



# ICRC DURING APARTHEID



ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) started visiting political detainees on Robben Island in 1963. It was authorised to visit sentenced prisoners in the maximum security prison following an agreement with the Ministry of Justice. The first visit was conducted to the late Robert Sobukwe. Until 1991, the ICRC visited thousands of prisoners across South Africa and provided their families with food vouchers and travel tickets to facilitate visits.

In 1986, an ambitious countrywide programme of transformation of the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) into a multiracial, democratic body, was launched. SARCS then became a partner of ICRC assistance programmes, conducting joint activities in the townships and a relief operation for the victims of the political violence, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Transvaal (now Gauteng) Provinces. Assistance was given to thousands of people in the form of cooking utensils, food parcels, blankets, plastic sheeting and burial vouchers.

In 1987, the ICRC suspended its visits to

detainees until access was allowed to all convicted detainees in relation to the security situation and unrest. During the suspension, the ICRC still provided the families of detainees with food vouchers and sent recreational items to various prisons, particularly to Robben Island, where a large consignment of sporting equipment was delivered. When the ICRC visits resumed in 1991, they were carried out to all security detainees, those awaiting trial as well as sentenced prisoners. Where necessary, the ICRC urged the authorities to respect the basic rights of those incarcerated and improve material conditions.

Signalling an end to apartheid, and its restrictions, changes dawned in 1992 when the ICRC was allowed for the first time to visit people detained in police stations, without having to provide the authorities with prior notification.

The cooperation with SARCS reached its height during the 1994 elections with the mounting of a massive preparedness operation at potential trouble spots countrywide.

## ICRC Delegates who visited detainees in South Africa between 1963 and 1991:

Georg Hoffmann (1963, 1964)	Pierre Delacoste (1984, 1985)
Geoffrey Cassian Senn (1967, 1969)	Olivier Cingria (1984)
Dr Simon Burckhardt (1967)	Dr Christophe Bolliger (1984, 1985)
Philip Zuger (1969, 1970, 1971)	Paul Grossrieder (1985)
Dr François Vuillet (1969)	Jean-Philippe Lavoyer (1985)
Dr Roland Marti (1970)	Daniel Züst (1985)
Jacques Moreillon (1973, 1974, 1975)	Angelo Gnaedinger (1986)
Roger Santschy (1973, 1978, 1979, 1980)	Anne Imobersteg (1985)
Dr Edoardo Leuthold (1973)	Ann Schwarz (1986)
Dominique Dufour (1974, 1975, 1976, 1977)	Olivier Courvoisier (1986)
Nicolas de Rougemont (1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1991)	Francine Fassa-Recrosio (1986)
Dr Andreas Vischer (1974, 1976, 1977, 1978)	Gianfranco Soldati (1986)
Dr Stefan Müller (1975)	Dr Hans-Werner Jaun (1986)
Frank Schmidt (1976, 1977, 1978, 1979)	Blanca Vincze (1986)
Harald Schmid de Grunec (1976, 1977)	Peter Fluege (1986)
Jean-Marc Bornet (1978, 1981)	Nicolas Roggo (1986)
François Néri (1978)	Philippe Roten (1986)
Dr Marcel Dubouloz (1979)	Alex Braunwalder (1991)
Peter Lütolf (1980)	Ann Sophie Lundberg (1991)
Jean-Charles Délèze (1980)	Daniel Fink (1991)
Dr Andreas Keller (1980)	Dr Ferenc Mayer (1991)
Paul Früh (1981)	Toni Pfanner (1991)
Salvatore Salvo (1981)	Heidi Huber (1991)
Dr Jörg Nagel (1981, 1982, 1983)	René Boeckli (1991)
Rudolf Kung (1982)	Dr Pierrre Decosterd (1991)
Hanspeter Reich (1982)	Hans Leuenberger (1991)
Dieter Pfaff (1982, 1983)	Dr Marc Joyeux (1991)
Olivier Dürr (1982)	Brigitte Troyon (1991)
Pierre de Cocatrix (1982)	Susanne Fishbach (1991)
André Collomb (1983, 1984)	Fabia Biancardi (1991)
Werner Schläpfer (1983, 1984)	Elisabeth Zumstein (1991)
Adrian Kübler (1983)	Karen Saddler (1991)
Philippe Comtesse (1984, 1985)	Anne Marie Dick (1991)
	Marc Henzelin (1991)
	Werner Koller (1991)

Photo courtesy of the Nelson Mandela Foundation & the SA National Archive.

## Nelson Mandela

***Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1963 and 1990***

"In those early years, the International Red Cross was the only organisation that both listened to our complaints and responded to them. This was vital, because the authorities ignored us." (A long walk to Freedom)

"In later years, the International Red Cross sent more liberal men who wholeheartedly fought for improvements. The organisation also played a critical role in an area that was less obvious but no less important to us. They often provided money to wives and relatives who would not otherwise have been able to visit us on the island." (A long walk to Freedom)

"What matters is not only what the ICRC brings, but even more the bad that it prevents." (ICRC booklet on detention)

"...to me personally, and those who shared the experience of being political prisoners, the Red Cross was a beacon of humanity within the dark inhumane world of political imprisonment."

"The Geneva Conventions...continue to remind us most forcefully of our common obligation to care for each other even, and particularly, in conditions that foster behaviour to the contrary..." (speech delivered at the British Red Cross Humanity Lecture in London on 10 July 2003)

## Johnson Mlambo

***Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1963 and 1983***

"I take this opportunity to salute the ICRC for the humanising element that they brought to us as political prisoners on Robben Island. The most vital work the ICRC did was to pressure the authorities about the cruel treatment in the prison.

We were happy that the ICRC came to visit us. I was once buried alive and throttled until I passed out and eventually lost my eye on Robben Island. But we could represent our complaints to the ICRC. The food was very bad and badly prepared. The Red Cross enabled us to select our own cooks who could go to the kitchen and prepare our food.

There were some sick inmates, who were suffering for some time. The doctors on the island did not give enough treatment and complaints were ignored. But then Dr Vischer from the Red Cross came and some inmates were even admitted to hospital.

We converted Robben Island from the 'Devils Island' it was in 1963 to a much more habitable place, this was not only due to the individual and collective efforts of the inmates but a transformation greatly assisted by the ICRC who came to us annually. I must also salute the work of the South African Council of Churches who assisted our families with accommodation when they came to visit us.

