane region well, having worked there on a regular basis for some months prior to the most recent events. It has brought in considerable logistic resources and has constituted stocks of food, blankets, hygiene items and other basic necessities in Belgrade and Pristina, sufficient to cover the requirements of 20,000 people, as well as medical supplies to treat 1,600 wounded. It is therefore vital that ICRC staff be allowed to return to the region in order to meet the victims' needs as a matter of urgency.

In Albania, refugees in the northern area of Bajram Curri are receiving aid from the Albanian Red Cross. So far the National Society, working with the support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for food aid and the ICRC for medical assistance, has distributed 50 tonnes of food to about 10,000 people, utterly destitute and exhausted after days on the road.

In Montenegro, an ICRC delegate based in Podgorica is closely monitoring the situation of three to four thousand newly displaced persons from Kosovo. The Yugoslav Red Cross, with the help of the ICRC, has already come to the assistance of 500 people, and is about to distribute blankets, hygiene items, kitchen sets and other essential supplies to a further 2,000.

The ICRC, together with the Albanian and Yugoslav Red Cross Societies, is making every effort to restore contact between family members separated as a result of the conflict by enabling them to exchange Red Cross messages. From the psychological standpoint it is most important for these refugees uprooted from their homes to rapidly re-establish at least some form of contact with relatives living in other countries.

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Communication to the press No. 98/25
26 June 1998

LEBANON/ISRAEL: MORTAL REMAINS REPATRIATED AND PRISONERS RELEASED

Geneva (ICRC) - On 25 June, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) participated in the repatriation of the mortal remains of an Israeli serviceman and those of 40 Lebanese combatants. The ICRC had been in contact with the Israeli and the Lebanese authorities since September 1997, acting in its capacity as a neutral intermediary and as a channel for messages between the parties.

The mortal remains were transported aboard an aircraft supplied by the French authorities. The ICRC handed them over to representatives of their respective countries of origin.

On 26 June, 10 detainees from prisons in Israel and 50 detainees from the Khiam detention centre in occupied South Lebanon were freed by the Israeli authorities and handed over to the ICRC. They were all interviewed in private by ICRC delegates and given the opportunity to state the destination of their choice. 55 detainees were then transferred by the ICRC to Kfar Falous, just north of the occupied zone, where they were given into the care of the Lebanese authorities.

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Communication to the press No. 98/26
10 July 1998

ICRC TEAM RELEASED IN SOUTH-EAST ETHIOPIA

Geneva - The six staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) abducted on 25 June in south-east Ethiopia were released earlier today. All six - five Ethiopians and the Swiss delegate Laurent Giger - are all safe and sound and should be reunited with their families soon.

The team was released unconditionally and picked up by colleagues. It should arrive at the ICRC office in Gode this evening.

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COMMUNICATION TO THE PRESS

Communication to the press No. 98/27
18 July 1998

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT: A REALITY AT LAST

Rome (ICRC) - On 17 July, after years of relentless efforts and five weeks of intense and sometimes hard negotiations, the Statute of the permanent International criminal court was finally adopted.

The ICRC welcomes this historical event. It sincerely hopes that this Statute will allow the Court to fight efficiently against those criminals who mock the international community and whose impunity is an invitation to crime.

It should be emphasized, however, that the Statute's substantial rules can be further improved. It is regrettable, for instance, that the States that will be Party to it will have the possibility to opt out, for a period of seven years, from the Court's jurisdiction over war crimes. Furthermore, in the States that do not adhere to the Statute, war criminals having perpetrated crimes on their territory or being their nationals cannot be prosecuted by the Court.

Signing and ratifying this treaty by a very large number of States is therefore a must, as is providing the Court with adequate funding and staff of a high quality.

The road ahead of us is still long and war criminals must be swiftly and relentlessly prosecuted so that the law does have a deterrent effect for the benefit of all those whom they would otherwise massacre, loot, rape and torture.

