



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

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Germany: Hitler seizes power

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler took power in Germany. While free governments, immobilised by depression and isolationism, looked the other way, some of their citizens acted. Within months, a concerned group of 51 Americans, responding to a plea by Albert Einstein, met to organise a branch of the Europe-based International Relief Association. Their objectives were clear: to help save anti-Nazi leaders targeted by the Gestapo, and to guide those in imminent danger to safety in free countries. The founders included many of the country's intellectual leaders – people like educator John Dewey, historian Charles A Beard, philosopher Morris Cohen, civil rights leader Roger Baldwin, writer John Dos Passos, rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, publisher Oswald Garrison Villard and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, later the Chairman of the IRC.

The mission expanded in 1936 as Hitler began to devour Europe (“course by course,” as Churchill put it). When the Nazis swallowed Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, the refugee tide grew, and surged again as thousands escaped from Fascist Italy and Franco's Spain.

Rescue from France

In June 1940, a new chapter in the IRC's seven-year history started. Paris had fallen to invading Nazi forces, creating a massive exodus of refugees to the south of France. An armistice required the collaborationist French regime, headed by old Marshall Petain, to “surrender on demand” former residents of the “Greater Reich.” That meant all refugees who had fled from countries seized by Hitler. The agreement especially imperilled the thousands of political, intellectual, cultural and scientific leaders among the refugees.

A new American group, the Emergency Rescue Committee, was quickly organised and engaged a young writer, Varian Fry, to go to France. In August 1940, Fry slipped into Marseilles with \$3,000 in contributions. The original goal of rescuing 200 refugees rapidly expanded and joining the rescue operation was a young Czech refugee, Charles Sternberg, who served as the representative of the International Relief Association. Varian Fry was expelled from France by Nazi collaborators in August 1941 but spent six months in Lisbon working on new refugee escape routes. What remained of the staff in France went underground. Many of them joined the French resistance movement and saved hundreds of other refugees.

In late 1944, following major allied victories in Europe, the IRC opened offices in refugee-crowded Paris as well as Ankara, which had been a wartime haven for many anti-Nazis. By the war's end, between France and Turkey, was a devastated continent with millions of uprooted people on the move: prisoners of war, Jews, forced labourers, expellees, concentration camp survivors and refugees. In order to provide the most

effective assistance for them (including survivors of the infamous Lodz ghetto) the International Relief Association and Emergency Rescue Committee joined forces to become the **International Rescue Committee**, serving refugees of all religions, races and nationalities.

The Iron Curtain descends

On 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill, declared: “An Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent. Beyond that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe.” Soon, a common pattern became clear: mass arrests, torture, new concentration camps, killing. Every day, democratic-minded people took flight and, by 1948, the death-knell of democracy in East Europe was sounded when Soviet-dictated regimes supplanted the last of the free governments. The IRC quickly developed a network of refugee programmes that included emergency relief, the establishment of hospitals and children’s centres and U.S. resettlement. Problems multiplied with the Soviet blockade of free Berlin that threatened millions with starvation. An IRC appeal raised funds sufficient to ship 4,224,000 pounds of essential food to the beleaguered Berliners.

Meanwhile, refugees were pouring out from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Albania and the Baltic states. The IRC continued steadily to expand its emergency relief, health, childcare and educational programmes in Germany, Austria, Italy, France and Belgium. Exiles were helped to integrate in their new environments and thousands were resettled in the United States.

East Europe: Unceasing flight

Until the end of the Cold War, some 35 years later, the IRC responded with equal speed and diversity to East European refugee crises, such as the flight of Czechoslovaks from the Soviet crackdown in 1968, the Solidarity activists fleeing from Poland following the martial law declaration in 1980, the sudden flow of Albanians to Italy and Greece in 1991. Substantial increases in the IRC’s resettlement caseloads inevitably followed such crises.

The basic objective of refugee resettlement in the United States is the integration of each person, each family, into the social, economic and cultural fabric of their new country. At the beginning of the process, following their initial registration and orientation at the IRC’s overseas offices, caseworkers at U.S. regional offices provide basic needs such as housing, food and medical care. The newcomers are then helped to find jobs and educational opportunities. The children are prepared for school.

