



# ICRC

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# REGIONAL DELEGATION BANGKOK

## Editorial

**"Being as useful as we can"**

The end of the year has been dramatically memorable for Thailand, and for the ICRC in the country. For months, we have been concerned about the humanitarian situation and were very impressed by the coping mechanisms, the solidarity and the courage of the Thai people as they faced widespread flooding at historical levels.

In Thailand, the ICRC has been visiting detainees since 2006 to assess their humanitarian conditions. Our history of cooperation with the Department of Corrections enabled us to offer our assistance as quickly as possible. Together, we answered the most urgent needs of the evacuated detainees and the affected prison staff: delivering vital safe drinking water, food, and blankets. We tailored our assistance to the individual needs of specific prisons affected by the flooding. At some facilities, we delivered tons of sandbags to help to prevent flooding. At centres receiving hundreds of evacuated detainees, we focused more on water and hygiene. Last, but not least, we helped evacuated detainees to inform their relatives about their fate. In times when rumours and incorrect information were widespread about detainees in flooded places, it was such a relief to the families to find out that their parents, brothers or sisters were safe! In total, the ICRC assisted about 50'000 detainees, prison staff and their families.

It is too early to accurately assess the extent of the flood damage, and the subsequent rehabilitation needs of prisons, but the ICRC stands ready to continue to assist the Department of Corrections to ensure decent conditions of detention in Thai prisons.

Jacques Stroun  
Head of Regional Delegation Bangkok



## Flood: an ICRC perspective

**Nobody saw it coming, not least Dr. Amnat Barlee, Director of the Thai Red Cross Relief and Community Health Bureau. The water came quickly and at great force. Within days, many buildings and sometimes entire neighbourhoods were engulfed. Prisons too were flooded and even when they remained dry, many were cut off from the rest of the world.**

"The situation is dramatic," said Dr. Amnat "This is the worst monsoon season since 1949." This was the result of a disastrous combination of overflowing water from dams and torrential rains. The floods affected 60 of 77 provinces, displacing millions and depriving them of their livelihood, and costing the country billions in losses and damages. More than 600 people lost their lives in the disaster.

Besides supporting the Thai Red Cross, since the beginning of October, the ICRC has been working with the Department of Corrections to help tens of thousands of flood victims. It has assisted at least 50,000 prisoners, prison officials and their families with basic necessities, such as water, food, hygiene kits and clothing. In the province of Ayutthaya alone, 100 kilometres north of capital city Bangkok, all prisons were evacuated and eight thousands prisoners were relocated to safe locations nationwide.

The flood marked a new chapter in the collaboration between the ICRC and the Department of Corrections. "I am very happy about the cooperation between our two institutions, said **Director General Suchart Wongnanchai of the Department of Corrections.** "This is the first time I have collaborated with the International Red Cross: previously, I hardly knew your mandate. But I must say I am very thankful and admire your way of working. You are fast to assist, prompt to help and this is very appreciated".

Besides meeting victims' needs, the ICRC helped social workers at the Department of Corrections to contact more than 3 000 families of prisoners. This critical initiative of the Department of Corrections fulfills the very basic human need of families to know that their next of kin are safe and well.

The experience of restoring family links was an emotional one too for many of the ICRC volunteers. The common messages volunteers took from relatives were of genuine love and care. "One mother broke down and cried. Her house was flooded, but she was more concerned that her son was safe and dry," said Teresa Suriyamongkol, an ICRC staff member who had tirelessly volunteered for many weekends and logged hundreds of calls on behalf of detainees. "She told me to tell her son to behave, since he had only a few months left in prison."

Besides tangible help, the ICRC offered its consulting services in water, sanitation and health care to the Department of Corrections. The ICRC's engineering and medical staff were dispatched to various prisons to help assess the coping capacity. When needed, the ICRC also helped install water tanks and filters.

The ICRC was also active in neighbouring Cambodia where flooding was also severe. In October, the ICRC provided the Siem Reap prison with 5,000 sandbags, 50 tarpaulins and 1,700 litres of diesel fuel – enough to run the prison's water pumps for about two weeks. The prison nurse was also supplied with medication for diarrhea and skin infections for the treatment of sick prisoners.



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## Clean drinking water is key to survival in all disastrous circumstances

Julian Jones is an ICRC regional engineer, and an expert in water and sanitation. His mission: building and engineering projects designed to ensure that people caught up in disasters / armed conflict have access to clean water and proper sanitation at all times and that they live in healthy environments. His team was particularly active during the floods in Thailand.

In prisons, the ICRC has provided flood victims – detainees, officials and their families – with clean water. Why is having access to safe water so important during floods?

Access to clean drinking water is key to survival in all disastrous circumstances. In a flood, water is all around but it is the enemy - it is neither clean nor safe to drink. Worse, floods cut off our normal access to clean water sources. But if we do drink dirty water simply in order to survive, the effect on our health is dramatic. Besides the debilitating effects of fever, the body rejects dirty water very quickly and so we can still end up dehydrated and right back at square one. The ICRC tries to help by either providing clean water from somewhere or making the available water safe to drink.

Can you tell us about the hygiene kits the ICRC has distributed?

Hygiene kits are important because they help people to keep clean in a dirty environment - and as we have said, a flooded environment is a dirty environment. By keeping clean on the outside, we stop contamination from getting into our bodies too. Clean hands are the most important aspect because we handle our food and touch our faces. Inside the kits are basic essentials that visiting families often give to prison inmates, such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, and sanitary napkins for women. You may think that these items are very basic, but in an emergency they are hard to come by.

What was your main challenge in providing relief assistance?