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Communication to the press No. 98/28
21 July 1998

ALGERIA : INFORMATION FROM THE ICRC

Geneva (ICRC) - Following the statements made on 21 July 1998 to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva by the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Algeria, as reported by various press agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) wishes to give the following information.

The ICRC Director of Operations plans to go to Algiers, on a date still to be decided by agreement between the ICRC and the Algerian authorities. The purpose of his trip will be to hold discussions on conditions and arrangements for the possible resumption of ICRC activities in Algeria.

The ICRC was able to visit a number of detainees in Algeria in late 1991 and early 1992. Visits were suspended at the request of the Algerian authorities in June 1992 following disagreement regarding the practical details (repeat visits, access to all detainees and all places of detention, interviews in private with detainees selected by the ICRC).

Since June 1992, the ICRC has not had any staff working in Algeria on a permanent basis, although it regularly raises with the authorities there the question of resuming its humanitarian activities. No agreement has been reached as yet.

Since 1994, the ICRC has supported certain Algerian Red Crescent programmes for the most vulnerable groups (provision of school equipment, soup kitchens, holiday camps for children who have suffered from violence).

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KOSOVO: ICRC CALLS FOR TEMPORARY HALT TO FIGHTING IN ORAHOVAC ON HUMANITARIAN GROUNDS

Geneva (ICRC) - Deeply concerned by the desperate plight of people affected by the recent heavy clashes in the village of Orahovac, Kosovo, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) calls on all those taking part in the hostilities to stop fighting long enough to allow the civilians and wounded to be evacuated and the bodies of the dead to be returned to their families.

A team of ICRC delegates travelled yesterday from Pristina to Orahovac to assess the situation following the clashes. Another team went to Malishevo, where more than 20,000 people had arrived after fleeing Orahovac. These displaced people, several of them severely wounded, were suffering from trauma and shock. The ICRC provided them with relief supplies and distributed medical items to hospitals and first-aid posts.

In Orahovac and the surrounding area, ICRC delegates saw bodies scattered along the roadside, destroyed buildings and other obvious signs of the recent fighting. They were extremely concerned about the fact that a number of severely wounded people needed to be evacuated and that many civilians remained trapped in and around the village. They also heard reports of arrests and abductions.

The ICRC urgently calls on all those involved in the hostilities to treat persons who are not or are no longer taking part in the fighting with the respect they are due under the provisions of international humanitarian law.

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Communication to the press No. 98/30
23 July 1998

AFGHANISTAN - ICRC REGrets NGOs' DEPARTURE FROM KABUL

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) regrets the departure in the past few days of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Kabul. It is concerned by the impact this measure will have on the entire population of the Afghan capital, and hopes that a compromise will be found enabling the NGOs to return in acceptable conditions and to resume their humanitarian activities for all the victims.

The ICRC stands ready to help find such a compromise. It continues to work in Kabul and throughout the country and is maintaining contact with the authorities.

Should the NGOs' absence last, the ICRC will have to re-assess the humanitarian situation and consult with the United Nations, the organizations concerned, the donor community and the authorities so as to ensure the survival of the most vulnerable sections of the population in Afghanistan.

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Communication to the press No. 98/31
30 July 1998

BAN ON BLINDING LASER WEAPONS NOW IN FORCE

Geneva (ICRC) - As of today, blinding laser weapons can be added to the list of weapons that are prohibited under international humanitarian law. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) welcomes this development, which confirms the obligation placed upon all States to refrain from using weapons deemed to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.

Protocol IV to the 1980 UN Convention on Conventional Weapons has now come into force, less than three years after its adoption. The Protocol bans the use and transfer of any laser weapon specifically designed to cause permanent blindness. This is the first time since 1868, when exploding bullets were prohibited, that a weapon has been outlawed before being deployed on the battlefield.