Conditions for studying improved, preparation of food improved and sporting facilities and equipment improved and it was thanks of the tiring efforts of the ICRC."

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P. O. BOX 2412  
DAR-ES-SALAAM  
3 JUNE 1984

The Director  
International Committee of the Red Cross  
Geneva  
SWITZERLAND

007494 \* 27 JUNE 1984

TAFOSA

A TRAITER PCUR INFO

Dear Sir

It is a pleasure for me to keep in touch with you from this Dar-es-Salaam address. I arrived here on 11th May, after spending some ten months with my people at home in S. Africa. Arrested on 31 March 1963 and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment - I lived on Robben Island from June 26 1963 to May 6 1983, but I only emerged from South Africa's Leenkop Prison on June 20th 1983, after serving exactly 20 years. Having thus shed the tag of prisoner number 277'63 - I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to you for assistance rendered to me in person, and to my fellow-in-mates, in general.

007494 \* 27 JUNE 1984

The services rendered by the I.C.R.C. - transformed our Island home from the inhospitable "Devil's Island" of the early 1960s - into a habitable place - the Robben Island of to-day. I need not recall the horrors of those early days - since you know them only too well - since these are well documented in records of your delegates who have visited us and continue the good work to this day. How can we forget the likes of - Dr Sen, Zuger, Moreillon, de Rougemont, Santelny, Dr Fischer, and many more. Many of these I met, to present my own problems - or to present

those of my fellow-in-mates as their representative. Getting newspapers, beds, better health, education, and recreation facilities, as well as better food and its better preparation - have, inter alia, been achieved through the significant contributions of these self-less men. I only know too well - that much more could have been achieved - were it not for the intransigence of the local authorities.

But your assistance did not just end with my release; I continued to receive valuable assistance which helped to reintegrate me into the community outside prison. Mr Kubler and his colleague from your Pretoria Office - even visited me at my remote area home - in Budbuckridge. They further consented to go along with me to see Mrs Chilwane Sella, widow of Armas Chilwane - a fellow Robben Island in-mate who spent 10 years there - and died in 1979 October - when a parcel-bomb exploded in his hands. Your delegates were sympathetic to Mrs Chilwane's dire need for a better - safer home. To shelter her and her three children, they gave her four blankets, and only wished they could do more towards her urgent housing needs.

007494 \* 27 JUNE 1984

Please convey my gratitude - therefore to your staff - especially to those in your Pretoria office - whom I left unceremoniously - to join the External Mission of the Pan African Congress - at its Dar-es-Salaam headquarters. Should the opportunity arise, I will take the opportunity to see you in person.

Sincerely yours  
Johnson P Mlambo 277'63.

## Philip Silwana

***Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1966 and 1976  
Chairperson of the Committee in charge of prisoners' affairs***

"I, Philip Fumanekile Silwana, prisoner number 258/66 served ten years on Robben Island. The ICRC was of great help to the political prisoners on the island and needs to work even harder in today's enlightened world, where science and technology has not been able to rid it of oppression and killings of man by man. Think a little about the Congo, Rwanda and Afghanistan etc.

From the delegation of Mr Senn to the vivacious Dr Moreillon, I headed the Prisoners Committee on their rights. The ICRC meant 'our mother has come'. It did not fear the oppressor regime even to present the problems to the Minister of Justice and Prisons in Pretoria. I was the leader of the committee and we presented the problems we were facing to the ICRC:

**Clothing:** Khaki shirts with shorts, canvas trousers, all not issued according to size, many tattered. On being given clothes one had to stand in the open,

stark naked. ICRC took our complaints and long warm trousers and even canvas jackets were changed.

**Work:** A prisoner allocated to work in Bamboo Span had to stand thigh deep in the cold slippery sea throughout the year pulling out the bamboo for sale to the East. The warders liked to push the asthmatic or TB sufferers into the sea. ICRC forced change.

**Food:** While ICRC helped very much to see prisoners food rations were improved – adding some bread and samp. I am sure it is a surprise prisoners survived and we were allowed finally to assign our own fellow prisoners to work in the kitchen.

**Water:** Salinity was not suitable for human consumption and we had to wash in cold water. ICRC asked whether authorities and their families used such cold water to wash and bath. Shortly after hot water and rain water tanks were provided.

**Doctor:** TB and asthma sufferers were ultimately better treated after the ICRC insisted on better food, blankets, clothing and even accommodation in hospital for severe cases.

**Studies and library:** After serious attempts and see-saw between prison – prisoners, the ICRC informed us that the government says we may have a library and improve our own education. The first library books came from the Red Cross.

Viva ICRC viva!"

## Solomon Mabuse

***Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1963 and 1978***



Served as a translator for the ICRC medical doctors for three years.

"We used to get outdated medicine from the South African Defence Force. They gave us such medicine with the expiry date visible for all to see and what doctors we saw on those odd occasions could not help all of us.

The visits by the ICRC improved our stay in detention because when the authorities knew that the ICRC would be visiting their attitude changed, they were humane. When the ICRC left we would be treated badly again, but we pressurised warders into changing their behaviour and reported to ICRC the next year and the department of Correctional Services were embarrassed. The 'verkrampste' (stubborn) warders were replaced by 'verligte' (lighter) warders.

The majority of us are alive today, largely because of the visits and the treatment from the ICRC."

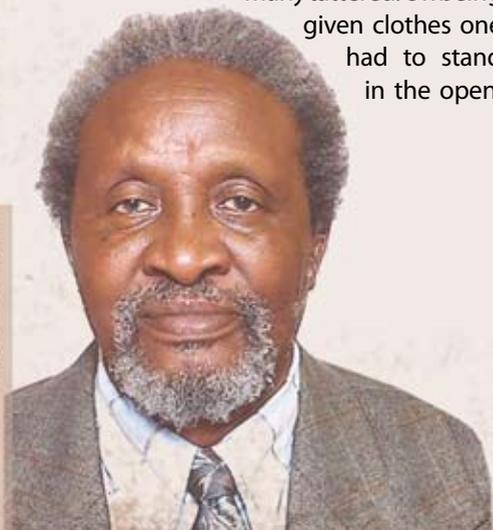
## Isaac Saki Mafatshe

***Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1963 and 1973***



"It must have been 1967 or 1968 there about, and the first representative of the Red Cross was Mr. Senn. Unfortunately, for him we met at the height of the cold war internationally, and on Robben Island itself, between political prisoners and prison authorities.