Many refugees have experienced the trauma of violence, imprisonment and loss of family members in their homeland or during their flight. They often need special attention from the IRC. Since 1990, the IRC resettled an average of 11,000 refugees every year from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

Vietnam: Division, war, flight

An upheaval of vast and long-lasting significance that would transform the IRC into a global organisation had erupted in 1954, when a million North Vietnamese marched southward following the Geneva agreement dividing the country, and the IRC started its work in South Vietnam. At first it focused on the thousands of displaced refugee students, intellectuals and professionals. But over the years, especially following the escalation of the fighting in 1964, the IRC operated a broad range of services for the war refugees, the sick,

wounded, orphaned and the homeless children in particular. Clinics, hospitals, community development, self-help projects and internal resettlement programmes were established.

Soon, more than eight million people in South Vietnam were displaced by the war, and the IRC recruited teams of volunteer doctors, surgeons, nurses and paramedics. Orphanages, children's clinics and schools were built. In Saigon, a 120-bed Reception and Convalescent Centre served Vietnam's leading facility for children's reconstructive and plastic surgery.

In April 1973, following the cease-fire and withdrawal of American troops, a mission of IRC volunteer leaders went to Vietnam to investigate the problems of the children. Their recommendations led to the establishment of a 70-bed medical rehabilitation centre in Saigon for war orphans to enable them to become candidates for overseas adoption. The IRC facility was staffed by a paediatrician, four American nurses and 35 Vietnamese personnel. Its effectiveness led to similar centres in Da Nang and Qui-Nhon. Some two thousand-war orphans qualified for overseas adoption as a result of this effort.

The IRC's work in Vietnam came to an end on April 30, 1975 when Viet Cong forces occupied Saigon. Their victory marked the beginning of the flight of Vietnamese refugees into the United States. As they arrived – 130,000 in ten weeks – the IRC built staff at four U.S. processing camps. The IRC headquarters in New York was expanded and regional offices opened. By the end of June, the IRC had registered 18,000 of the Vietnamese for resettlement. With the conquest of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, and the end of fighting in Laos, even more Indochinese refugees were being admitted and by the 1990's more than one million had been resettled in the U.S.

Boat people from Vietnam – sometimes escaping at the rate of tens of thousands a month – comprised a large proportion of the refugees reaching other Asian countries, including Hong Kong, a thousand miles away where the IRC devoted its work to the children's desperate needs. More than 20,000 arrived in 1990 alone and were detained in prison-like camps. That year, Liv Ullmann, the IRC's Vice President International, went to Hong Kong with a delegation of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, and she described the camps as follows: "Barbed wire cities, thousands upon thousands of terrified people. Men, women and children stacked together on shelves, often three levels high. People stacked together like spoons in a drawer, in concentration camp-like conditions."

“In Cambodia, a holocaust, clearly”

In 1979, the genocidal atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge drove hundreds of thousands of sick, starving and wounded Cambodians into Thailand, where, since early 1976, the IRC had become the leading voluntary agency providing medical, educational, childcare, self-help and resettlement services to Indochinese refugees.

With the vast influx of Cambodians, the IRC stepped up its pace, and within a year had a team of 109 doctors, nurses, paramedics, sanitarian, public health specialists and teachers strung along the border. The staff consisted of expatriates, Thai nationals and volunteers. Over the next decade, the IRC provided the refugees with the critical care they needed to survive, and the skills and determination they needed to face the bleak future. At one time, the IRC's primary and secondary school system served more than 50,000 Cambodian children and young adults. Special classes for the disabled were added to the curriculum.

When Cambodia began to open its borders in 1991, the IRC moved into Kampong Province inhabited by 300,000 repatriates and war victims. The work, spearheaded by mobile medical and public health teams, served thousands of children. The programme was soon expanded to other areas of Cambodia, concentrating on developing self-reliance projects for ultimate transfer to local groups.

The IRC's medical, health training, educational and self-help work in Thailand served refugees from Laos, as well as Vietnamese fleeing by boat or over land. The IRC also assisted boat people reaching the shores of Malaysia. At one time, more than 40,000 Vietnamese were crowded on the tiny volcanic island of Pulau Bidon, known as Hell Island. An IRC delegation of volunteers – the first western group to inspect the island – took immediate steps to relieve the plight of the refugees, and to press for their transfer to less primitive areas of Malaysia.