"This new norm is a tremendous achievement. Many soldiers and innocent civilians will be spared horrible suffering", said ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga.

To date, Protocol IV has been ratified by 27 States. The ICRC reiterates its call to all States that have not yet done so to adhere to the Protocol as soon as possible. At the same time, the ICRC reminds States of their obligation to review all new weapons in terms of their compatibility with the norms of international humanitarian law. "The next millennium will present challenges similar to that of blinding laser weapons. New technologies for inflicting human injury are around the corner and the full range of their effects are unknown. International humanitarian law has an essential role to play in sparing humanity the worst consequences of its technical capabilities", added Mr Sommaruga.

The States that have notified the United Nations of their ratification of the Protocol are: Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Cape Verde, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Holy See, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Uzbekistan.

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Communication to the press No. 98/32
19 August 1998

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: ICRC APPEALS FOR COMPLIANCE WITH HUMANITARIAN RULES

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is deeply concerned about the consequences in humanitarian terms of the conflict taking place in the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the current situation, the ICRC reminds all the parties involved that international humanitarian law prohibits the destruction or rendering useless of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as drinking water installations and supplies and foodstuffs and their transport. In Kinshasa – a city with several million inhabitants – cuts in the electricity supply are causing a shortage of drinking water and may have extremely serious effects on public health.

The ICRC further reminds all the parties concerned of their obligation to respect international humanitarian law. It urges them to differentiate between combatants and civilians, emphasizing that the latter must be spared in all circumstances and without distinction among them. Violence to the lives and physical or mental integrity of persons not or no longer taking part in the hostilities is prohibited. In addition, any injured or sick person – whether civilian or military – must be taken in and cared for. The lives of persons deprived of their freedom must be spared, and fundamental judicial guarantees must be provided. Extrajudicial executions are prohibited. Moreover, the ICRC requests unrestricted access to all arrested persons.

The ICRC asks the parties to the conflict to do everything possible to comply with these rules and with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. It also requests that Red Cross personnel be allowed to go about their duties unhindered and in safety and demands that the red cross emblem be duly respected.

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Communication to the press No. 98/33
14 September 1998

MORTAL REMAINS REPATRIATED FROM AFGHANISTAN TO IRAN UNDER ICRC AUSPICES

Geneva (ICRC) - Following the recent announcement by the Taliban authorities that the bodies of nine Iranians diplomats killed in August during fighting in Mazar-i-Sharif had been found, the authorities in both Kabul and Tehran asked the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to assist in the repatriation of the mortal remains.

On 14 September an ICRC-chartered aircraft left Peshawar, Pakistan for Meshed, Iran to transport two diplomats from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and two Iranian experts in forensic medicine. The plane then went on to Mazar-i-Sharif, where the four Iranians, accompanied by an ICRC delegate, met representatives of the Taliban to discuss procedures for the identification and handing over of the bodies.

After the nine mortal remains had been examined by the Iranian experts, seven were identified and subsequently repatriated to Iran under ICRC auspices.

The ICRC acted in this operation as a neutral intermediary with a view to enabling the bereaved families to bury their relatives and remains at the disposal of the parties should its services be further required.

Further information: Corinne Adam, ICRC Geneva, tel. ++ 4179 202 36 80

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Communication to the press No. 98/34
17 September 1998

MILESTONE RATIFICATION OF OTTAWA TREATY

Geneva (ICRC) - The ratification yesterday of the Ottawa treaty banning anti-personnel landmines by Burkina Faso is a key event in the extraordinary global response to the suffering caused by these deadly weapons. The deposit of this 40th instrument of ratification with the United Nations Secretary-General in New York means that on 1 March 1999 the treaty will become binding international law for almost a third of the 130 States which have signed it.