At the time of Mr. Senn's visit, conditions on Robben Island were harsh and cruel, food was bad, there was the general brutalisation and victimisation of political prisoners. When we drew the attention of Mr. Senn to our condition, he said our conditions were better when compared to political prisoners in Congo and other African States. This strengthened our suspicion that the Red Cross represented was a Western agent to protect the Apartheid regime. However, his subsequent visit, he became attentive at listening at our complaints and good at representing us to the Vorster Pretoria Government. Gradually there were changes as a result of our struggles, strikes and the role played by the Red Cross representatives, who followed in the footsteps of Mr. Senn."



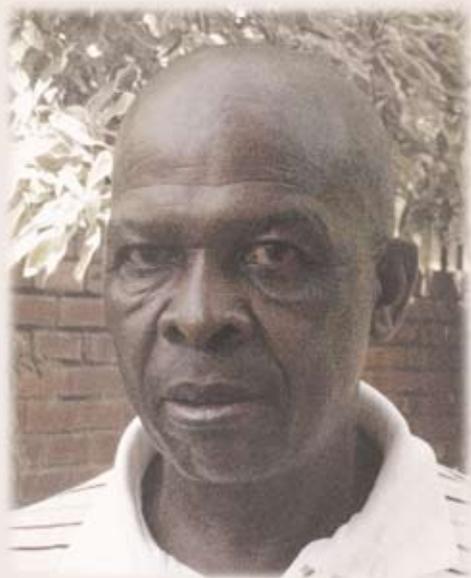
## Hosea Mokone

*Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1977 and 1985*

"The ICRC played a big role. As prisoners we got high morale from the delegates who visited us. They helped us get access to newspapers.

Through the assistance of the Red Cross our families could visit us, which would not have been possible otherwise and they also supplied our families with food vouchers.

When I arrived on the island we were getting raw mealies and through the intervention of the Red Cross we were able to get more nutritious food. We were also given better medical treatment and were able to be referred to the Grootte Schuur Hospital on the mainland."

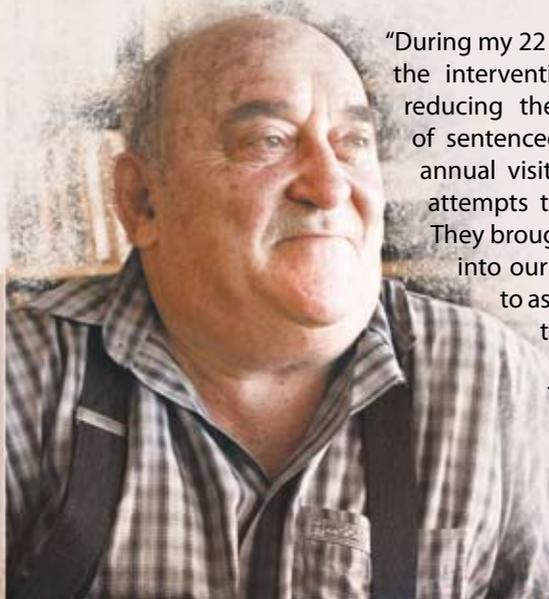


## Denis Goldberg

*Imprisoned at Pretoria Prison between 1964 and 1986*

"During my 22 years imprisonment under apartheid the intervention of the ICRC was important in reducing the psychological and mental abuse of sentenced political prisoners. The Delegates' annual visits helped to overcome the regime's attempts to totally isolate us from the world. They brought a breath of sanity and caring right into our prison. Your watchful eye helped us to assert our human dignity and improved the conditions of our health and diet.

There is no doubt that the ICRC's monitoring of the prison medical services literally saved the lives of some of our prisoners."



## Leila Blacking

*Former ICRC delegate*

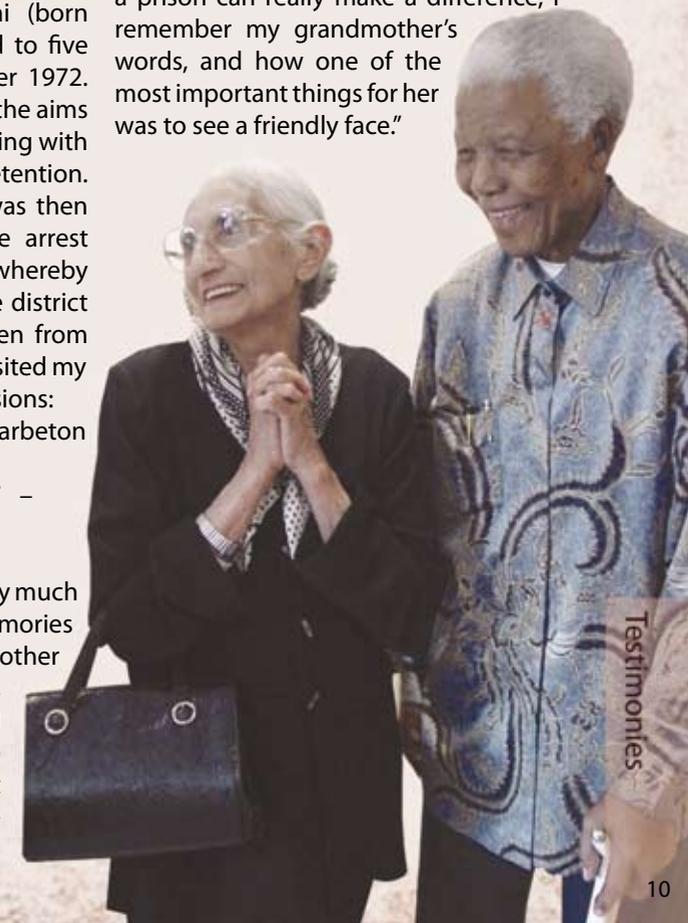


"My grandmother, Amina Desai (born September 1919) was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in November 1972. She was charged with furthering the aims of the ANC and SACP and conspiring with Ahmed Timol, who died in detention. She was released in 1978 and was then under a banning order / house arrest for a further 5 years until 1983, whereby she was not allowed to leave the district of Roodepoort and was forbidden from attending gatherings. The ICRC visited my grandmother in prison on 5 occasions: May 1973 and May 1974 – Barbeton Prison  
April 1975, May 1976, April 1977 – Kroonstad Women's Prison

My work for the ICRC has been very much inspired by my grandmother's memories of the organisation. My grandmother did not often talk about prison, but when she did, she would mention the ICRC visits, and the small - but sometimes significant - concessions often made by the

authorities as a result, whether it meant having a blanket instead of sleeping on the floor, or being given something to write on.