When the last of the IRC staff left Malaysia in 1981, the Secretary General of the Red Crescent Society wrote: "it was indeed a blessing when IRC offered its services, and it is indeed a pity that we have to say farewell. A big thank you goes to IRC and all its stalwarts for all their help and dedicated services."

The Burmese government aggravated refugee problems in the area in 1988 by violently suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations, forcing more than 7,000 young people to flee to Thailand. Over the years, new assaults drove thousands more across the border, where the IRC developed a broad-ranged programme of medical, public health, sanitation and shelter construction projects, and the provision of food. IRC staff trained refugees whenever possible to take over the responsibility for the services. For those Burmese reaching Bangkok, the IRC provided stipends for food, shelter and clothing. In 1996, a new offensive by the military dictatorship drove more refugees into Thailand, increasing their population to almost 100,000.

Africa: The IRC's role expands

On another continent, Africa, decolonisation and internal power struggles were meanwhile creating new masses of refugees on the move and during the 1950s, the IRC was helping some African refugees who made their way to Europe. The United Nations designated 1959 as World Refugee Year and in 1962, the IRC's first major involvement in Africa occurred when 200,000 refugees fled from Portuguese-controlled Angola to Zaire. The IRC quickly recruited teams of medical and relief personnel to serve the victims of colonial oppression. The work was continued for several years, when it was turned over to refugees trained by the IRC. In 1976, the IRC returned to Zaire to help new waves of Angolans from what had become a Marxist-oriented state. The work continued for some four years, when most of the refugees were integrated into the local populations.

In 1964, the IRC went to Botswana, a free black country where black refugees from South Africa were concentrated. Education for young refugees was provided to prepare them for entering schools in Tanzania and Zambia. Blacks escaping South African persecution were helped also in other neighbouring countries. A few years later, in 1967, the suppression of the Biafran independence movement in Nigeria led to widespread atrocities, and the IRC joined other voluntary agencies in providing critical relief and medical services for civilian victims of the civil war.

In Uganda, Idi Amin put a new twist on mass cruelty in 1972 with the announcement that 50,000 Asian nationals would be expelled – it mattered not that they had lived in Uganda since the turn of the century. An airlift was hurriedly organised and flew several thousand to European countries.

Five years later, native Ugandans poured into Kenya. Among them were the nation's cultural and intellectual leaders, students and professional people and thousands of children. The IRC organised a large-scale programme of medical and childcare services, educational support and placement assistance.

New crises erupt

By 1980, it had become clear that extensive long-term IRC assistance would be needed in Africa for victims of oppression, civil war and famine. That year, in the Sudan, the IRC established medical, health care and training programmes for refugees flowing in from Ethiopia. Four years later, the flow swelled into a massive exodus from Tigre and Eritrea, where independence movements were under siege by Ethiopia's Marxist dictatorship. Within a year, about a hundred IRC expatriate personnel, and 2,000 refugees trained by them, were providing extensive assistance in areas where more than a half-million refugees were massed.

The IRC expanded the scope of the work in 1989 to the central and southern regions of the Sudan for people displaced by civil war and famine. The programmes covered a wide range of medical, public health, immunization, childcare, emergency feeding and intensive refugee training activities. The IRC also served as the principal agency providing health care services for Sudanese seeking safety across the border in Kenya.

In Somalia, starting in 1991, the IRC initiated more programmes for Sudanese refugees involving medical, public health and child feeding projects. Emphasis on training large corps of both refugees and Somali locals made it possible for the IRC to transfer the work to local hands. But a year later, at the urgent request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the IRC had to return when hundreds of thousands of Somalis, uprooted by civil war and famine, massed along the Kenya border, many of them close to death. The IRC quickly organised programmes serving some 300,000 refugees, and soon expanded the work into Kenya.

The IRC became involved in still other regions of Africa during the 1990s. Liberian refugees forced out of their homeland by civil war were assisted in Ghana, Guinea and Ivory Coast through educational and self-help programmes. Special attention was devoted to the crucial needs of women, including assistance in starting small business enterprises.