The logistic was a nightmare! During a flood, supply lines are cut - we have all seen what has happened to the availability of basic items in the shops. Road access was a major constraint as well: journey times can be very long in a flood this large. Real-time monitoring of road conditions is essential. We can only adapt to the context, travel by car, boat, truck, and bear in mind that a 20km journey in a flooded area can mean hours of transportation.







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## Being There

During the flood, the ICRC made the most of its resources and ability to support our friends in helping those in need. The map on the left outlines the provinces we were active in.



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## Families were so relieved to know their detainee relative was safe!

**Benjamas Chantiwas is an ICRC Tracing officer. Her job is to help re-establish links between family members separated because of natural disasters or conflicts. Her department was particularly active during the floods, working together with the Department of Corrections to inform the families of evacuated prisoners about the fate of their loved ones.**

### How did the ICRC come to help detainees reconnect with their families?

Not knowing what has happened to a relative when disaster strikes is traumatic. Restoring contact between family members is one of the basic elements of a humanitarian response, along with meeting basic needs for shelter, water, food and health care.

Together with the Department of Corrections, we made a list of relocated prisoners and asked them for a relative's phone number. We informed the relative that their loved one was safe. If requested, we returned basic information to the prisoner about the family's situation. Volunteers from the Thai Red Cross Society and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies spent their free time and weekends helping with this essential work.

### What were the reactions to your phone calls?

We have successfully contacted about 2,804 relatives of detainees. A lot of them could not contact their loved ones because they were flood victims themselves, having lost their homes and having to flee the rising waters. Not knowing the situation of their imprisoned relatives added to their suffering. It was such a relief for both the families and the prisoners to know that their loved ones were all fine, in spite of the floods. We have also extended this service to evacuated foreign prisoners as well, so their families were also reassured about their fate.



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# Deadly assaults on medical facilities and personnel around the world

**Bahrain, March 2011: Security forces attack paramedics, doctors, and nurses who are providing urgent offsite medical care to wounded protesters and bystanders. They also attack ambulances and prevent them from picking up injured protesters, some of whom are critically wounded.**



Catalina Martin-Chico, winner of the first ICRC Humanitarian Visa d'or photojournalism award (23rd "Visa pour l'Image" International Photojournalism Festival – September 2011 – Perpignan, France)

Afghanistan, June 2011: A hospital in Logan Afghanistan is the target of a car bombing. At least 27 people die and 53 are hurt, including women, children and the elderly. The actual toll is believed to be higher: many people took away the bodies of relatives. Hospitals in Sri Lanka and Somalia are shelled, ambulances in Libya are shot at, paramedics in Colombia are killed and the wounded in Afghanistan languish for hours in vehicles held at checkpoints.

The list of comparable incidents is far too long.

Under the Geneva Conventions, the wounded and sick, whether civilians or combatants, must receive prompt medical treatment.

To assure this in practice, health-care facilities, personnel and medical vehicles are protected: attacks upon them are forbidden as long as they retain a neutral function and treat all patients equally, irrespective of political, religious or ethnic affiliation. Protective symbols such as the red cross, red crescent and red crystal clearly identify medical installations, vehicles and personnel as protected entities. These provisions, enshrined in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their

Additional Protocols match the right to receive health care with an obligation on all parties to a conflict to search for and collect the wounded after battle, and to facilitate access to health-care facilities. Human rights law protects health care at all times, including during internal disturbances. These laws are binding on all States and parties to conflicts around the world.

Yet, many armies and fighters flout the Geneva Conventions and combatants overlook their responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

The ICRC has launched a four-year campaign to help mobilise international opinion and promote potential solutions.

The ICRC wants to harness the power of public opinion to help mobilise the world's leading states to put this overlooked humanitarian issue on the global agenda. Violence against health workers must stop: it is a matter of life and death for thousands of health workers, and countless people who need their help.

## Border clashes and the role of the ICRC: Sisaket, a case study

**Artillery and machine gun fire hit the village as dusk settled in. Panic seized the inhabitants and farmers returning from the fields. In the chilly weather of February 2011, the evacuation of border residents was underway on a scale unseen in the past decades in Thailand.**

"We could hear the siren and for a moment people did not know what to do," said Wasit Puangsawat, director of Kantharalak Industrial and Community Education College. "Villagers rushed onto the main roads and vehicles, large and small, started to clog the roads." In Kantharalak District alone almost 15,000 people were displaced from their homes and ended up in temporary shelters further inland. In total, by the time a temporary ceasefire came into force, at least 80,000 residents were affected on both sides of the border.

The fighting between Thai and Cambodian armed forces along the border in the following April and May ensured that Sisaket province's Governor, Somsak Suwansutjarit, and his colleagues would be busy preparing and accommodating tens of thousands of residents who sought temporary shelters in schools and government buildings.

But Somsak and other border province governors, along with the armed forces and public health officials, are not alone. The Red Cross family was quick to assist and the ICRC in particular offered its help through its partner, the Red Cross Society of Thailand.

From the very beginning, the Thai Red Cross Society's provincial officers were busy meeting basic needs such as water, food, temporary shelters and clean toilets for at least 35,000 villagers displaced in 40 camps in three provinces.



The Red Cross involvement culminated in a seminar, jointly organised by the Governor of Sisaket and Thai Red Cross, to evaluate lessons learned from the relief responses. The two-day event held in Sisaket resulted in many insights which could be used in future to ensure the most efficient and effective response to such an emergency.

By fostering better understanding among all related organisations, humanitarian needs can be better met in the event of disaster, whether it be man-made or natural.

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