During my time with the ICRC, I have reunified families separated by conflict, helped to coordinate water projects and food distributions, and of course I have visited many detainees. In moments of doubt, when I have asked myself if visiting a prison can really make a difference, I remember my grandmother's words, and how one of the most important things for her was to see a friendly face."



## Susan Newall

*ICRC employee 1986 - 2010*

"I started with the ICRC in the late eighties working in the Detention/Assistance Department. It was my job to organise the travel tickets for the families to visit their relative in Robben Island and other prisons (12 tickets per year per family). I also organised the food vouchers to be given to the families.

It was a most memorable time for me and I

have such fond memories of the families. I remember mostly their strength, particularly those whose family member was due to be hanged at Pretoria Prison, they had such courage.

The families would come to the delegation with their visiting permits and sometimes they were received too late for the visit or for a very short visiting time. Over the years I managed to build up a rapport whereupon I could negotiate about late permits and get another date or for a longer visiting time. The families were so appreciative and, of course, it left me with a very good feeling that I could help in some small way. During the time that the ICRC suspended its visits to prisons, I organised for recreational equipment to be delivered to Robben Island and some other prisons. We would send football team outfits, exercise bicycles, games, books, etc.

I visited Robben Island a couple of years ago, and the ex-prisoner guide was overwhelmed to meet someone from the ICRC and said he was glad to get the chance to express his thanks, particularly for the fact that because of the ICRC his mother could visit him in prison."

## Jonathan Makwenkwe Mathe

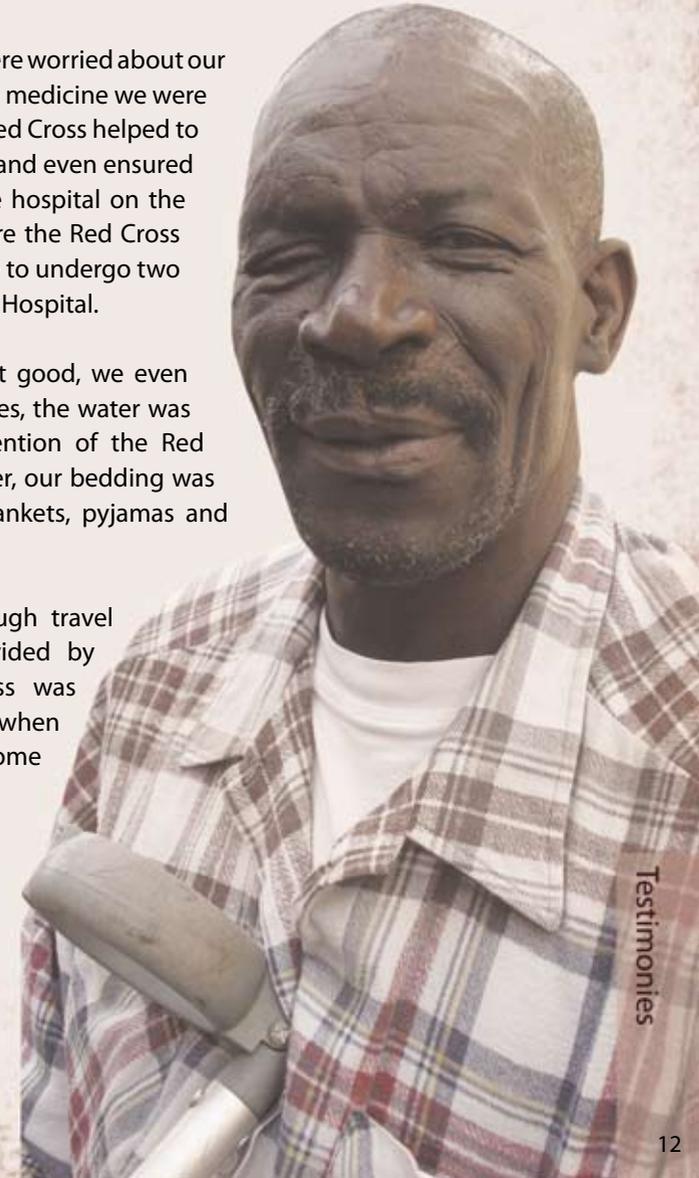
*Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1976 and 1984*

"I was visited by the ICRC personally and in later years we had representatives who took our complaints to the delegation who came to visit the island. I particularly remember Mr Senn from the first visit we received.

The Red Cross helped a lot, we were worried about our health and specifically about the medicine we were receiving. It was outdated. The Red Cross helped to improve our medical assistance and even ensured that we could be treated in the hospital on the mainland, this was denied before the Red Cross intervened. As a result I was able to undergo two operations at the Groote Schuur Hospital.

The food on the island was not good, we even found worms in our food at times, the water was also salty. Through the intervention of the Red Cross we later on got fresh water, our bedding was improved and we even got blankets, pyjamas and beds...we survived.

My family also benefited through travel tickets and food parcels provided by the Red Cross. The Red Cross was very helpful after my release, when I was visited and received some assistance."



## James April

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1971 and 1986*

"My first recollection of the International Red Cross was when they came to visit the prisoners on the Island in 1973/ 1974. The delegation was led by Dr Moreillon and included among others a Mr Sanchi and Mr DeRougemont. A year or so later a Mr Dufour was included. What for me was significant about the visits was that we could speak to them without close supervision by the authorities. I was in B section then. This was where most of the top leaders of the various organisations were held.

Dr Moreillon intimated to us that comparatively we were not as bad off physically as our counterparts in some other jails but that we had more of a psychological handicap. Nonetheless,

every year things improved. For instance, we obtained underwear soon after their visit in 1974/1975. The next year or so we got beds.