"It is especially encouraging that mine-affected countries on three continents, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Mozambique, Yemen and Zimbabwe, are among the first 40 countries to ratify", commented Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "The challenge ahead is actual implementation of the treaty. The setting-up of mine-clearance and mine-awareness programmes and the organization of assistance for victims have only just begun and will require the mobilization of resources at national and international levels for years to come. Real success will be measured in terms of fewer victims, the replanting of fertile farmland, and the resumption of normal life in communities plagued by landmines", he added.

The adoption of the Ottawa treaty was the first time in history that a weapon in widespread use has been outlawed. Its ratification by 40 States less than a year after it was opened for signature is also a unique achievement.

"The Ottawa treaty is the result of a remarkable process, involving the mobilization of public opinion and of a myriad of private organizations, international agencies and governments in response to a humanitarian crisis. It demonstrates that, for once, in the face of atrocious suffering, humanity has been neither powerless nor incapable of achieving results. I congratulate the 40 States which have ratified the treaty for leading the way, and call on other States to sign and ratify it as a matter of urgency, so as to make the treaty universal." said Mr Sommaruga.

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction was concluded in Oslo, Norway, on 18 September 1997, and was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, on 3-4 December of the same year.
The 40 States which have ratified and will therefore be legally bound by the provisions of the treaty are: Andorra, Austria, Bahamas, Belgium, Belize, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Fiji, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Grenada, Holy See, Hungary, Ireland, Jamaica, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Mozambique, Niue, Norway, Peru, Samoa, San Marino, South Africa, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

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Tel: ++4122 730 2729 or ++4122 730 2329

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KOSOVO CRISIS: ICRC STEPPING UP ACTIVITIES

Geneva (ICRC) - After a ten-day suspension of its field activities following a landmine incident in which a doctor was killed and three other medical staff injured, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is resuming its activities throughout Kosovo and seeking to restore the high degree of access to persons in need that it had in recent months. Field trips will be subject to enhanced security assessments, particularly regarding the threat of landmines. A first relief convoy left Pristina this morning with 30 tonnes of food and other supplies to be distributed to displaced people in Mitrovica, north of Pristina. Further convoys are planned for the coming days.

On Monday 12 October, ICRC delegates distributed food and other basic necessities to 200 wounded and sick people at Pristina hospital. Beneficiaries included patients coming from areas affected by the recent violence, refugees from Krajina, and vulnerable individuals treated at the hospital.

The ICRC team in Pristina comprises five delegates working with the support of senior national staff. Last week the organization decided to stay on in Yugoslavia even in the event of airstrikes.

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ICRC TESTING OPINIONS ON WAR TO PROMPT WORLDWIDE DEBATE

Geneva/London (ICRC) - From November 1998 to August 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will be gathering the opinions of thousands of people in a dozen countries who have been directly affected by armed conflict. They will be asked to share their views on the limits to warfare set by international law and on how to improve compliance with the Geneva Conventions and other humanitarian treaties. These will be published along with the results of a parallel survey conducted in countries at peace. The participants' personal stories will be portrayed in publications, the media and on an interactive web site. The project is intended to increase awareness around the world of the rules that already exist for people's protection in wartime and to encourage discussion of humanitarian law in the context of modern-day conflict.

In Colombia, the first round of the study is currently being conducted among displaced civilians, former hostages, soldiers, guerrillas, security detainees, medical personnel and members of the general public. The interviews conducted so far have yielded a fascinating insight into how people perceive the conflict in Colombia and its consequences for their country, as well as their views on the limits set by humanitarian law and the dilemmas that arise in practice.

The project, entitled "People on war", reflects the ICRC's desire to give a voice to those who have personal experience of war as well as to stimulate discussion. It will also mark the 50th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, on 12 August 1999. For the ICRC, the anniversary is an opportunity for the world to reflect on what has occurred in the half-century since the Conventions were adopted, to take stock of the present and to consider the future of international law and humanitarian action.
The survey in each country will result in an individual report published both locally and worldwide. The findings will then be summarized in a final report drawn up at the end of the process. This will be presented to the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, scheduled to take place in Geneva in November 1999. (The International Conference brings together the 188 States party to the Geneva Conventions, 175 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of those Societies, and the ICRC itself.)