The Rwanda tragedy

In 1994, the IRC set in motion an emergency programme in response to a tragic refugee disaster. A quarter of a million Rwandans had poured into Tanzania virtually overnight to escape a sudden escalation of the tribal and political warfare between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples. Killing, torture and death by starvation had become everyday occurrences and, as always, the helpless women and children suffered most deeply and died most easily. Life-saving relief and medical measures were quickly instituted by IRC crises teams – to be followed by preventive medicine projects.

The IRC's work in Tanzania was only the first of several crisis interventions involving the Rwandans. Soon, a million more refugees surged into Zaire, bringing the number of people escaping the genocidal conflict to more than two million. Inside Rwanda, a million more were violently displaced – refugees within their own country. Burundian refugees fleeing to Tanzania and Zaire magnified the already massive problems. While continuing its life-saving work, the IRC developed programmes of a more durable nature, especially as the Rwandans returned to their homeland. Buildings were repaired, shelters were constructed, small

business projects were instituted, the shattered agricultural economy restored. Special attention was devoted to helping women develop their earning power and to giving them a role in rebuilding their ravaged country.

“Migratory genocide: Afghan refugees”

While African refugee movements occupied much of the IRC’s attention overseas, Cold War aggression had created a new and massive crisis in Asia including the plight of Afghans escaping invading Soviet forces. Their flight – soon to reach three million people – was described by a correspondent as “migratory genocide hinged on large-scale Soviet ground offensives, aerial bombardment and burning of crops.”

The IRC introduced an extensive network programmes involving medical, public health, feeding, educational, refugee-training and self-help services. The work in primitive refugee camps stressed the special needs of women and children – 80% of the refugee population. Mobile medical units, clinics and a women’s hospital were staffed by doctors, nurses and paramedics, many of them refugees trained by the IRC.

An educational system in the camps ranged from primary schools to university-level and post-graduate education. During 1990, the IRC operated or supported 2,500 primary schools, trained refugee teachers and provided educational material to 316 secondary schools serving 50,000 students. The only high school for Afghan girls in Pakistan was maintained in Peshawar in the face of sometimes violent opposition by radical Muslim groups.

Critically important was the implementation of a basic IRC principle: helping refugees to support themselves through skills-training and self-reliance programmes. The achievement of self-sufficiency in camps also prepares refugees for the time they are able to return to their own country. In Pakistan this effort involved construction, agriculture, handicrafts, office management, small business enterprises. An IRC printing workshop, for example, trained thousands of refugees in the trade while producing textbooks, health education aids and other material for camps and schools.

Starting in 1990, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Afghans were able to draw upon their training as they started returning to their country devastated by nine years of relentless warfare. With the help of IRC workers inside Afghanistan, their efforts focused on agriculture, sanitation, water supplies, and rebuilding the wreckage of the educational system. But the IRC’s work in Pakistan had to continue as violence erupted time and again in Afghanistan, preventing refugees from returning and creating new waves of escapees.

The ten million refugee exodus

Although some IRC programmes have a relatively short duration, they are nevertheless as vital in humanitarian terms as those that may last for many years, or decades. It was in 1971, when East Pakistanis sought a measure of autonomy from their oppressive central government far to the west. Pakistan’s leaders responded by dispatching troops that, in the first assaults alone, killed 200,000 people. Once again, the tragedy of refugees in flight was seen as ten million people, mostly Hindus in a Muslim-dominated society, fled to India. Soon, refugees were working alongside IRC relief and medical volunteers in 38 clinics in teeming camps. A single clinic at Barasat treated 250,000 sick, wounded and malnourished patients per month. The IRC enlisted the cooperation of the All-India Institute of Medical Science for a massive nutrition therapy programme. In its school programme for children, the IRC recruited 10,000 refugee teachers. At

higher levels, a Research Facility in Exile was organised by the IRC in the camps around a nucleus of 150 college and university instructors.

The day of return was not far off. In December 1971, a liberated Bangladesh supplanted East Pakistan. Free but devastated, the new nation desperately needed help to assist the millions of refugees returning from India. IRC representatives met with the new leaders of Bangladesh, and the result was a network of medical, public health, feeding, child care and educational programmes that enabled the Bangladesh people to rebuild their shattered lives.

Critical to the IRC's work were two basic programmes. Vocational rehabilitation and job placement services for young war-disabled people were developed. And scholarships enabled more than 17,000 destitute students to resume their studies at scores of colleges and universities. In 1975, the IRC was able to transfer all programmes in Bangladesh to local organisations and shift its resources to other refugee crisis areas of the world.

