

A Movement United To Help Families Torn Apart

At first sight, a well-equipped conference room in a Bangkok hotel appears light years away from the reality faced by those separated from their families because of natural disaster, war or migration. Yet, the speakers at the opening ceremony of the Regional Conference on Restoring Family Links (RFL) were at pains to put their plight at the heart of proceedings. Their message was clear: a lot is expected from the Movement. The work done here in Bangkok must have a tangible impact on its efforts to help separated families in Asia and the Middle East.

"How many of us here have witnessed – or perhaps experienced – the rupture, often sudden and brutal, of contacts between family members and loved ones?", asked Eric Roethlisberger, conference chairman and honorary member of the ICRC. "It is meaningless to try weighing feelings of human suffering. However, many a mother or father has stated that they would prefer to know that their children were dead rather than to be totally ignorant of their whereabouts."

Sawanit Kongsiri, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand and a previous Deputy Secretary-General of the Thai Red Cross, stressed that the plight of many families requiring support is often forgotten: "The people who need this help most urgently count on your mission to deliver it. They often live outside the spotlight of public attention, on the margins of society, ignored and vulnerable."

A Voice from the Field

The importance of RFL activities was illustrated by the testimony of Long Vibol, a tracing agent of the Cambodian Red Cross. Speaking on behalf of thousands of National Society staff and volunteers who deal with RFL issues at the field level, he



Long Vibol, a Tracing Officer from Cambodia sharing his field experience

explained that at times he has to resort to riding on elephants to deliver family messages to the most remote villages. Many Cambodians have been without news of loved ones for years following the devastating armed conflicts in the country and the region. Mr Vibol vividly described the intense emotions experienced by families when they find out that, contrary to what they had believed for years, their loved ones are still alive.

Like the previous Regional RFL Conferences in Nairobi, Kiev and Buenos Aires, the aim of the Bangkok meeting is ambitious. "The objective of this project is to develop a strategy for the long term", said Phan Wannamethee, Honorary President of the Conference and Secretary-General of the Thai Red Cross, which is co-hosting the conference. "This means in particular developing the capacities of individual National Society tracing services to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities."

Deputy Minister Sawanit Kongsiri reminded participants of the magnitude of this challenge: "The family links network is only as strong as its weakest link. There is little point in successfully

collecting Red Cross messages if the National Society or the ICRC Delegates in their home countries are unable to deliver them and collect replies."

Achievements and Challenges

The Deputy Head of the Bangkok Regional Delegation of the International Federation, Alan Bradbury, emphasised the importance the organization places on the restoration of family links. He suggested that the Federation should encourage National Societies to place RFL activities at the core of their development plans and to integrate them fully into their response to disasters.

In his keynote speech, the Head of the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency, Alain Aeschlimann, presented a frank and at times critical assessment of the Movement's current RFL capacities. On a positive note, he noted that in 2005, the ICRC working with National Societies, exchanged nearly 135,000 family messages in Asia and the Middle East, processed more than 13,000 tracing requests and located 1,400 persons.

However, despite these successes and the remarkable efforts of individual National Societies some challenges remain. Pointing at "a gap between the ideal of the Family Links Network...and the reality on the ground", Mr Aeschlimann said that the Movement needs to reinforce its shared vision of the Network's role and that cooperation between its components should be further developed. He stressed that more could be done to enhance public awareness of the Movement's RFL activities and that those in need found it difficult to access the service at times. Mr Aeschlimann also pointed out that several 'competitors' - other humanitarian organisations as well as private businesses - had become involved in RFL activities, presenting the Movement with a new challenge.

The Draft Strategy

The Head of the RFL Strategy Project, Jane Clarke of the ICRC, followed on, explaining how the draft Strategy would address these challenges by

increasing the capacity of individual Movement components to respond to RFL needs, while strengthening the Family Links Network as a whole. To achieve this, the Strategy suggests detailed steps including a drive to better target services at those who need them, and enhance the ability to respond to both emergencies and long-term problems. The strategy, Ms Clarke added, would also try to increase professionalism and improve cooperation among Movement components while continuing to raise awareness of the humanitarian obligation to restore family links.



The Head of the RFL Strategy Project, Jane Clarke

The Views of the National Societies

Some 30 National Societies took the floor during the afternoon to draw attention to many of the key issues and challenges they are dealing with, ranging from serving the needs of migrant workers across the world to making full use of the possibilities presented by new communications technology. Many of them pointed at the need for more training and resources as well as effective outreach work to inform those who need RFL services most. Others commented on the respective roles of the ICRC and the International Federation. The debates during the working group sessions of the second day promise to be rich.

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