But before all this we received quantities of fruit, peaches in particular. At first, our tummies were upset but they got used to the fruit. At one time, we even received chocolates. It was only some time afterwards that I discovered that the Red Cross had funded those eats. Moreover, I believe the Red Cross was responsible for the purchase of the majority of long-playing records.

Mr Schmidt, a huge but very polite man, followed Dr Morreillon. He brought us messages from outside."

## Juby Mayet

### *Imprisoned at the Women's Jail between May to October 1978*

"Feeling a sense of gladness that someone out there was taking an interest in us. The visits provided for us a break in normal boredom of the routine and had other people to talk to for a while. The sense that someone was interested in our plight.

I don't remember any drastic changes for me personally, I was locked up most of the time. Things were not too bad but the fact that you did not have your freedom.

The visits from the Red Cross was a good thing, they listened to our complaints. Made us feel that we were not alone."

## Tito Maleka

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1979 and 1990*

"For me, the assistance of the Red Cross made a difference to my life on Robben Island, especially in terms of family communication. At first, there was no access to our families and the Red Cross assisted us with this.

Life was difficult on the Island and even though we were in isolation, we were able to see changes in the food because of the visits by the Red Cross. The visits helped us the 'naughty ones' as pressure was reprieved. We also noticed a change to the censoring of our letters. In terms of sports, we had a committee and the Red Cross assisted with our needs."

## Eddie Daniels

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1964 and 1979*

"I would like to compliment the International Red Cross for the magnificent service they are rendering to those in distress throughout the world.

I was a political prisoner on Robben Island from 1964 to 1979. We, the political prisoners are indebted to the world for the assistance rendered to us in our Struggle against the apartheid government. In prison, the ICRC visited us and I feel that the ICRC was representing the international family of nations. We, as prisoners, benefited from the presence of the ICRC.

Initially, we were very badly treated but with the successive visits by the ICRC, with Mr Senn being the first representative of ICRC to visit us, the prison conditions gradually improved in terms of work, food, blankets, clothes and recreational items as well as the behaviour of the prison authorities towards us.



I, and others, am personally indebted to the ICRC for pressurising the South African government of the day to allow us to study. Permission to study was a bonus to us. I came to prison with a std. 6 (grade 8) education. I was allowed to study, and with the assistance of my fellow prisoners and the good offices of the ICRC, I eventually left prison with two academic degrees a BA and a B.Com.

Thank you!"

## Deborah "Debs" Matshoba-Mabale

*Imprisoned at several prisons in the late 1970's and early 1980's*

"We were held in solitary confinement. We were not allowed to communicate or interact with each other. We were sleeping on 'velt' (thin material) mats in the cells, it was very cold. That December (1976) a team from the Red Cross visited and listened to our complaints.

After this we were issued with bunks, mattresses to sleep on, pillows and sheets. I was released at the end of that December but re-detained a few weeks later under section 6 as a security detainee and taken back to the Women's Jail for 18 months.

We were often moved from prison to prison. If they thought you became to comfortable they would move you. That's how I ended up in Pietermaritzburg Prison for 11 months, Bethal Prison for 6 weeks and Middleburg Prison for 6 months. At one of the jails my valuable things were taken from me, my watch, wedding ring etc.

I was 'released' but then taken back to number four jail (Women's jail). The Red Cross came to see me once more here, the first thing they picked up was that I needed to see a doctor. I was very sick. The Red Cross insisted that I be taken to a hospital where I received treatment. I also told them about my personal items that were taken from me, they followed it up and these were returned to me a few days later.

The Red Cross really made a difference in our lives while we were incarcerated."

## Bennie Ntoele

*Imprisoned on Robben Island from 1963 to 1973 and again from 1979 to 1989*

In the early years, an ICRC delegate by the name of Mr Senn visited Robben Island but we could not contact him and thus could not present our case. But once we had direct contact with an ICRC delegate then there was pressure on the authorities to come right with the administration of the prison.

Certain abuses were pointed out to the delegates, eg. being denied recreational facilities, the diet, clothing and medical attention. Then there were visible changes. In the late 80's we had access to newspapers and television because of the ICRC.

Adequate lighting for studying and the length of the time for studying improved through representations from the ICRC. ICRC helped with the improvement of hygiene facilities and the quality of the water. Because of ICRC, we received better quality blankets and an extra one was given.

I felt that because ICRC visited us every year, the authorities were cautious not to have the same complaint raised again.

When I first arrived on Robben Island in 1963, working conditions were terrible and sometimes meaningless, eg. carrying sand from one point to another and then back again. Things did improve gradually until conditions were bearable when I left in June 1989."

## Brigitte Troyon Borgeaud

*ICRC delegate in South Africa between 1990 and 1991*

"I arrived in South Africa in July 1990 at a historical turn: Nelson Mandela had been freed some months before and the regime of apartheid was declared dead. It was exciting to be a witness of all the hopes raised by these radical changes towards finally, freedom and democracy for all. But this period of tremendous changes was marked as well by uncertainty and violence, which made us fear that South Africa would fall into chaos.

Being in charge of ICRC programmes in the East and West Rand, including Soweto, made me see the legacy of the apartheid regime and the immense injustices it had created. Overcrowded hostels were filled with angry men; inhabitants in seemingly never ending shacks were living in extreme poverty. Violence came unexpected and strong, killing and wounding hundreds of

people in just 2 months. Shacks were burnt down, leaving homeless so many families.

The ICRC and the South Africa Red Cross Society had to act fast to answer to the needs caused by this sudden violence: distribution of food parcels to those who had lost their homes; first aid courses and dissemination of basic humanitarian principles, to try to limit the number of casualties. Violence died down as slowly and quietly as its eruption had been sudden and loud.

I left South Africa in 1991 clinging to the hope that the country had gone through the worse and that the best was yet to come. In every country where I was posted, I followed the news. The election in 1994 made me cry: finally South Africa and its inhabitants were free."

## Ronnie Mamoepa

*Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1980 and 1985  
- Prison number 17/80*

"My first interaction with the ICRC, which we nicknamed "M-Geneva", was in 1980 following a hunger strike which lasted three days to improve our diet, health and educational privileges. Even though we understood too well that the primary responsibility to improve our lot on Robben Island lay on our shoulders, we knew that without the support and the watchful eye of the international community as represented by the ICRC, the regime could afford to ignore our demands.