Flight from China

Of far longer duration, in another part of Asia, was the IRC's work in Hong Kong, starting in 1961, when a stream of refugees from China became a torrent, and the IRC started a large-scale programme that was to continue for 27 years. The work consisted of emergency housing, medical care, counselling, vocational training, job placement and resettlement assistance. IRC day nurseries for the children enabled destitute refugee mothers to work. A self-help project, The China Refugee Development Organisation, kept thousands of refugees employed producing handicrafts.

Mao-Tse-Tung's brutal policies led to a new refugee phenomenon during the 1970s: the escape of young "freedom swimmers" from China across shark-infested waters to Hong Kong. Untold thousands drowned in their bid for freedom – yet, in 1974 alone, an astounding 14,000 swimmers made it to Hong Kong. More came in homemade sampans, rubber boats and rafts and still more breached the heavily guarded land border.

In 1980, Hong Kong authorities started cracking down on the flow, returning the refugees forcibly to China – even children trying to join parents already in Hong Kong. The IRC nevertheless stayed on, helping those in need until 1988, when the work was turned over to local agencies.

Crises in the Middle East

The Middle East shared the tragedies of violence, flight and displacement that plagued other areas of the world where the IRC operates. In 1982, seven years of civil conflict in Lebanon culminated in warfare that led to widespread destruction and the creation of thousands of newly uprooted people. By the end of the year, the IRC had organised medical and relief programmes, including an emergency "trauma" unit at the American University Hospital in Beirut serving uprooted Lebanese of all faiths and races and Palestinians. In three camps, the IRC established a project to rebuild the homes of Palestinian refugees severely damaged by warfare.

In 1984, the IRC established an Intermediate Health Care Unit in Sidon to provide diagnostic and therapeutic services for displaced Palestinians and Lebanese. As violence in the Sidon areas intensified during 1985,

the State Department pressed for the departure of Americans from Lebanon, and the IRC turned over the unit to the staff of the United Nations agency serving the Palestinians.

April 1991 was the start of the flight of two million Kurds from massive attacks by Iraqi military forces. Within days, the IRC had dispatched a relief team to the Turkey-Iraq border where more than 150,000 Kurdish refugees were clinging to a mountainside. The needs were overwhelming. Snow and heavy rains, and the lack of food and adequate clothing, had already caused thousands of deaths, mostly of small children and the elderly. Within two weeks, teams of doctors, public health nurses and sanitarians were at work, concentrating on the critical needs of women and children. As Kurds began returning to their villages, the IRC helped them with the immense task of rebuilding for the future. Shelters were constructed, medical facilities rehabilitated, water and sanitation systems repaired, agricultural assistance provided. In April 1992, a year after its initial involvement, the IRC completed its work for the Kurdish refugees.

Latin America: Cuba, Haiti, Chile

The Western Hemisphere has not escaped the malignancy of the massive refugee problems that beset other continents during the latter half of the century. In 1959, Fidel Castro seized control of Cuba and within three years, 155,000 Cubans had become refugees, and a million more were to follow, largely to the United States. Soon, the IRC set up the Caribbean Refugee Programme in Florida for Cubans as well as refugees escaping from Trujillo's Dominican Republic and Pap Doc Duvalier's Haiti. Meanwhile, Cuban jails were being filled with political dissidents and the IRC steadily denounced their imprisonment and torture.

Through the decades of the Castro dictatorship, the IRC was a major provider of relief, resettlement and family reunion services for repeated waves of Cuban refugees. In 1980 – when Castro briefly opened the port of Mariel, permitting American boats to pick up Cubans flocking there – 125,000 refugees were brought to Florida and the IRC's caseload mounted. Under intense pressure, Castro started releasing some political prisoners in 1987. Some had been in solitary confinement for more than 20 years. IRC reunited many of them with their families in the U.S.

Starting in 1961, the IRC was at the forefront of an effort to provide dissident Haitian exiles from the Duvalier dictatorship with relief, family reunion and legal services. IRC was a founding member of the National Emergency Coalition for Haitian Refugees, headed by Bayard Rustin, an active IRC Vice President and American civil rights leader. Rustin also served as Co-Chairman of the IRC-sponsored Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees until his death in 1987.

