

Security in ICRC field operations

by Philippe Dind

In the course of the last 20 years the number of ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) expatriate staff working in the field and the number of operations conducted by the organisation have increased tenfold; the number of locally hired staff has risen in about the same proportion. Moreover, as ICRC delegates' activities take them closer to the fighting than before, their working conditions have become more hazardous.

The conflict environment too has changed considerably. For example, the chain of command among combatants has weakened to the point where it is often difficult to distinguish between the armed forces and gangs of bandits. All these factors combined make it extremely difficult for the ICRC to adhere to its traditional working methods. The number of people that have to be contacted to ensure that an operation runs smoothly has risen sharply, without this having any favourable effect on security, rather with the opposite effect.

These developments have prompted the ICRC to focus even greater attention on matters relating to the safety of its field activities. What follows is an outline of the organisation's general approach to security.

The first tenet of the ICRC's security policy is that danger is not the exception. Danger is inherent in the working conditions of ICRC staff and eliminating it completely would mean withdrawing all personnel from their working environment. It should, therefore, always be taken into account in operational decisions.

The second tenet is that although security has its technical aspects, it is above all a political issue. No security rule and no protective measures can replace the establishment of a network of contacts among all the parties to a conflict so as

to convince them of the ICRC's neutrality, impartiality and independence. Neutrality - and above all the combatants' perception of that neutrality, a perception which stems from the organisation's independence and impartiality - is the best guarantee for the warring parties that the ICRC does not constitute a threat.

Security rules must be understood and applied with both these tenets in mind. Compliance with the rules brings the risk down to an acceptable level, but cannot eliminate it altogether.

As a rule, security measures are aimed at:

- Preventing serious incidents by eliminating the possibility of their occurrence. Potential targets can be removed, for example by avoiding cash transfers; making sure that expatriates stay out of no-go areas; or prohibiting travel by road where there may be land-mines.
- Reducing risk by means of deterrents such as perimeter protection, guards and bomb shelters, or by means of preventive measures that promote respect for the ICRC's activities, staff and property (for example, negotiations with the warring parties, use of the ICRC emblem, notification systems, etc).
- Limiting the consequences of an incident if it nevertheless occurs (by means of medical evacuations, insurance, etc).

Regardless of the measures taken, a certain degree of risk remains inevitable, and expatriate staff have to learn to live with it. Recognising this fact should not be interpreted as a lack of resolve to ensure their security, quite the contrary: the fact that only a residual element remains means that everything possible has been done to minimise the risk.

Some levels of risk may be considered acceptable if they are justified by the humanitarian impact of the operation. That impact should be measured not only in terms of immediate benefits (food distributions, for example) but also with a view to the long term (surveys, etc). No risks should be taken for the sake of maintaining a presence or for reasons of competition.

Training for all

The best way of improving security is to give special priority to training, with a view to creating awareness of risks, ensuring consistency of security measures, and imparting the technical knowledge and the skills required for each individual to assume his or her responsibilities in this respect.

Training should be:

- given to expatriate and local staff alike;
- geared to the context and the specific risks facing each individual;
- adapted to each person's actual tasks and duties;
- given at headquarters and in the delegations.

The seven pillars of security

The ICRC's security policy for field operations relies on the seven 'pillars' described below. The first few of these are virtually exclusive to the ICRC, while the last are adopted by all organisations or multinational corporations to protect expatriate staff. The order of importance assigned to each of them will vary according to the type of threat encountered. In particular, the choice of active or passive protective measures (pillar number 7) will clearly depend entirely on the local situation.

1. Acceptance of the ICRC

The concept of acceptance is of paramount importance to the ICRC. To be able to operate, the organisation has to be accepted by the parties to the conflict. The disintegration of social structures and the emergence of warlords and organised crime make it indispensable for the ICRC to be accepted not only by the authorities of a constitutional State but by all groups wielding any power. Such acceptance is inextricably linked to the mandate of the ICRC as a neutral intermediary, and to its status as an impartial and independent humanitarian organisation. The ICRC has no means of exerting pressure to impose its activities. Persuasion and influence are its only weapons. Viewed from this angle, vulnerability paradoxically offers a form of protection.

The means used to achieve acceptance are negotiation, projection of a consistent image, and efforts to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law and the Fundamental Red Cross/Red Crescent Principles. These activities have to be conducted at all levels. In many, but not all, situations, two other means are used to strengthen acceptance: promotion of ICRC activities by making them as visible as possible; and broadcasting information to a wide range of audiences via the local media.

Another factor that enhances security is acceptance by expatriates of the culture in which they are working. If they learn to understand the local system of values and customs they can act in a manner consistent with their environment. This understanding is essential if they are to be able to adjust to different situations and to the way in which a particular society functions, without having to become part of it. All expatriates have a duty to spend the time needed to familiarise themselves with the political, social and cultural features of the country

ICRC security training course at Chatigny, Geneva

to which they have been assigned, notably by reading. Familiarity with the armed groups operating in the ICRC's environment, and how they function, is also vital in order to adjust security measures to the prevailing dangers.

