



Jon Borgvinson/ICRC

NEWSLETTER

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FAMILY LINKS NETWORK

In this issue, you can read about how the Indian Red Cross Society and the Canadian Red Cross Society are working to re-connect families in two very different contexts. While the former is responding to sudden family separations caused by disasters, the latter is covering migrants' needs to restore family links.

It is well over a year since the Restoring Family Links (RFL) Strategy for the Movement was adopted by the Council of Delegates. Since then a number of positive steps have been taken by National Societies to improve their RFL services for separated families.

The active involvement of the Movement will be crucial to the development of the tracing services of National Societies, tracing agencies in ICRC delegations and the Central Tracing Agency at ICRC's headquarters, which together form the Family Links Network.

The aim of this newsletter is to give an update on the work to improve the Movement's RFL services for people separated from, or without news of, their family members.



THOUSANDS SEPARATED IN BIHAR FLOOD

In August 2008, television screens around the world broadcast images of the suffering caused by the devastating floods in the state of Bihar in India. They showed people awaiting rescue on rooftops, wading through neck-high water, or receiving assistance in crowded camps. Men, women and children were enduring one of the worst natural disasters to hit the region in many years.

Several rivers weave their way through Bihar, one of the poorest states in India. When a major breach, about two kilometres long, occurred in the Kosi river embankment, most people were unprepared for the consequences.

More than 3.7 million litres of water bursting through the river's banks flooded and damaged about 380,000 homes. People were forced to evacuate in haste. They left behind their possessions and livelihoods and often had no knowledge of the whereabouts of relatives. It is reported that 4.6 million people were affected, a staggering figure.

Because roads and bridges were destroyed by the flooding, boats and helicopters were used to rescue the flood victims. It was a logistical challenge that resulted in more families becoming separated. Rescue boats collected women and children first and took them to relief camps. Men were rescued at a later stage. Not only were they often taken to camps other than the ones where their families were sheltering, they also had no means of getting in touch with their relatives. More than 400 camps were established to take in approximately 450,000 people.

For people already traumatized by the widespread devastation, losing contact with loved ones caused additional anguish. The Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) organized a tracing response in order to help people locate their relatives.



ICRC



Indian Red Cross Society

MOBILIZING RESOURCES

Responding to a crisis of this magnitude requires extensive preparation. The IRCS had benefited from a two-year capacity-building project, but it had never provided RFL services on such a massive scale.

The joint IRCS-ICRC capacity-building project had several facets: training for IRCS staff; development and promotion of RFL tools; providing RFL services for unaccompanied children; coordination and management of IRCS state branches; management of dead bodies.

The IRCS sent a five-member team trained in tracing services to Bihar. The team was equipped with mobile handsets as well as posters and brochures in the local languages, for information gathering, training and communication purposes. Recently printed RFL guidelines and a handbook proved to be indispensable when it came to training volunteers and providing a rapid RFL response.

In coordination with other humanitarian organizations, the IRCS established a tracing network by mobilizing more than 200 volunteers. After receiving half a day's training, these committed volunteers went to work in the five most seriously affected districts.

The successful involvement of the IRCS, the dedication and enthusiasm of staff and volunteers and the high level of responsibility and ownership may be attributed to the two-year RFL capacity-building process.

GATHERING AND COMMUNICATING INFORMATION ON VICTIMS

The team in Bihar collected tracing requests from the affected population, took them to a central point and entered them in a database.

Lists of missing persons and enquirers were drawn up and data was matched. While visiting camps, tracing volunteers collected over 1,000 tracing requests concerning almost 3,000 missing or separated persons.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Lists of missing persons and enquirers were printed and posted in all the camps. A toll-free helpline number was posted along with the request that anyone who might have recognized a name, or who knew of a missing person's whereabouts, should get in touch.

This toll-free helpline was widely publicized in the media and its number displayed on tracing posters in affected areas. Trained volunteers answered calls to the helpline day and night.

In addition, in affected areas the names of missing persons and their relatives' enquiries were printed in the most popular local newspapers. Several television and radio stations provided free airtime as well.

Lists of people who had died were compiled and compared with the list of missing persons. When matches were found, the information was passed on to the responsible authorities who then contacted the families.

AN ADDED BENEFIT

The IRCS's tracing activities in Bihar were widely covered by local and national print media. This had a fundraising spin-off. Several potential donors have contacted the IRCS and enquired about their RFL activities.

COMMITTED UNTIL THE END

Today, the IRCS is the only organization still involved in the tracing operation in Bihar. It will continue to follow up the remaining cases of separated or missing family members after the emergency phase, for as long as necessary.

RFL IN DISASTERS

Strengthening the Movement's response in the area of restoring family links (RFL) during disasters has been identified as a shared objective in the wake of recent major disasters – the 2005 tsunami, the Bam earthquake, and Hurricane Katrina among others.

The report in this bulletin on the exceptional RFL response of the Indian Red Cross Society to the Bihar floods draws attention once again to these humanitarian needs and to the importance of all the components of the Movement working together.

In order to strengthen such responses globally, an ICRC project – part of the implementation of the *RFL Strategy for the Movement* – is being undertaken with support and input from the German Red Cross and the British Red Cross. The project has two elements: a field manual and the establishment of a "pool of specialists" for rapid deployment in a disaster.