In February 1986, young Duvalier, who had inherited the title "President for Life" from his father, fled from Haiti. The beginnings of a democratic process that followed sharply reduced the need for IRC services. But the trend was reversed when military rule and violence returned until a freely elected government was formed in 1995.

In Chile, an unusual Latin American operation started in 1975 when General Pinochet's military junta decreed that political prisoners would be freed if granted admission in another country. Several hundred of the 2,500 refugees admitted to the United States were resettled by the IRC. The IRC was assisted in its resettlement by volunteer English teachers, doctors and dentists, human rights and union groups. Also resettled during this period were Argentine political prisoners, Uruguayans, Paraguayans, Guatemalans and other refugees seeking asylum from oppressive Latin American countries.

Central America: War and displacement

In 1984, the IRC moved into El Salvador, a country ravaged by civil conflict. Some 70,000 people had been killed and 500,000 – more than 10% of the country's population were displaced from their communities. The IRC helped the “desplazados” through programmes of medical care, public health education, self-help and gardening projects. By 1990, IRC clinics, mother-child and vaccination centres were serving 50 refugee communities. Also provided was training in nutrition, midwifery, environmental sanitation and literacy.

Salvadorans wishing to integrate permanently in refugee communities were helped through the construction of housing. Rebuilding schools and educational training were critical in creating new, self-sustaining communities. By 1992, the IRC was able to turn its work over to an indigenous organisation, The Committee for Integration and Reconstruction of El Salvador.

During the early 1980s, in Honduras, some 25,000 Miskito Indians who had escaped from harsh persecution in Nicaragua lived in scattered, primitive developments. Educational opportunities for the children were non-existent and in 1985 the IRC organised an unusual project to overcome the problem: an education-by-radio system that reached into remote areas. Adult refugees, who were trained to serve as “monitors” in the Miskito camps, were provided with radio receivers, papers, pencils and blackboards.

By 1990, with the establishment of a freely elected government in Nicaragua, refugees who had fled to Costa Rica, where the IRC was helping them were finally able to return home. The IRC's role for the Nicaraguan refugees shifted from relief services to programmes involving both repatriation and local integration. The Costa Rican government had affirmed a commitment to permit refugees to remain, and the IRC stayed on to assist in the integration process. Inside Nicaragua, the IRC assisted in the rehabilitation of devastated communities receiving returning refugees.

In 1992, about half of the rural population of the tiny Central American country of Belize consisted of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who lived side-by-side with Belizeans in more than 80 scattered villages. The large refugee population strained the agricultural and educational systems, and the IRC alleviated many of the problems by the construction of roads and bridges, the buildings of schools, purchases of equipment, the installation of water systems, repair of health centres and the development of farm projects.

The former Soviet Union

The early 1990s also created severe refugee crises in three former Soviet Union republics: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Tajikistan. Although the nature of the problems varied in the three countries, they shared common roots: the displacement of people by ethnic and civil wars. The IRC helped these uprooted people – not yet recovered from Soviet oppression – in a variety of ways suitable to the particular problems: agricultural support, small enterprise development, repair of infrastructures, health care, rebuilding housing and public buildings. Underlying the work was the development of self-sufficiency, in practice and spirit.

During the same period, the IRC supported a unique effort in another part of the former Soviet Union: the Russian Republic. There, in Moscow, the IRC participated in the work of an organisation named Compassion, founded in 1989 to provide home-based medical services to Gulag survivors of Soviet terror – dissident Russians who had been physically and psychologically brutalised in Siberian jails. The IRC supported the teams of physicians, nurses and health aides visiting the homes of 1,200 refugees from the

Gulag. In-patient services were arranged with cooperating hospitals and a van was purchased to ensure more extensive medical care.

“Ethnic cleansing”: The Bosnian terror

In December 1991, the IRC responded speedily and decisively to Europe’s worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Widespread violence had erupted in new nations carved out of the entity of Yugoslavia. The principal victims were Bosnian Muslims who were terrorised by Serbian nationals. What became known as “ethnic cleansing” was, in practice, a calculated campaign of terrorism involving mass murder, torture, the rape of women and children. Central to the genocidal warfare was the drive to destroy and occupy the homes and the communities of the Bosnia people.

