

# RED CROSS SOCIETY OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

## OUR SELECTED EXPERIENCE

### PRACTICAL RESOURCE PACK

#### Our context

The Red Cross Society of Côte d'Ivoire was founded in 1960 and recognized as a charitable organization by government decree in 1963. We have 50 local branches, plus 26 separate first-aid teams. This constitutes a total of 76 entities throughout the national territory capable of taking rapid action in the event of an emergency.

Our National Society helps improve the living conditions of particularly vulnerable people across the country through programmes such as administering first aid, improving health and promoting humanitarian values. It is also auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field.

#### How our acceptance, security and access were affected

One recent incident exemplifies the kinds of challenges that our personnel encounter when attempting to carry out their humanitarian work in extremely dangerous and volatile conditions.

In December 2010 Côte d'Ivoire was caught in the grip of a post-election crisis. A huge demonstration was announced in front of the headquarters of the national television and radio station. Given that two rival groups were involved, there was a high risk of violence. As usual in such situations, our National Society deployed first-aid teams in various neighbourhoods.



Volunteers from the Red Cross Society of Côte d'Ivoire provide health care for residents, recent returnees and displaced people following post-election violence.

One such team was operating in Cocody, the neighbourhood considered most likely to be the scene of violence. At about 10.30 a.m. the team heard bursts of automatic gunfire coming from the waterfront area. They rushed to the scene and found a number of people who were wounded, some of them seriously. They loaded the people onto their vehicle and set about rushing them to hospital. This was no easy undertaking. Almost immediately, their way was blocked by a checkpoint manned by implacable armed men who denied them passage. They attempted another, longer route to the hospital, but once again found themselves blocked by armed men. By now the condition of the shocked victims was deteriorating rapidly. The first-aiders did what they could to keep them alive while attempting a third route to the hospital.

Only 400 metres from their destination, they were stopped yet again at a heavily manned checkpoint. They were held up for a long period while the wounded men were searched and at one point even unloaded from the vehicle. Despite the protestations of the team leader, who told them the wounded men would die if they did not receive urgent care, the men remained intransigent. When, after much discussion and persuasion, the Red Cross team was allowed to proceed with the patients, the hospital refused to admit them. When they finally arrived at another hospital 20 km away, one of the patients had died and the other was in a critical condition.

## What we did and learned

The incident shows how delays at checkpoints, discrimination against the wounded on the basis of their affiliation, failure to uphold human dignity and failure to respect the role of medical personnel cost the life of one wounded person and endangered the lives of others. That the outcome was not worse can be attributed

to the fact that the team members remained calm and cooperative throughout and never abandoned the endeavour to reach their goal through dialogue, standing firm to the Fundamental Principles of humanity, neutrality and independence.

The first-aid team was easily identifiable as National Society personnel, wearing red cross bibs and carrying volunteer identity cards. The red cross emblem was also visible on the vehicle. The team leader introduced himself to the weapon-bearers, explaining that they were from the Ivorian Red Cross and their role was to assist the wounded without distinction. He told them that he understood they were just doing their job, but that just as the army fulfilled its role during an armed conflict, the Ivorian Red Cross, which was set up by the government as an auxiliary to the public authorities, likewise had its work to do – namely, to provide humanitarian assistance for all victims of armed conflict. If they were ever to find themselves in the same situation, he said, the Red Cross would do exactly the same for them.

The lessons learned from the incident, all of which are actions or measures promoted in the Safer Access Framework, were as follows:

- ▶ Remaining calm and true to the Fundamental Principles and explaining the neutral and impartial role of the Ivorian Red Cross can eventually prevail, even in the most intransigent situations.
- ▶ The National Society needs to have more contact with the authorities and other influential stakeholders in peacetime so as to raise awareness and improve its access in times of future crisis.
- ▶ In very sensitive situations, the ICRC's reputation as a neutral and independent organization can be of value in facilitating a National Society's access by obtaining prior guarantees of safe passage to evacuate the wounded.