Our struggles on Robben Island were advanced on two fronts i.e. internally through struggles by the prisoners themselves and secondly through the international community as represented by the ICRC. The two fronts complimented each other and were mutually reinforcing.

One of the crucial struggles waged on Robben Island was the need for the regime to recognise that we were not criminals but prisoners of conscience or indeed political prisoners. Ironically, the ANC had signed the first Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions in which it committed

itself to treating detained agents of apartheid abroad as prisoners of war. Yet the apartheid regime on the other hand refused to recognise us as political prisoners, prisoners of war or conscience. Through our own efforts and the unflinching support of the Red Cross the regime recognised us as "Security Prisoners", which was a crucial distinction from other categories of prisoners.

The ICRC reminded the prison authorities to change our conditions of living including our diet, because they were inhumane and that they themselves would not accept such conditions if subjected to them.

Support from our families either through letters and/or a visitation was indeed crucial for our morale.

How can we forget that our families received tickets for train rides to Cape Town through the ICRC? How can we forget the support our parents received from the ICRC during their stay at Cowley House in Cape Town? How can we forget that upon our release it was the ICRC which provided us with blankets?"

## Hugh Lewin

### *Imprisoned at Pretoria Prison between 1964 and 1971*

"The apartheid government did not treat its opponents kindly, especially the political prisoners. Reporting about the harsh conditions was limited, until the articles in 1965 in the Rand Daily Mail by Harold Strachan, after three years as a political prisoner.

The articles had a dramatic effect on the treatment of those of us inside. Isolated as we were, we knew little of the furore arising from the revelations about our conditions – until one morning in 1965 when our mailbag sewing was disturbed by the arrival of a man with a foreign accent and the ability to elicit respect and friendliness from the usually aggressive warders.

This was Mr. Senn from the ICRC, responding to complaints emanating from the Strachan reports. He brought relief from pain (e.g. proper medical treatment); the possibility of better physical conditions (like glass for broken window-panes); and, most importantly, the promise that mistreatment would never again be allowed.

Bram Fischer put it to one of Senn's ICRC successors, who diligently visited the prisoners each year thereafter: "It is not so much the good that your visits bring but the bad that they prevent."

## Mark Shinner

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island from 1963 to 1973 and from 1979 to 1987, transferred to Diepkloof Prison from 1987 to 1990*

"Many will remember the humanitarian intervention of the ICRC from a myriad of experiences world-wide. Common to all these experiences is the ICRC's intervention at the moment of great human suffering.

For us on Robben Island ICRC assumed the name 'Mjiniva' which is the isi-Xhosa pronunciation of Geneva – ICRC always recalled the name of the home-city of their Headquarters.

Apartheid South Africa was jolted by stories of atrocities suffered by us on Robben Island. Naturally the government denied these allegations. To prove their bona fides they allowed the ICRC among others to visit us annually. Mr Senn, an excellent listener and a good memory for detail was the first to visit us on the island. His patience was phenomenal, he listened to each complaint, insisted on specialist treatment and pursued policy matters affecting conditions of our incarceration.

The size of the prison population was large and to make the most of the ICRC visit we elected committees to ensure that all complaints were given to the ICRC. Thanks to the Red Cross, my family also benefited through food parcels and travel tickets."

## Sandy Oupa Lebeso

*Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1977 and 1983*

"The conditions were terrible, we were allowed one hour exercise and then we would be locked inside the cells. We had no sporting equipment.

The visits of the ICRC once or twice a year helped us to raise concerns and problems that we were faced with at that time. Some of those problems were poor quality of food and lack of sporting equipment. The ICRC started helping us with sporting equipment like soccer, rugby balls and indoor games like chess, scrabble etc. We were quite happy with the support we got from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Our lives and conditions changed a little bit and the situation improved a lot.

Our parents were helped with transport and accommodation during their visit to Robben Island. Many of our parents received vouchers for food parcels.

We appreciated the role that was played by the ICRC as many of the challenges we faced were addressed on our behalf by the ICRC to the Government of the day. ICRC became our mouth piece, they negotiated on our behalf to change the prison conditions.

On behalf of my colleagues who were imprisoned with me, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for the role and the support that we got from the ICRC."

Testimonies

## Lilian Keagile-Sere

*Imprisoned at the Women's Jail in 1983, transferred to Central Prison, Kroonstad Prison and Klerksdorp Prison. Released in 1989*

"I was in jail for almost six months before I saw the Red Cross for the first time. I remember the ladies getting ready for the visit. They were so excited, putting on make-up and so on.

I remember that we could not do anything during the day. We did not receive any newspapers or magazines or games and exercise equipment. I remember specifically asking for jigsaw puzzles, we didn't have any and a few weeks after the Red Cross visited the Prison authorities brought us jigsaw puzzles. We also did not have tables in our cells, so we requested tables and eventually received them.

We never received sweets in prison and I remember the first time I received sweets in prison was the ones brought by the ICRC. We enjoyed that!

I was transferred to Kroonstad Prison where they would not let me continue my studies. I complained to the ICRC and I could then continue my studies.

A very good thing from the Red Cross was that they gave grocery coupons to my mother who was looking after my six-year old son. My mother never had a chance to thank the Red Cross. But I need to thank the Red Cross for taking the time to worry about prisoners in South Africa. We waited for the Red Cross every September. It was through the Red Cross that we kept our sanity."

Testimonies

## Thami Mkwanzazi

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1980 and 1987*

"I remember being visited by the ICRC, the visit that stands out the most is when the first female delegate visited the island. I gave her a bunch of flowers which came from the late Elias Motswaledi's small garden.

The Red Cross gave us hope and the most significant thing they did was to provide food parcels and travel tickets to our

dependents. We were never allowed contact visits but through the Red Cross we were later allowed to touch our spouses and kids.

Other improvements like access to newspapers came about through the intervention of the Red Cross which was intensified through the hunger strikes undertaken by prisoners to improve conditions.

I was a journalist myself and started the first underground newspaper on the island, The Robben Island News. We managed to get news from outside through newspapers smuggled in by warders and would then transcribe and circulate to the ANC camp inside the prison. I was also the first journalist who was able to write for a newspaper from inside jail. Six months before my release I was employed by the Weekly Mail.

