

**THE NEW RADIO STATION
OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS**

The new radio station of the International Committee of the Red Cross is installed in a small building in the countryside at Versoix, some 10 kilometers from Geneva, in a field from which rise four lofty antennas.

The station was inaugurated on 4 December 1974 with a direct conversation between Mr. Eric Martin, President of the ICRC, and Mr. Walter Bargatzky, President of the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany, who was inaugurating his Society's radio station at the same time.

The need had long been felt for the ICRC to improve its system of radio communication, which is vital for the speed and effectiveness of its activities in the field. The two transmitter-receivers and the single antenna which still constitute the headquarters radio station had clearly become inadequate, and the proximity of several industrial and administrative buildings sometimes impaired seriously the quality of radio contacts.

The headquarters station continues to operate on some days, but the bulk of the radio traffic between the ICRC and its various delegations is now handled by the new station at Versoix. This station—with three automatic transmitter-receivers, each of which can operate on ten frequencies, and with three directional and two omni-directional antennas—can transmit and receive on all wave-lengths between 2 and 30 megacycles. All the equipment was installed by the ICRC telecommunications staff which had worked for nearly four years in planning the new station and transferring equipment from Geneva to Versoix.

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The ICRC radio system has had a career of ups and downs ever since it was established some 15 years ago.¹ It was decided at the administrative conference on radio communications, at Geneva in 1959, that the Red Cross should have an independent system, to link the various National Societies and connect them with the Red Cross institutions in Geneva.

In 1963, the Swiss telecommunications administration granted the ICRC a licence to establish and operate a radio station. At the end of the same year, daily communications were established with the field hospital at Uqhd, in the heart of the Yemen desert. Apart from its practical use, this first link contributed to relieving the feelings of isolation and loneliness of the medical teams who were working and living hundreds of miles away from civilization. Station HBC-88 of the International Committee of the Red Cross had come into being. To help understand the real significance of this new and useful instrument for the ICRC, it is instructive to read again the article published by *International Review* in December 1964:

At the foot of the rocks, worn smooth by the desert winds and burning to the touch, the surgeons of the ICRC field hospital at Uqhd in the Yemen are consulting each other about a wounded case. The X-ray apparatus has just broken down and it will not be possible to operate. How many days will pass before the news reaches Geneva and how many weeks before spare parts are received ?

One of the ICRC's short-wave transmitting and receiving posts installs its antenna above the camp. At the headquarters of the International Committee in Geneva the main station is on watch and soon wireless engineers collect around the microphone. They ask questions, detect the fault and give instructions to the electrician who, 3000 miles away, then manages to make the necessary repairs. The surgeons can now continue to operate and save lives.

Many other examples could still be found on looking through the log-book of HBC 88, the ICRC's main station, where a series of rapidly transmitted abbreviations summarizes the lives of these teams which bring the Red Cross to all the corners of the world. Swift action has to be taken since the victims of conflicts and disasters cannot be kept waiting. Appeals and replies cross each other with lightning speed. Now delegations are no longer isolated and they can maintain direct contact with the International

¹ *International Review* has published several reports on the development of the ICRC's radio communications system. See in particular the issues of January 1971 and March and November 1972.

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Committee, inform it of their needs and receive instructions, wherever they may be. To-morrow, a world network of emergency Red Cross radiocommunications will ensure the immediate transmission of messages and the effective organizing of relief.

During the conflict in Nigeria, the ICRC supplemented its equipment with the acquisition of a second station of the type used by radio amateurs or "hams". These were pioneering days for those who were trying to develop the most direct and quickest means of contact to carry out the organization's humanitarian mission. Out in the field, delegates often had to turn themselves into radio amateurs to contact Geneva from the most faraway spots. Upon these makeshift radio connections, we must remember, thousands of lives depended. This early experience provided the ICRC with invaluable guidance as to the kind of material it should have. Thereafter, it acquired standard commercial equipment for the principal station in Geneva and several sets, weighing less than 70 pounds (including the antenna, generator and accessories), which delegates and doctors could learn to operate in a very short time. These sets are still part of the essential equipment for the first ICRC team sent to the scene whenever a new conflict breaks out.

In July 1974, at the time of the events in Cyprus, the ICRC radio antenna was erected on the roof of the delegation's base within a few hours after the arrival of the first delegates. Although all other telecommunications had been interrupted, Geneva quickly received the first reports on the situation and launched its first appeals for assistance.

Radio communications have abundantly proved their worth in the most recent humanitarian undertakings.

In 1975, considering only the ICRC, about fifteen communications were exchanged daily—mostly by radio telegraphy—with delegations in the Middle East (Amman, Cairo, Beirut), the Far East (Phnom Penh), the Asian subcontinent (Dacca), Africa (Lomé), Latin America (Caracas, Santiago) and Cyprus, not counting all the conversations by radio telephone between officials in Geneva and delegates in the field.

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In co-operation with the League, the ICRC has also worked to develop radio communications throughout the Red Cross world as a whole. Since 1971, the two institutions have been urging National Societies to obtain permission from their governments to utilize Red Cross frequencies. Thirty-eight Societies, many of them in Latin America, are already doing so, and some of them are operating their own national networks.

The story of Red Cross radio communications cannot be complete without paying tribute to the role played by radio amateurs, who have often performed work of vital importance in humanitarian activities. We need only recall, for example, that in 1973, when the catastrophic earthquake ravaged Nicaragua and the radio system of the National Society was out of commission, it was a radio "ham" in direct touch with the Nicaraguan Red Cross who established the first contact between the League—through ICRC headquarters—and Managua. The League was then in a position to organize its relief activities, and the ICRC dispatched a radio operator and the necessary equipment to maintain the link between Managua and the League.

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Telecommunications are tremendously important, as we can see, for the work of the ICRC. The communications infrastructure, little known to the general public, has become one of the indispensable means for co-ordinating all of the humanitarian activities of the Red Cross—which has been forced to adapt its operations to the rapidity of modern war techniques, to the ever-increasing destruction resulting from conflicts, and to the need to intervene with the utmost rapidity in the event of natural catastrophes. Most of the time, under such circumstances, such conventional means of communication as the telephone and telex are interrupted. This is why every emergency delegation sent out into a new field of operations by the ICRC takes with it complete radio equipment. In this way we can be sure that the voices of men and women working for the Red Cross, across all the seas and continents of the world, will summon aid for suffering people.