Initially, the IRC’s main operation was in Sarajevo – providing life-saving medicines, food, blankets and helping to evacuate Jewish as well as Muslim refugees. Soon the work spread to Zagreb and later to Split, Mostar, Tuzla and other areas of former Yugoslav countries and was broadened beyond emergency relief. Medical rehabilitation, women’s and children’s centres were established, sanitation projects were developed, and clean water projects were built. Business and industrial enterprises that had been damaged or destroyed were revitalised.

In Split, in close cooperation with the United Nations, the IRC established a system for inter-agency coordination of reconstruction projects. Steps to enable refugee populations to achieve nutritional self-sufficiency were taken. Among special efforts was the Children’s Medical Project that provided hospital and convalescent services for more than 300 refugee children from both Bosnia and Croatia. Mental health and counselling services were provided for war-traumatised refugees.

Since 1998

Overseas, by the year 2000, the IRC was working in 33 countries. The programmes involved life-saving aid – food, clothing, shelter and medical assistance; public health and rehabilitation; education from primary school to adult levels; training and self-reliance projects aimed at refugee self-sufficiency; legal and sanctuary assistance. Special attention was devoted – as throughout the IRC’s history – to children and adolescents, the most vulnerable of victims of war, terror and civil conflict.

Across the United States, 22 resettlement offices continued to carry out a multi-faceted resettlement programme. During the year 2000, close to 10,000 refugees from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America were provided with a wide range of services – enabling them to achieve self-sufficiency and integration into the mainstream of American life. Among them were many ethnic Albanians who had fled the onslaught of terror unleashed by the Serbian ruler, Slobodan Milosevic.

In a note enclosing a modest contribution to the IRC, a refugee said: “How wonderful the freedom world is! Thank you for helping us so much. Please let me send the very first check as a small hand to assist refugees.”

The new dimensions of the IRC’s work overseas led to increased emphasis on community-based programmes, regional cooperation and cross-border teamwork. Durable solutions were sought for war and internally displaced refugees in particular. Greater attention was given to the development of consortiums

with other voluntary and local agencies sharing a common purpose with the IRC. Among the 13 African countries where the IRC served during 2000, new programmes were initiated, or current ones expanded, in the two Congos, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda and the Sudan.

In Asia, similar steps were taken by the IRC in Afghanistan, Pakistan, East Timor, Indonesia and Thailand for both internal and cross-border refugees. The East Timor programme followed the outbreak of violence when, in August 1999, voters chose independence from Indonesia in a UN referendum. Healthcare, education, training, home and infrastructure rebuilding were major components of the work dealing with the mass destruction.

In Europe, a succession of refugee crises precipitated new and expanded programmes in Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Yugoslavia. The IRC help for victims of the Chechnya war was vital to the survival of thousands and to the rebuilding of their lives. For the refugees who poured into Albania from Kosovo in the spring of 1999, the IRC developed a network of emergency programmes. A parallel operation was carried out in Macedonia, where hundreds of thousands of refugees had fled from the Milosevic reign of terror. Following the intervention of NATO, the IRC moved into Kosovo to develop extensive life-saving work, followed by a rehabilitation programme aimed at rebuilding a shattered nation.

In Latin America, working through local agencies, starting in 2000, the IRC provided assistance in Colombia for many of the hundreds of thousands of civilians uprooted by civil strife. That same year, the establishment of a central Emergency Response Unit strengthened the IRC's ability to respond quickly and effectively to refugee crises everywhere.

Vital to the strength of the IRC is public understanding of its mission. A sustained effort was therefore devoted to developing greater worldwide awareness of the IRC's work in the context of refugee problems on humanitarian, political, social and economic levels.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and children provided an increasingly strong voice in the advocacy effort. At the start of the new century, the Commission intensified its role as a vital protector of uprooted women and children. New attention was devoted to expanding the participation of women in the management of refugee communities.

At a conference announcing the formation of the IRC in July 1933, the chairman said:

“This is a chance for each of us to be a part of history. We cannot lean back on a comfortable cushion of sentimentality, shivering and weeping over Fascist horror stories. We cannot close our eyes with ‘I don’t know what I can do’. The serious calamity of our day calls, and we are able and impelled to act.”

The spirit of the IRC, and the basic mission, has not changed since that day almost 80 years ago.