Through all the improvements the ICRC managed to bring about in our conditions, they got the nickname 'um-Geneva', which means everyone could be represented. The Red Cross was powerful, we saw changes."

## Stanley Mogoba

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1963 and 1966*

"One of the most effective ways of ensuring a prisoner wastes away is to deny access to things like reading material. At Robben Island only the warders were allowed to read newspapers. That changed when the ICRC stepped in. Through talks with the authorities the organisation was able to donate reading material (and also arrange for donations from others),

chairs, tables, referencing material etc.

The library became one of our cornerstones. Through it, distance learning was established and many prisoners over the years benefited as they completed their schooling on the island, including high school and tertiary education."

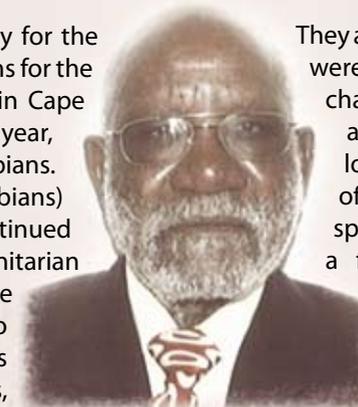
## Andimba Toivo ya Toivo

### *Imprisoned on Robben Island from 1968 to 1984. Currently Chairman of the Namibia Red Cross Society*

"The ICRC was a relief for the inmates on Robben Island. It acted as mediator between the inmates and authorities. For example, we had no access to newspapers until 1978 when the committee successfully convinced the prison authorities to allow the inmates to have newspapers. I lived in "B" Section and what I'm saying happened to "B" section inmates.

food and cooking utensils. Mr Nicolas de Rougemont whom we met and who headed one of the ICRC delegations to Robben Island was in Namibia heading the ICRC office in there and was instrumental in organising our reintegration back into society. We have high regard and praise for the work of the ICRC to help with the alleviation of the suffering of the masses of the world.

The ICRC was able to pay for the trips and accommodations for the Namibian visitors while in Cape Town. They gave us R30 a year, this was only for the Namibians. Even after our (Namibians) release, the ICRC continued to give us humanitarian relief support with the reintegration back into society. The Red Cross provided us with blankets,



They also facilitated that prisoners were given spectacles free of charge or allowed to buy them at a reduced price. We always looked forward to the visits of the Red Cross, the day they spent with us was virtually a freedom day because no warder would set his foot in our section. That is how I began to appreciate the work of the ICRC."

## Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada

***Imprisoned on Robben Island (prisoner 468/64) between 1964 and 1982 and then in Pollsmoor Prison, and then Johannesburg Prison until his release in 1989***

"Imprisonment by its very nature entails a multitude of deprivations, hardships, humiliation and assaults on human dignity. But apartheid's political prisoners were subjected to additional restrictions, obstructions, pettiness and hostility, that frequently went beyond the prescribed rules and laws.

Things would have progressively worsened had it not been for the visits of the Red Cross. The crude and amateurish attempts of our jailors to prevent us from conveying our negative experiences to the ICRC invariably failed. The delegates patiently and sympathetically recorded our representations, and conveyed them to Prison Headquarters. As expected, the regime resisted giving the impression that it had immediately succumbed to ICRC, or any other pressures. For this reason they delayed improvements, some of them for years. But in the end it was a combination of pressures - covert on the part of the ICRC; and overt in the form of go-slows, determined assertion of dignity, hunger strikes, etc on the part of prisoners - that forced the jailors to concede to demands.

In any evaluation of the history of political imprisonment, the role of the ICRC stands out boldly for its consistent and unwavering support in the struggle of the thousands of political prisoners for basic human rights. Thank you ICRC. May your efforts continue to be crowned with success."



*The Rivonia trialists at a Robben Island Reunion conference in 1995. From left: Ahmed Kathrada, Andrew Mlangeni, Walter Sisulu, Dr. Moreillon, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Wilton Mkwayi. Missing: Nelson Mandela, Elias Motsoaledi, Denis Goldberg.*

## Jacques Moreillon

***ICRC General Delegate for Africa who visited Robben Island in 1973, 1974 and 1975***

"That first meeting with Nelson Mandela must have lasted a little less than two hours. But as I left his cell, I realised that there was something very special about this man: he radiated an exceptional moral authority. I then went to talk, individually with the other leaders in the single cell section.

I remember clearly three other people from that first visit:

Walter Sisulu (who, I later discovered was Mandela's mentor); Ahmed Kathrada, a distinguished Indian scholar who was the prison librarian; and Govan Mbeki, a forceful figure who played the guitar on which I strummed a few chords while talking in his cell. The guitar was obtained for him through much insistence with the authorities by Philip Zuger (ICRC delegate)."



## Vesta Smith

### *Imprisoned at the Women's Jail in 1976*

"We went into No. 4 jail in July 1976 and slept on the floor on something like a mat, which looked exactly like what we had to cover ourselves with. Then on a particular day, around September, the prison officials together with the ordinary prisoners (as political prisoners we were separated from the others) they came in there in a rush and took out things from our cells and put in beds and other things, which surprised us because the cell was so narrow. We could not understand what was going on. We had 'tamed' some of the black warders when we arrived at the prison and these warders were very open and would help. One of them whispered that the Red Cross was coming to see how we were treated.

When we heard this, we went on strike saying that we did not want the beds as we had slept on the cold floor right through winter. We tried to refuse but they forced the items into our cells. The Red Cross delegates came and we told them that we received beds for the first time. Even though I did not have personal interaction, their presence made life a bit easier for us. Things like access to the newspapers and the small changes that came about."

## Nicolas de Rougemont

### *ICRC Regional Delegate for Southern Africa from 1973 to 1983. He spent several missions in Africa and made 10 visits to Robben Island on behalf of the ICRC*

"I visited Robben Island about ten times and there was definitely a lot of progress. You can never say if it was a direct result of the ICRC's intervention, sometimes it was and sometimes not, as pressure was also put on government from others.

When we first arrived the detainees were sleeping on mats and over the years it improved where they eventually had beds, mattresses and sheets.

I visited Nelson Mandela several times on the Island and later at Pollsmoor. I distinctly remember one conversation we had where Walter Sisulu was also present. Sisulu asked me why a nice young man like me was not part of 'the struggle'. Mandela replied to him saying, "no Walter, don't include him in this, the Red Cross visits are too important".

