

REPATRIATION OPERATIONS BY THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS

The repatriation of foreign residents in the Republic of South Vietnam took place between 28 December 1975 and 29 February 1976, as mentioned in our previous issues. We would like to refer to them again here, for this was a humanitarian action on a large scale enabling 1,657 people to leave Saigon for India, Pakistan and the Yemen.

Several flights were organized by the International Red Cross in co-operation with the authorities and Red Cross of the Republic of South Vietnam and with the governments of the receiving countries. The aircraft were chartered by the ICRC, whose delegates aboard the planes escorted the families, many of which had several children. The delegates gave assistance throughout the flight and on arrival as explained by one of the five delegates on this mission, J.-J. Kurz, in his account published in Contact (N° 7) after he had escorted nearly 500 Yemeni nationals back to their own country¹.

Aboard the DC-8 of the International Committee of the Red Cross the 237 passengers insist on landing. Having left Vietnam for their homeland, they have now been more than ten hours aloft. They are all tired; a score of half-naked crying children wander in the aisle, some of the adults are dozing in their seats, some ask for water, some of them are tying and untying the same bundles over and over again. One man has fallen ill and lies shivering under a blanket.

In the cockpit the pilot is talking with the ICRC delegates: a strong wind has slowed the plane and now the mountains surrounding Sana'a, the capital of the Yemen Arab Republic, are hidden in clouds. Landing is impossible, the plane must turn south for Aden, capital of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

Radio contact is made with Aden, where some surprise is expressed, but when the aircraft comes to a stop at Aden the delegates are relieved

¹ *Plate.*

to see awaiting them representatives of the authorities and of the South Yemen Red Crescent. After a brief explanation, local Red Crescent volunteers take over to find shelter and food for all the adults and children.

It is almost 11 o'clock at night when the passengers are permitted to leave the aircraft which must return to Vietnam immediately for the second flight of the repatriation programme.

Two of the ICRC delegates remain at Aden to arrange for the repatriation of their charges to the Yemen Arab Republic. They search for some means of transport to Taiz, but the road from Aden to Taiz is difficult and long. So they decide on travel by air. A jet is offered, but it is too expensive. Finally they are able to hire two DC-6's. While one delegate attends to the charter party, the other reassures the passengers. Families are made comfortable with camp beds and blankets. The sick man has been taken to hospital by a Red Crescent ambulance and several voluntary workers from the Red Crescent are serving food and hot tea. A nurse is going to spend the night with the passengers.

Next morning, after a hearty breakfast, the take-off. The Red Crescent volunteers wave goodbye, the children reply from behind the portholes, and soon the planes are over the desert. Gradually the stark peaks of the mounts are in sight and soon after, in the centre of the mountain mass, Taiz comes into view.

At the airport the North Yemen Red Crescent has made preparations. Hot tea is ready and buses are waiting to take the passengers to new stone houses a few kilometres from the airport. After a meal of rice, vegetables and meat the families are installed, one to each house, with mattresses and blankets. A new life is starting for them in a country which some of them have never seen.

The delegates depart. They are sure of one thing at least: in both North and South Yemen the enthusiasm of the young voluntary workers augurs well for the future of the two emerging Red Crescent Societies.