

# IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

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## Santo Domingo

*The following report, submitted at the ICRC's request, was recently received in Geneva. Not the least reason for our being pleased to publish it is that it bears testimony to the fine work carried out by the Dominican Red Cross in particularly difficult circumstances. It was written after the events which occurred in Santo Domingo, by Señor LUIS F. FERNANDEZ MARTINEZ, who was President of the Dominican Red Cross at that time.*

*Our readers will recall the intervention of the ICRC and the work of its delegates ; these were described several times in the International Review* <sup>1</sup>.

This report is being drawn up to place on record, in the history of the Dominican Red Cross, the humanitarian work carried out by the National Red Cross Society and the ICRC. First we wish to emphasize the dedication displayed by the Institution's members and also by the volunteers, who, in true Red Cross spirit, gave a fine example of exceptional devotion to duty.

On April 24, 1965, we learnt that a coup d'état had just taken place in the Dominican Republic. On the following day armed conflict broke out between the "Constitutionalist" Forces and those of the military junta which, later on, took the name "Government of National Reconstruction". During the first day the fighting was limited to the outskirts of the town and to the approaches to the Duarte Bridge.

From the evening of the 25th, however, the fighting became more wide-spread. The number of wounded and dead throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, *International Review*, August 1965.

town was so great that the Dominican Red Cross personnel, who had gone into action the previous day, found its activities becoming more and more intense. Ten of the city's ambulances and four others from various parts of the country were used for the transport of the many wounded and dead to the hospitals and also for supplying the hospitals with urgently required material.

The work of the Red Cross and particularly of the ambulances was continually interrupted by the fire of weapons of every calibre, including mortars, tanks, guns, bazookas, rifles and machine-guns as well as by air raids. This fighting continued until April 30 at 11.30 a.m., when the President of the Dominican Red Cross, in collaboration with the Papal Ambassador and after having succeeded in making telephone contact with the armed forces in both sectors, arranged a truce, to enable collection of the hundreds of wounded and dead with which the streets were strewn. On the following day, in view of the danger of an epidemic and the impossibility of properly burying the corpses, the Red Cross was obliged, with the agreement of the Church, to consign the bodies to a common grave. The dead numbered about 350 and some of them had to be cremated.

A few days later, in co-operation with the Department of Health and Social Welfare, and with the help of personnel from the World Health Organization, a large-scale vaccination campaign against typhoid and para-typhoid was undertaken.

The work of the Red Cross was hindered by the lack of electricity and telephone communication and also by the shortage of water. In addition, misuse of the Red Cross sign was frequent. Many private cars belonging to doctors which, because of their white colour, could be mistaken for ambulances, were used to transport war material and combatants and the latter several times opened fire from the inside of these cars. As a result, several Red Cross ambulances were later fired on and the personnel wounded.

When the truce which the Red Cross had arranged came to an end, there were daily wounded and killed. The cease fire which had been of short duration did however contribute to a reduction in the number of deaths.

During the first few days of May, fighting was less intense and valuable assistance in the form of medical supplies was received from the American Red Cross.

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On May 14, the struggle broke out with renewed violence in the north-west of the capital which was held by the Constitutionalist Forces. These operations continued for six days, in the course of which the Red Cross was more active than ever. Its main task was the transport of wounded and dead and the provisioning of hospitals in various districts of the town.

On May 14, Mr. Pierre Jequier, delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross, arrived in Santo Domingo. His presence had been requested by the Dominican Red Cross so that, through co-operation with the National Society, effective aid could be given to the prisoners of war and political detainees in the Santo Domingo prisons.

National Society officials, together with Mr. Jequier, visited La Victoria Penitentiary, the prisons of the Palacio Nacional, the Salomé Ureña Institute, and La Audiencia ; the latter two were on territory controlled by the Constitutionalist Forces. By these visits the Red Cross was able to make known its interest in the treatment of prisoners and their state of health, and it was able also to deliver medical and food supplies intended for these prisoners. Following these visits, the ICRC delegate drew up a report which was handed to both Governments in order that improvements be made in conditions of detention.