FIELD MANUAL

The target audience for this manual consists of RFL staff and volunteers and others

who respond to disasters, whether they are from the ICRC, National Societies or the Federation.

However, it is intended to be of particular use to those who have to manage RFL responses. As such it aims to be a simple operational guide setting out the appropriate approaches in most circumstances and for the most important needs.

The manual covers preparedness, assessment, planning and implementation; it is hoped that it will provide decision-makers with a common "operational grammar" enabling them to make key choices under disaster conditions.

It will be translated into the four official languages of the Movement and distributed to all the delegations of the ICRC and the Federation and to all National Societies. The manual will be published in 2009.

POOL OF SPECIALISTS

Another aim of the project is to train selected members of the staff of the ICRC and National Societies to respond rapidly and systemati-

cally in large-scale disasters. This group, which will be deployed by the CTA, will consist of approximately 60 persons. It is also envisaged that members of the group will be drawn from around the world. Training will take place in Bangkok, Dakar, Geneva, Lima and Nairobi over the coming 12 months. National Societies and ICRC delegations will be made aware of this training, so that persons may submit their applications to join the pool of specialists.

It is hoped that these steps will help to increase understanding of RFL within the Movement, and that RFL will become part of the Movement's standard operational response to natural disasters. Over the last year or so, we have already seen RFL responses to disasters in Mexico, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and other places. Such action will help the Movement to improve the quality of its response to one of the most basic human needs – remaining linked to your own family members.

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM CANADA

One in five people in Canada was born in another country. One in three has at least one parent who was born outside Canada. Immigration is a central part of Canadian history and identity.

In recent years, many immigrants to Canada have been arriving from conflict areas such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Countless people here have no idea what became of relatives from whom they were separated during such conflicts.

Many of us working on Restoring Family Links (RFL) for the Canadian Red Cross are immigrants ourselves. Some of us have our own personal RFL stories, such as Almira, who waited for 10 months for news of her sister after war broke out in Bosnia.

Information finally came through a Red Cross message.

We see and have first-hand experience of the physical, psychological, sociological and economic importance of maintaining contact with one's family when one is building a new life in a new country. Such contact is important not only for individuals, but for the whole community.

We also understand how easy it can be for these ties to be broken, especially during a disaster or a conflict.

The RFL Strategy provides a solid base that we at the Canadian Red Cross are now using in order to build a long-term plan of action for RFL and a stronger, truly impartial programme that reaches and serves everyone who could benefit from our services.

"Countless people here have no idea what became of relatives from whom they were separated during such conflicts."

We are already tackling several key challenges that relate to Objective 1 of the Strategy: *Improving restoring family links capacity and performance*. RFL in Canada relies heavily on the work of a wonderful and constantly evolving team of volunteers who are supported by four full-time staff. Ensuring standard casework across a huge country



Boris Heger/ICRC

COORDINATION AND PROMOTION

Brochure and leaflet

The ICRC has published the RFL Strategy together with a promotional leaflet. The English and French versions are now available to all National Societies, ICRC delegations and the Federation. The Arabic, Russian and Spanish versions will be finalized in 2009.



Logo for the Family Links Network

One of the objectives of the RFL Strategy is to raise the profile of the Family Links Network among beneficiaries, governments and donors, and to foster awareness of the service it provides and the Movement's expertise in this area. Accordingly, a visual identity, including a logo, has been devised to enhance RFL communication.

The RFL logo was selected following extensive consultation between the ICRC and National Societies. As a symbol of the integrity of the service provided, it is intended to instil a sense of trust, familiarity and professionalism, and to be recognizable around the world.

Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish versions of the logo are currently available. National Societies can translate the phrase "RESTORING FAMILY LINKS" into their own languages, and associate it with the same logo. To do so, please consult the guidelines which have been established to ensure that the logo is used effectively and consistently and which are available from the ICRC.

Implementation group

In line with the RFL Strategy, the ICRC will establish and chair an implementation group composed of National Societies, the International Federation and the ICRC. The group will provide guidance and support in the implementation of the RFL Strategy. A first meeting is planned for 6–8 April 2009. National Societies will be provided with more details.

with vastly different needs calls for a comprehensive training package and up-to-date procedural guidelines.

Our continuing reliance on an outdated database is a particular obstacle to efficiency. Following a review of databases used by several other National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, some of whom, we discovered, were also looking to upgrade, we decided to develop an updated tool that meets our specific requirements.

We have also identified the need for better outreach, resource mobilization and communication. Some immigrants to Canada are aware of RFL because of contact with the ICRC in their home or transit countries. Others, however, have no idea that the Canadian Red Cross has a programme that may be able to help them reconnect with their families.

To address this gap we are currently collaborating with our public affairs department to finalize an RFL communication strategy. One particularly exciting project has been the development of a public service announce-

ment based on a song, "I Know You're Out There," which was contributed by an immigrant in Vancouver. Also in the past year, the programme and successful reunifications have been covered on television and radio, and in newspapers.

At the 30th International Conference in Geneva last year, the Canadian Red Cross and the Government of Canada signed a joint pledge to cooperate on the Strategy. This pledge, and our work connected to the Strategy, will give us, we hope, the momentum to build a programme that truly reaches all the vulnerable people in Canada who desperately need RFL services.

Henry Dunant recognised the importance of sending family news from the battlefield in Solferino. As family links around the world continue to be broken by conflict and disaster, we want to be in the best position possible to restore them.

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