

The British Red Cross today

In connection with the recent visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the ICRC, International Review is pleased to give in this issue an account of the work performed today by the British Red Cross. This article was written for International Review by Mr. David Bedford, press officer at British Red Cross headquarters.

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Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, people in Britain began to take an increasing interest in humanitarian affairs. The first name that comes to mind, of course, is that of Florence Nightingale, who tended the wounded and the sick in the Crimean War (1854-55). When Henry Dunant published his "Memory of Solferino", his suggestions found immediate supporters among the English. He was invited to deliver lectures in England and his text, partly in French and partly in English, has been preserved. The British representatives at the Diplomatic Conferences of 1863 and 1864, which laid the foundations of the Red Cross movement, supported Dunant's proposals and became his friends, and on 18 February 1865 Great Britain ratified the Geneva Convention of 1864. The ground was therefore ready for a Red Cross Society to take root in England.

On 4 August 1870, soon after the outbreak of hostilities between France and Prussia, a large meeting convened in London by a provisional committee founded in 1869 decided to set up a society to care for the wounded and sick of that war. That was the start of the British Red Cross Society. It obtained immediate moral and financial support from the public and the Society took supplies to both sides in the conflict. Thus began its long and distinguished service to the victims of war which was climaxed in its work for the sick and wounded of two World Wars.

Today, in peacetime, the Society has two main aims. One is to train the public and its own members in emergency skills and the other is to give voluntary service to the community in the fields of first aid, nursing and welfare.

As a Voluntary Aid Society subject to the terms of the Geneva Conventions and the principles of the Red Cross movement, the British

Red Cross has a paramount responsibility to maintain a trained membership ready to act as an auxiliary to the public authority in time of emergency whether in peace or war.

In addition, it has a responsibility to train members of the public so that they are prepared to deal with emergencies such as accidents or sudden illness. In 1979 the Society trained over 50,000 adults to an approved standard in first aid; under a new scheme, these qualified first aiders and others who will be trained in the future, will be given the opportunity to join an "Emergency Reserve" ready to be called out in a grave national emergency. In such circumstances they would work alongside regular Red Cross volunteers and under the co-ordination of the public authorities concerned.

The Society's peacetime services in the community are offered by some 100,000 volunteers who are organised under a County Branch structure in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Their activities vary according to local needs but usually include first aid duties at public events, escorting the sick and handicapped on essential journeys and running Medical Loan Depots to provide aids for those in sudden or long term need of them. Other services include clubs for the handicapped and frail elderly, holidays for the disabled of all ages, and a wide range of welfare services.

The Society endeavours to meet areas of need not adequately covered by the Government's Health and Social Service provisions. On occasions it has pioneered services which have later been taken over by the State. The blood transfusion service was one such case.

The British Red Cross Youth and Juniors movement has some 53,000 members who offer a range of services as varied as their adult colleagues. Members are trained in emergency skills to save life following accidents. Youth and Junior members provide holidays for handicapped children and are given special training to cope with the day to day problems which can arise.

Internationally the British Red Cross supports the work of both the ICRC and the League. Its disaster warehouse on the outskirts of London holds relief goods which can be sent anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. The Society also provides specialist personnel for relief operations. For example, it recently provided 28 doctors and nurses to work among Kampuchean refugees in Thailand and a delegate to organise relief work on behalf of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

In addition to its on going fund raising the Society regularly launches appeals to the public for donations to support specific relief operations. Notably, in recent years, it raised £800,000 in 1975 to support ICRC

work at the end of the wars in Cambodia and Vietnam and raised over £500,000 in 1979 in support of relief work in specific disaster areas.

In some major disaster situations, the Society joins with other aid agencies to appeal jointly under the umbrella of the Disasters Emergency Committee. The Society provides the Committee's secretariat and in certain circumstances co-ordinates relief activities among them.

The British Government regularly uses the Society as a channel for its aid and government-financed relief efforts are arranged through Red Cross sources.

Despite the fact that a number of the Society's overseas Branches have become independent National Societies since the war, the Society still has 24 Branches and Committees overseas. Support and encouragement is given from London. Services offered by the Branches vary from region to region. For example, the Hong Kong Branch is actively involved in medical, relief and tracing work among Vietnamese "boat people" refugees; the Dominica Branch took aid to victims of last year's Hurricane David and the Zimbabwe Red Cross offers countrywide medical, feeding and training services while working towards independent National Red Cross Society status.

In some areas of work the Society's home and international activities merge. In its tracing work, for example, the Society uses both the world wide resources of the movement and its nationwide network of volunteers to make enquiries. The Society is still finding about two people a week who have not seen their relatives since they were separated from them during the Second World War. These are mainly Poles who were among the 250,000 Eastern and Central European refugees who settled in Britain after the war. The Society has now started tracing work on behalf of the Vietnamese refugees arriving in the country.

The Society is on the threshold of a decade which could be one of the most challenging in its history. The government has recently announced reductions in its expenditure on Health and Social Services inevitably leading more people to turn to the Society for help; government legislation demanding that trained first aiders should always be present on work sites has significantly increased the number of requests for training; and the Society would be given a far reaching role under government contingency plans for the event of an attack upon the country. The increasing needs overseas will also necessitate even greater efforts by the Society.

The Society will meet these new challenges in the best traditions of the Red Cross movement.

David Bedford