2. Identification

The second pillar is a logical consequence of the first: once its special role has been accepted, the ICRC must be identifiable. Identification relies mainly on the emblem of the red cross. To distinguish itself from other 'humanitarian' players who use or misuse the red cross, the ICRC uses a logo consisting of a red cross surrounded by two concentric black circles between which appear the words "Comité International Genève". Vehicles operating in sensitive situations fly a flag with this ICRC logo, to attract special attention; however, care must be taken not to overuse this means of protection.

To supplement visual identification, buildings used by the ICRC and staff movements in the field are notified to all parties to the conflict. As modern methods of warfare make it possible to destroy a target long before visual contact has been established, notification is sometimes the only effective method of protection. This is particularly important when aircraft are used.

Special technical means such as flashing blue lights and radar

transponders may be used to identify hospital ships or medical aircraft.

3. Information

In any high-risk situation, information is a fundamental element of security. Reliable information makes it possible to anticipate events and to react in an appropriate manner as situations develop or when dangers arise during field trips. Information should therefore flow in all directions: from senior staff downwards and vice versa, and between ICRC colleagues and outside contacts.

All field personnel must acquire the conditioned reflex of collecting and passing on as much information as possible on security matters, whether relating to the past or the present situation or to developing trends. All security incidents must be reported orally or in writing, depending on their importance, so that the delegation can take steps to avoid any similar events in the future or to anticipate more serious ones. Special attention must be paid to any signs that the situation is deteriorating, and care must be taken not to become accustomed to such signs, so as not to unconsciously raise one's threshold of tolerance of danger. Locally hired staff are not only entitled to be kept abreast of developments but are also a very important source of local news and reports on changes in the overall climate.

As regards the exchange of information between the ICRC and other organisations and entities, it is



ICRC/Thierry Gassmann

essential to adopt an attitude that is as open as possible. Nonetheless, care must be taken not to overstep the limits of confidentiality, for example by never seeking to obtain or pass on information of a military nature.

4. Security regulations drawn up by individual ICRC delegations

Each delegation has its own security rules which prescribe proper behaviour and are specific to the country concerned. Where necessary, sub-delegations also have to draft security rules applicable to the local situation. The rules should lay down only the basic precautions and leave some room for manoeuvre. They are in no way a substitute for the responsibility every individual must assume towards himself and those affected by his or her decisions.

The rules must be as concise yet as comprehensive as possible. They should cover all relevant subjects while stating only the essentials, so as to ensure that they do not lose their full impact. Security rules should be constantly updated in line with the situation, and deal with both preventive measures and appropriate reactions in the event of a security incident.

5. Personality

The safety of the ICRC's field activities depends to a large extent on the personal attributes of its staff, the most important of which are solidarity and a sense of responsibility.

In dangerous or threatening situations or in other difficult circumstances, the security of several individuals may depend on one person's reactions and attitude. What is needed is not so much a remarkably well-balanced personality but an awareness of one's own limits, the capacity to remain calm and clear-headed, and acceptance of any weak points that might be revealed in the course of the mission. In this respect, to discover in the heat of action that one is not cut out for the job and to give it up shows courage and a sense of responsibility.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a further way to combat fatigue and nervous tension and preserve physical and psychological well-being.

It is important to recognise signs of physical or mental stress and to talk

about them openly. In the face of danger, these reactions may be normal and can play a useful role in alerting us to and regulating stress. If they are acknowledged and discussed, they soon dissipate. If they are ignored and suppressed, they lead to the taking of unnecessary risks. Talking over one's concerns and emotions is always the best way of maintaining a sense of perspective.

In this connection, solidarity is of fundamental importance - staff must support each other in the delegations and during field operations.

6. Telecommunications

Telecommunications play an important part in security by facilitating the transmission of information, the monitoring of and checking movements in the field, giving warning of a deterioration in situation, or dealing with any crisis that may arise.

The facilities made available should be geared to the specific situation, in terms of both quality and quantity:

- modern, reliable equipment, which can be operated independently of the local infrastructure and is serviced by the ICRC;
- a network appropriate to the geographical situation, with ICRC staff on site to set up and develop the telecommunications system as required; round-the-clock radio monitoring, if circumstances require;
- training of the users, facilitated by the greatest possible level of standardisation.

7. Passive and active protective measures

Protective measures, whether passive or active, are taken only in situations where there is no other way of ensuring security. Sadly, such situations are on the increase. They fall into two main categories:

- (a) When there is a risk of indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population, the ICRC is no longer protected by its special status. For preventive purposes, delegations will opt for premises that are not in an exposed position and that have passive protective facilities, mainly bomb shelters. Individual protective mea-

asures such as bullet-proof vests are not normally used, for two reasons: the ICRC does not accept that its staff might be potential targets, and it does not want them to take greater risks because they feel protected. Whatever the protective measures taken, they are always as discreet as possible and must never be of military appearance.

- (b) In situations where crime and banditry are rife, ICRC expatriate staff are in the same position as any other foreigner living in the country. In this kind of context the emblem offers no protection. Vulnerability becomes a risk factor and delegations must make sure they are hard targets by adopting protective measures such as physical barriers, alarm systems, guards, etc. Active protective measures include armed escorts, which are used only in very exceptional circumstances and with the approval of headquarters.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of security regulations may be likened to the strength of a chain, which is as strong as its weakest link. Security in the field depends on coherence between all seven factors described above, and heads of delegation are responsible for ensuring their proper application by each and every staff member.

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