

THE HONDURAS-SALVADOR CONFLICT

**Aid to victims by National Societies
of Central America**

In previous editions the *International Review* has given information on the ICRC's work which lasted several months in Honduras and Salvador as a consequence of the conflict which broke out between these countries in the middle of July 1969. We mentioned the humanitarian work of the National Societies of the belligerent countries and of Guatemala. It was discharged with such dedication and so effectively that we believe it useful to recapitulate below the essential features of that work.¹

Honduran Red Cross

From the outbreak of the conflict and throughout August this National Society had to face two major problems: assistance to interned Salvadoran civilians and to displaced Honduran nationals.

There were about 10,000 internees from Salvador. They were in several improvised camps, the largest being the camps of Agas in San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, the capital, and Choluteca in the south of the country. At one time there were more than 2,500 Salvadorans at the San Pedro Sula camp. From the first day the Honduran Red Cross organized a small dispensary and canteen in which volunteer workers each day prepared three meals from food collected among the population of the town.

In co-operation with the ICRC representatives who had made an on-the-spot survey of the most urgent needs, the Red Cross distributed tents in camps where the plight of the internees was

¹ *Plate* : Exchange of mail and repatriation of civilian detainees.

least enviable, to protect them from the season's torrential rains. They also provided plastic dishes and other kitchen utensils and disinfectants for water purification in order to prevent the spread of diseases. Medicines against influenza and diarrhoea were regularly distributed by Red Cross first-aiders to those detainees at Tegucigalpa and Choluteca who required them most. Anti-tetanus vaccinations were given at the San Pedro Sula camp.

In order the better to assist displaced persons, the Red Cross set up in a primary school in the small town of Nacaome, in the south of the country and only a few kilometers from the front, a dispensary manned by a medical team and a permanent detachment of first-aiders. Medical supplies were renewed from Tegucigalpa and at least two ambulances were constantly available in readiness to evacuate any seriously wounded cases to the hospital in the capital.

After the withdrawal of occupation troops at the beginning of August and the complete evacuation of the internment camps towards the end of the month, the main efforts of the Red Cross were concentrated on providing for the Honduran civilians repatriated from Salvador. As early as 12 August the Red Cross of Honduras, like that of Salvador, had closely co-operated with the two ICRC delegates on the spot in the exchange of prisoners of war.

During the successive repatriation operations between 16 August and 6 October, involving some 450 Honduran civilians, many of them women and children, a strong contingent of first-aiders was also present at the frontier post of El Amatillo, with all available ambulances, to attend to the victims and convey them to their villages. At Nacaome, the first town on the road to Tegucigalpa, the Red Cross first aiders had organized a temporary reception camp capable of lodging up to 200 persons. This team often worked almost to dawn to prepare food for these refugees and help them to settle in as best as possible in large rooms where they provided straw-matting and blankets.

It should be pointed out that the Red Cross helped not only their compatriots released by the Salvador authorities, but also helped the Salvador nationals who, after release from internment, wished to join their families in Salvador. Thanks to the free transport service organized by the Red Cross of Honduras to the border,

several hundred families were reunited. Moreover, twice a week, the first-aiders of both National Societies met at El Amatillo to exchange correspondence from detainees to their families or from families to detainees.

Salvador Red Cross

During the same period the National Society of Salvador helped Salvadoran refugees coming from Honduras, prisoners of war and Honduran civilian detainees.

From 18 June to the beginning of October, the Red Cross helped more than 36,000 Salvador nationals, several thousand of them women and children, coming from Honduras with nothing but the clothes they stood in. Most of these refugees crossed the frontier at El Amatillo on the pan-American highway, to the east of the country, and at El Poy in the north on the San Salvador—Nueva Ocotepeque road. At both these frontier posts the Red Cross recorded the identity of refugees as they arrived and took them to the reception camps at Santa Tecla, Chalatenango, San Miguel, San Vicente and La Union. Other refugees went from Honduras to Guatemala where they were temporarily sheltered by the Guatemalan Red Cross before proceeding west to Salvador where they were lodged in the camps at Santa Ana, Ahuachapan, Sonsonate and Ciudad Arce. These camps were capable of sheltering from 200 to 300 people, and the refugees stayed there one or two days before re-settling in the country.

It was no mean task to take care of all these refugees day after day, often at a rate of 2,000 persons a week. It was discharged by an excellent team formed by the Red Cross first-aiders and Ladies' Committees. In the various towns where there were reception camps they attended to the distribution of clothing and foodstuffs and they gave medical assistance and first aid to many children. In the largest of the camps, at Santa Tecla, there was a clothing centre and at the San Salvador Red Cross headquarters there was a medical supplies and dressing materials centre.

This continuous assistance to refugees by the Red Cross was made possible by the Society's twenty ambulances, the dozen

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lorries lent to it, the dynamic organization set up by the Red Cross Council, and the daily dedication of some 300 volunteer first-aiders.