The various surveys will be conducted by means of a questionnaire among a representative sample (involving at least 1,000 individuals in each country) of the populations concerned. The opinions of people directly affected by conflict – refugees, prisoners of war, relatives of missing people, soldiers, war-wounded, etc. – will also be sought by means of detailed interviews and group discussions. This work will be carried out by ICRC staff and volunteers from the respective National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, supported and assisted by local professional agencies. The ICRC has engaged an international opinion-survey specialist to advise it on methods, to help draft the questionnaires and to analyse the results.

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COMMUNICATION TO THE PRESS

Communication to the press No. 98/37
Geneva, 12 November 1998

MEXICO: ICRC RELIEF DISTRIBUTION IN CHIAPAS

Geneva (ICRC) - In conjunction with the Mexican Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) carried out relief distributions in the Chenalho district of Chiapas from 3 to 7 November. Apart from soap, the supplies provided consisted of food (maize, maize flour, beans, rice, sugar, oil, sardines and salt), enough to cover 80% of the beneficiaries' nutritional needs over a period of two weeks.

The operation was designed to ensure the survival of displaced persons and local residents who have been giving them shelter and find themselves deprived of access to their fields. The distributions took place in the villages of Pohlo, Acteal, Xoyep, Poconichim, Naranjatic Alto, Chimix, Tzanembolom and Tzajalchen, bringing relief to over 9,600 people.

This was the ICRC's first relief operation since it returned to Chiapas last September. For the moment the distributions will be repeated every two weeks in the same villages. Should field surveys reveal that farmers elsewhere do not have normal access to their fields and therefore require food aid, they will be included in the programme.

Further information:
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MEXICO: ICRC TO PLAY ROLE IN EZLN/COCOPA TALKS

Geneva (ICRC) - In anticipation of the talks to be held on 20 and 22 November in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas) between the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) and COCOPA (Commission for Concordance and Pacification), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been asked to transport the EZLN representatives to the facility where the talks will take place and, together with Mexican Red Cross volunteers, to set up a security perimeter around the facility.

The operation will involve 11 ICRC delegates and about 100 Mexican Red Cross volunteers. It is due to begin on 19 November with the transfer of the EZLN representatives from the villages of Oventic, La Gurrucha and La Realidad.

The ICRC played a similar role in facilitating meetings between the government, the EZLN, COCOPA and CONAI (National Mediation Commission) between 1994 and the end of 1996.

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CAMEROON/NGERIA CONFLICT: ICRC REPATRIATES POWS AND CIVILIANS

ICRC (Geneva) - A total of 211 prisoners of war and civilian internees held in connection with the conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula were released and repatriated on 24 November. The operation took place under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which acted as a neutral intermediary.

The Cameroonian authorities released 124 Nigerians, who had been regularly visited by ICRC delegates throughout their captivity, while 87 Cameroonians, who were visited once by the ICRC before their release, were freed by the Nigerian authorities. They were flown in an ICRC-chartered aircraft to their respective countries. Before boarding, each was interviewed individually by delegates to ensure that all were leaving of their own free will. Mortal remains were also returned.

The ICRC has reminded both parties that its delegations in Lagos and Yaoundé are available to help in ascertaining the whereabouts of those who remain missing, and thus put an end to the uncertainty of their families.

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Communication to the press 98/40
26 November 1998

EAST TIMOR: ICRC ASSESSING SITUATION IN ALAS AREA

Geneva (ICRC) - Concerned about widespread allegations in recent days of massacres near the town of Alas on the south side of East Timor, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) dispatched a delegate from its office in Dili on 22 November to gather information about the situation in Alas and surrounding villages.

