

ICRC Restoring Family Links Conference, Kyiv 2006

Opening Ceremony

The second of four regional Restoring Family Links (RFL) conferences is taking place in Kyiv, Ukraine from 15 to 17 November. The content of the ten-year RFL strategic plan (2008–2018) will be debated at length by the ICRC and Red Cross/Red Crescent societies from Europe and the Caucasus.

At the opening ceremony, Mr Paul-Henri Arni, Head of the ICRC regional delegation in Kyiv gave a statement to shed light on the grief and misery that filled Ukrainian history throughout the 20th century. "Almost every Ukrainian family had been affected by the First and Second World Wars and had to overcome the tragic period of starvation (1932–33) that killed around eight million people". He added that "famine, repressions, the Soviet revolution and the four-year civil war resulted with half of the total population of Ukraine dying during these 40 years of nightmare. Millions of families were separated from their

'Besides the physical pain, there is moral suffering which is no less'

G. Moynier, Geneva, 1871

loved ones without receiving any news of their whereabouts". Indeed, many European National Societies still deal today with an RFL caseload from the Second World War.

An illustrative story that symbolizes Ukraine's tragic past is that of Stepan and Maria Pampukh, brother and sister currently in their eighties. They were separated 60 years ago! During the famine that hit Ukraine in 1932, their parents tragically died from hunger. The two children survived and were subsequently deported to Germany. There, they were separated and placed into two different families. After the Second World War, Stepan returned to his native village



Ivan Usichenko, Ukrainian Red Cross.

in Ukraine. 60 years after their brutal separation, Stepan living in Ukraine and Maria in Arolsen, (Germany) were finally reunited one month ago by the Ukrainian Red Cross.

"Stepan was supposed to be present at the opening ceremony to share his experience with the audience, however, due to his old age, he was too weak to attend such a conference", concluded Arni.

Dr Ivan Usichenko, President of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society lamented the continued disruptions of contact between family members and the losses of the next of kin during wars and other emergencies. In that respect, the Ukrainian Red Cross has chosen to intensify its network with other national societies such as the German Red Cross and the ICRC Central Tracing Agency and welcomed the excellent cooperation with the ICRC over the past 14 years.



Stepan and Maria Pampukh: 'At last together'

“By reuniting separated families, is not just the good we bring but also the bad we prevent”

said Dr Jacques Moreillon, Member of the ICRC and Chairperson of the conference, sharing with the audience a personal experience with Nelson Mandela. In the early 70s, he visited political detainees in Africa, among them Nelson Mandela. Mandela told him “never forget that what matters is not so much the good you bring as much the bad you prevent”. Moreillon used Mandela’s quote as a leitmotiv for the conference: “we have to think that by reuniting separated families, it is not just the good we bring but also the bad we prevent, as the lack of family unity and protection generates significant humanitarian problems. This can be our guiding light for this conference”.

An opportunity to discuss RFL in a broader perspective

Alain Aeschlimann, Secretary General of the conference and Head of the ICRC Central Tracing Agency in Geneva, delivered a keynote address that ushered the audience into the crux of the subject matter. “Entrusted in special responsibilities to restore family links, the ICRC has taken the initiative to launch a program to strengthen the RFL network. This



Dr Moreillon and Alain Aeschlimann, ICRC Geneva.

conference is a great opportunity for the Movement to discuss the various issues at stake.”

He emphasized the fact that the conference is action-oriented and should lead to concrete proposals. As a unique family links network, “we have to join forces and discuss where we want to be in ten years. It is an open consultation process”. Dr Moreillon underlined this point adding: “this conference is a tool to raise the level of consciousness within the Movement”.

Despite its apparent weaknesses, the Family Links Network is a very precious asset for the Movement. “We do not always give it its full

value”, said Aeschlimann. In effect, the strength of one member of the Movement benefits all others and the weaknesses of one member are detrimental to the Movement’s overall efficiency in RFL. This is the first time the ICRC is able to look globally at where the Movement stands in terms of RFL.

RFL Vision: A unified response in a diversified world

The collaboration between National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC does not always function in the best possible way. RFL is recognized by all as an important activity. Unfortunately, ownership is still lacking.

According to Aeschlimann, “when conflict erupts or a natural disaster strikes, the Movement has to be on the spot in less than 24 hours, this is a challenge that we have to take.” Competition and the quick technological developments of communication means pose a new challenge.

To reinforce the Family Links Network as provided for in the draft strategy paper:

- need to improve our capacity to respond;
- need to improve the effectiveness of Movement cooperation in emergencies;





- need to strengthen responsibility of the Movement in RFL;
- need to improve communication within the Movement and outside.

Jane Clarke, Head of the RFL project, emphasized that “RFL is a challenge but it is definitely worth taking it. Together we have a humanitarian obligation to respond to RFL needs. The essence of the strategy is our mutual commitment in meeting RFL needs of the affected persons”. The Movement has a responsibility to provide families with answers, whether they are positive or negative.

Ms Sofia Stoimenova from the Bulgarian Red Cross intervened saying that her presence as a representative of the Bulgarian RC at the conference was already a revealing sign of the Bulgarian Red Cross commitment to improve its approach to RFL. “No matter the differences between the different national societies, this conference offers opportunities to find common needs and work on common grounds”.

RFL, in concrete terms:

- *preventing persons from becoming disappeared or unaccounted for;*
- *re-establishing contact between separated families;*
- *maintaining contact between separated families.*

Dr Moreillon: “one measures the task ahead and the challenges are indeed great... It is not a unique ICRC responsibility it is a shared responsibility, we would like to create a coalition with regards to support and funding”. In Nairobi, funding became an issue, where African and North African National Societies affirmed their commitment but mentioned their difficulties to meet the necessary funds to achieve RFL goals.

According to Aeschlimann, to build capacity in tracing and RFL is not as easy as building capacity in relief activities. The ICRC has a firm commitment to work on building capacity but this effort has to be sustained in the long term and to be integrated and coordinated with the Federation’s capacity-building policies. The ICRC cannot do it alone and needs the commitment of the Movement and their enhanced sense of ownership.

Be prepared in time of peace for the time of war

Dr Moreillon explained that during the Nairobi RFL conference, national societies mentioned that the reason why most NS did not focus on RFL was that it was not a priority as there were no immediate needs, and other matters were more urgent. “The big challenge is that there are many situations where RFL is not an urgent matter. But when disaster strikes, it is already too late to get prepared”.

Jane Clarke mentioned the importance of integrating RFL in NS disaster preparedness and response programs. “We need to build capacity, work more effectively, share information in times of peace”.

Mrs Asa Molde from the Swedish Red Cross argued that the Tsunami disaster raised awareness amongst the Swedish public as to the importance of RFL. Sweden lived first hand the tragic separation from family members, as thousands of Swedish nationals were scattered in the Tsunami area leaving their families without any news.

Sir Nicolas Young, Chief Executive of the British Red Cross said that RFL was unfortunately “not sexy within the Movement. We need to make it sexy, to tell the stories that really get people going and help us sell this service to the public and to our own people”. He added, our strength in the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is the network. I repeat the importance of OUTREACH! OUTREACH! OUTREACH!”.

Raising awareness within the Movement and in the public sphere

This first day of the conference consisted in a collective reaffirmation of the importance of the Restoring Family Links Network.

Local Media

Local Ukrainian media (radio and print) interviewed representatives from the Ukrainian Red Cross and the ICRC on the rationale behind the Restoring Family Links conference and the results expected.

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