The National Society also attended continuously to the needs of civilian Hondurans in detention, especially the women and children temporarily interned at Cafetalón, Santa Tecla, the camp near San Salvador, and even at the headquarters of the San Miguel section of the Red Cross. It gave them every necessary material aid (medicines, clothing, straw-matting, food, cigarettes, writing paper, etc.). A member of the Supreme Council of the Salvador Red Cross accompanied the ICRC delegates on each visit to prisoners of war detained at the San Vicente Penitentiary and to Honduran civilians in the prisons of Santa Ana, Sonsonate, Zacatecoluca, Cojutepeque and Ilopango.

Guatemalan Red Cross

The active solidarity among National Societies in time of conflict and the help given to the victims of war in belligerent countries by neighbouring Red Cross Societies are well known. A further instance was the intervention of the Guatemalan Red Cross.

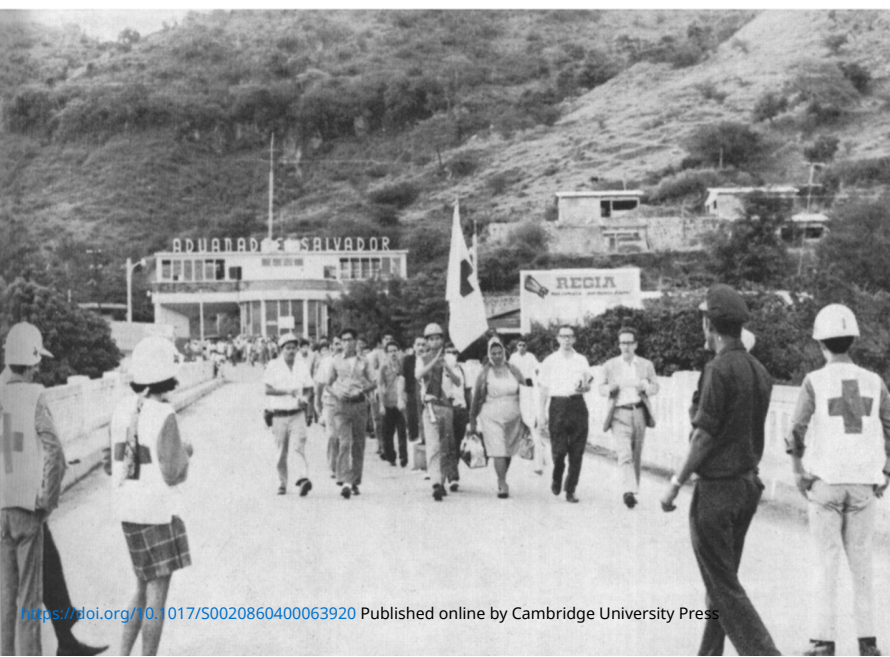
From the outset of hostilities that National Society organized an "Emergency Committee" which, as early as 15 July, sent ambulances loaded with medical supplies and dressing material, and a group of first-aiders to the local sections at Jutiapa, Esquipulas and Izabal in the eastern part of the country bordering on Salvador and Honduras. In those towns, the Ladies' Committees made arrangements to meet any eventuality, collecting clothing and food from the population. At the same time the National Society appealed for blood donations and set up a tracing service in its central headquarters.

From the first day of the conflict until the occupation of the Honduran town of Nueva Ocotepeque, hundreds of Honduran nationals, most of them peasants, sought refuge in Guatemala. With tents lent by the army, the Red Cross set up several reception camps near the town of Esquipulas. As the flow of refugees increased—more than 5,000 Hondurans were sheltered by the Red



At the frontier between the two countries representatives of both National Societies meet (*standing, on left, Mr. H. A. Segovia, regional head of Salvadoran first-aiders, Mr. Mora-Durón, Honduran Red Cross, director-general, between them Mr. E. Leemann, ICRC delegate*) to exchange mail from interned civilians to their families (August 1969).

Under the same auspices, repatriation of Honduran detainees at the same place (October 1969).



Cross in July—private individuals, hotel keepers and the College of Benedictine Friars offered accommodation through the Red Cross.

A census of refugees and a medical service were organized. The most seriously ill were taken to the nearest hospital at Chiquimula. An interesting sidelight was that during the 29 days the refugees spent at Esquipulas there were thirteen births!

When Nueva Ocotepeque was liberated in August, the Red Cross organized repatriation of the refugees in family groups. With the agreement of the Honduran authorities, all were repatriated between 5 and 7 August by ambulances or military lorries to their own towns and villages, or by sea to the Honduran port of Puerto Cortés by the vessel "Hilda".

As early as 3 July some Salvador nationals residing in Honduras took refuge in the North of Guatemala, crossing the frontier at El Cinchado. This exodus increased at the end of July. In groups of 20 to 60 each day, 1,346 Salvadorans had crossed into Guatemala by 16 August.

The Red Cross also helped the victims of the conflict by giving them clothing, food and medicines in the improvised camps at Puerto Barrios and Izabal. By rail, coach and lorry made available freely to the National Society of Guatemala by private companies and by the army, these Salvadoran refugees were taken south and repatriated. In Salvador they were taken in by the first-aiders from the Ahuachapan and Santa Ana Red Cross sections.

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It must be mentioned in conclusion that the Red Cross of Nicaragua also gave Honduran refugees shelter and assistance.