The delegate was able to confirm that four persons had been killed in separate incidents. These occurred in the course of military operations following an attack on an Indonesian military post in Alas on 9 November, in which three soldiers of the Indonesian army and a civilian were killed, and thirteen soldiers taken prisoner (11 of whom were subsequently released). However, he was unable to confirm that massacres had been committed. The ICRC has so far been able to visit 13 persons detained in connection with those incidents in police stations in Same and Dili.

Following the attack, an ICRC delegate had visited Alas from 16 to 20 November. He was able to speak freely with the inhabitants and had unimpeded access to all areas.

As part of the ICRC's usual activities in East Timor, the delegate assessed local needs for humanitarian aid. At the same time, the ICRC office in Dili contacted the Indonesian military commander there to offer its services regarding the captured soldiers and express its concern about the possibility of a further deterioration in the situation. The ICRC's regional delegation in Jakarta made a similar approach to the authorities in the Indonesian capital.

At the time of the initial visit to Alas, the situation there was very tense and many civilians were sheltering in a school as the Indonesian army carried out an operation nearby. The delegate observed that houses and personal property had been destroyed.

On the second visit to Alas, the delegate noted that tension had eased but many people were still sheltering in neighbouring villages or sleeping in churches. They were being assisted by local authorities and church organizations. Though some material and medical problems remain to be solved at the school, where the ICRC found 143 persons, no life-threatening situation was observed.

The ICRC will continue to assess and endeavour to meet the need for humanitarian aid and will carry on its visits to persons arrested in connection with the situation in East Timor.

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Communication to the press 98/41
Geneva, 1 December 1998

NEW ICRC WEB SITE

Geneva (ICRC) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has launched a new Web site in English (www.helpicrc.org) and French (www.helpcicr.org) enabling Internet users to make contributions directly by credit card. A similar site will soon open up in German. "We get so many requests on our main site from people wanting to know how to give us money that we decided to set up a special site just for them", explained Ilona Pongracz from the ICRC's Promotion and Private Fundraising Division. An encoding system for credit card numbers guarantees the security of all electronic donations.

Surfers can also sign up as "virtual delegates" on the new site. To do so, they must first pass a series of aptitude tests. That way, they can gain an inside view of the many aspects of a delegate's work and acquire a better understanding of complex subjects, such as international humanitarian law.

The site also presents the ICRC's fund-raising partners, currently the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), Rotary International and the International Road Transport Union (IRU). In addition, an electronic boutique sells promotional items.

Set up by New Media Publishing, the site combines attractive graphics with a deliberately subdued style: black and white photos reflect the harsh reality confronting delegates in their daily tasks. It is directly linked to the ICRC's main site (www.cicr.org), where more general information can be obtained.

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Communication to the press No. 98/42
17 December 1998

IRAQ CONFLICT: ICRC REMINDS STATES OF THEIR OBLIGATIONS

Geneva (ICRC) - In view of the military operations launched against Iraq last night, the ICRC today addressed a diplomatic note to the United States, British and Iraqi governments reminding them of their obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular the four Geneva Conventions of 1949.

Under this body of law, those conducting the hostilities must take all necessary precautions to spare civilians and civilian property, to treat captured persons humanely, to ensure that the wounded and sick have access to medical care, to protect medical facilities, staff and means of transport, and to guarantee respect for the red cross and red crescent emblems.

Meanwhile the ICRC team in Baghdad, including a nurse and a water engineer, are gathering information from the city's hospitals and from the Ministries of Health and Foreign Affairs with a view to affording all victims the necessary assistance in accordance with the mandate entrusted to the organization by the international community.

Since the 1991 Gulf war, the ICRC has been giving support to water treatment stations throughout the country in order to provide the population with clean water. In addition, it delivers emergency medical supplies and assistance to the victims of the ongoing hostilities in northern Iraq. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is also present in Baghdad.

The ICRC has a staff of 10 expatriates in Baghdad and a further eight persons in northern Iraq.

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