On May 19, the battle was resumed when the Constitutionalist Forces attempted to retake the Palacio Nacional. There were dead and wounded, and activity by the Red Cross and the blood bank was intense. Mention must be made of the fact that until that time the help received from other Latin American republics and from the United States as well as several European countries had been considerable : pharmaceuticals, blood, linen and food-stuffs.

In view of the many wounded and dead to be transported even whilst fighting was going on, and the risks which ambulance drivers and volunteers had to run, the Dominican Red Cross, in co-operation with the ICRC and World Health Organization delegates, as well as with the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, drafted a cease fire proposal which was submitted to the National Reconstruction and Constitutionalist Governments. After several changes, two such documents were finally signed on May 20 by the President, Colonel Francisco Caamaño for the Constitutionalist

Forces, and by General Antonio Imbert, President of the Government of National Reconstruction. This cease fire undoubtedly saved many human lives.

During this period, the Dominican Red Cross had many other tasks to attend to, not the least of which was the recruiting of blood donors. The staff of the blood bank played a large part in this campaign, in which a number of voluntary personnel were associated.

To enable proper treatment to be given to the wounded, blood had to be delivered to the hospitals, an almost impossible task at times, in the midst of the fighting. Special mention should be made of the co-operation received from our blood bank and the town of San Francisco Macoris through which we continually received blood supplies collected in that province. In addition, several other towns sent us blood they had collected.

A second ICRC delegate arrived on May 28, Mr. Serge Nessi, who, with Mr. Jequier, co-operated with the Dominican Red Cross indefatigably in every aspect of its activity. After a period of relative calm, fighting broke out again on June 15 and once more the Red Cross was in action with might and main. Finally, we would mention that most of the help received by the Dominican Red Cross and our people came from the U.S.A., Mexico, Colombia, Panama, Argentina, Aruba Island, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, Chile, Curaçao, Spain, France and Switzerland. In addition, many sister Societies generously co-operated with a grateful Dominican Red Cross.

On July 4, Mr. Jequier left for Geneva and Mr. Nessi on the 10th. Although they considered their presence no longer indispensable, both assured the President of the Dominican Red Cross that they would return in case of need.

In conclusion, we would add a few general comments prompted by the Dominican Red Cross's experience during this tragic episode in our country's history.

1. Voluntary workers are extremely important, and it is essential that they be trained in peace-time.
2. Abuse of the red cross emblem led to difficulty in the performance of our work, and was undoubtedly the cause of tragic incidents which would otherwise not have occurred.

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3. The voluntary staff should include people of all ages, particular importance being attached to the Junior Red Cross.
4. Undoubtedly the constant neutrality of the Red Cross enabled it to carry out its task in accordance with Henry Dunant's wishes.
5. National Societies should strengthen the ties between them through regional, inter-American and world conferences.
6. Red Cross activities must always be free of the trammels of political considerations, not only in war-time but also in time of peace.

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### Youth's Viewpoint...

" Red Cross Youth ; tomorrow's strength today " : this was the theme of an essay competition organized by the Canadian Junior Red Cross on the occasion of World Red Cross Day for 1965 which, as is well known, was dedicated to youth. This competition was open to all Canadian Juniors ; the winner of the first prize for French-speaking competitors was *Miss Pauline Lajoie*, of Edmundston, whilst the winning English language competitor was *Miss Sherry Hilton* of Calgary, Alberta. Thus these two young girls who are both only 16 years of age, were able to spend part of their summer holidays in Europe ; this was the prize offered to the winning competitors.

As can be seen from the extracts which we believe will be of interest to our readers, these winning entries which have been kindly communicated to us by the Junior Red Cross Bureau of the League, display the competitors' earnest desire to serve their neighbours in a spirit of solidarity and humanity. And this is the true spirit of the Junior Red Cross, a spirit which, as Mr. Verniers wrote in his foreword to the book on the World Conference of Educators at Lausanne, " is to make young people aware of the