I also have to pay tribute to a late colleague of mine, Geoffrey Senn, he was like a father to the detainees, specifically the ones we visited in the former Rhodesia at that time.

My last visit to a detainee was to Barbara Hogan in the Women's Jail at Number four in 1983. I remember the former prisoners I visited by name and I am still friends with some of them."

Mr de Rougemont retired in 1995 and settled in Pretoria, South Africa.

## Sally Motlana

*Imprisoned at the Women's Jail several times between 1976 and 1978*

"I was particularly grateful to the Red Cross for coming to the prison shortly after my arrest as I was being detained in a small cell that had a broken window at the top, the authorities refused to repair the window. But when they said the Red Cross members were coming there was so much activity in jail. It was as if the mayor of Johannesburg was coming.

All of a sudden the warders were flying around and prisoners were cleaning the yard. Before the Red Cross came we were suddenly supplied with beds; we never had beds we were sleeping on the floor with one blanket. There were suddenly tables, chairs, sheets, nice blankets and even a mat (wow! It became a real bedroom from being a shack for so long). We were treated like real VIPs!

When I heard the Red Cross was coming, I decided that this was a chance for me to get my window fixed. So that afternoon when the bell rang for us to go inside, I put all my bedding outside my cell and dressed for bed. I refused to go inside and told the warders that it made no difference where I slept because the inside of the cell was as bad the outside. After pleading and begging with me for more than three hours, they finally promised to fix the window the next morning. Very early the following day, there were about six men to fix my window, which was a joke because it was a very small window.

The presence of the Red Cross made a difference to prisoners. We were so pleased that we succeeded in getting them to do what they were never going to do. With the help of the Red Cross, we had the window fixed and we got all those other things, so you see the Red Cross was a real blessing to the women prisoners at No. 4.

I have never forgotten them."

## Toni Pfanner

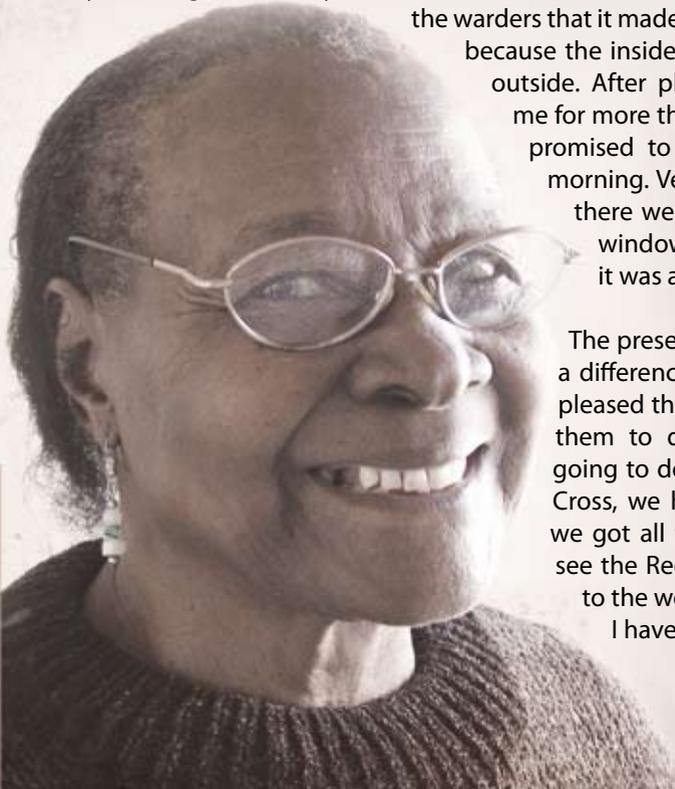
*Head of ICRC delegation in South Africa 1990-1993*

"For every ICRC delegate, visiting Robben Island was a historic moment, and it was also one of the most exciting events for me in 1990. Nelson Mandela had been released a few days earlier, and there was a positive atmosphere in the prison: all the detainees expected to be freed soon, they prepared for their political functions and the harsh days during their earlier years in detention seemed to be far away. The initial meeting with the prison authorities was quickly done - however, the visit could not start yet. We were told that the detainees were discussing who should receive us: their "department" of foreign affairs, social affairs or internal affairs, and in each case, which sub-committee. This debate delayed the visit for one and a half hours.

In the meantime, I had to go to the bathroom of the administration and saw a poster with the slogan: If you have to act quickly: decide by yourself; if you have more time, consult with some others; if you have all your life, create a committee. I feared the worst, as most of the detainees had been sentenced to life imprisonment... but eventually we were received by a joint committee under the umbrella of the department of foreign affairs. After my address to all detainees, I wanted to engage in an informal dialogue with the detainees, but the chairman of the committee quickly intervened,

and the dialogue was structured with "motions", before at last individual talks could take place.

Months later, I met again with many former detainees, now engaged in the political arena in different departments and committees outside prison walls: firstly within the political organisations (mostly the ANC secretariat), then as heads of committees, as ministers, and in the most known case as head of State of a new South Africa. Prisons follow their own rules, but these are sometimes not so different from the outside world. Although these detainees' sentences eventually were not for life, it seems their committee work may be!"



## David Evans

*Imprisoned in Pretoria Prison for five years*



"In 1967, while serving a five-year sentence in Pretoria Prison for opposition to apartheid, I was stricken with acute diarrhoea. The prison doctor's prescriptions failed. After a month I asked to see a specialist but the request was refused. Appalled by my obvious weight loss, my wife appealed unsuccessfully to the prison authorities.

Two months later, each of us 'politicals' was unexpectedly interviewed at length by Mr G.F Senn and Dr Simon Burkhardt of the Red Cross. I got my specialist and we all got improved conditions. I'm among the millions who have reason to salute the International Red Cross."

## Mohale Pilusa

*Imprisoned on Robben Island between 1979 and 1990*

"The ICRC helped many on the island. We received soccer kits, sports equipment, 'tekkies' (sports shoes), tennis balls, volleyball equipment and musical instruments.

Our families benefited and specifically my parents through the food vouchers and travel tickets made available by the Red Cross. The organisation contributed to many families.

When ICRC visits were suspended in the mid 1980's the morale was very low on the island but overall the visits by the ICRC made life easier for us on the island.

## George Mononyane

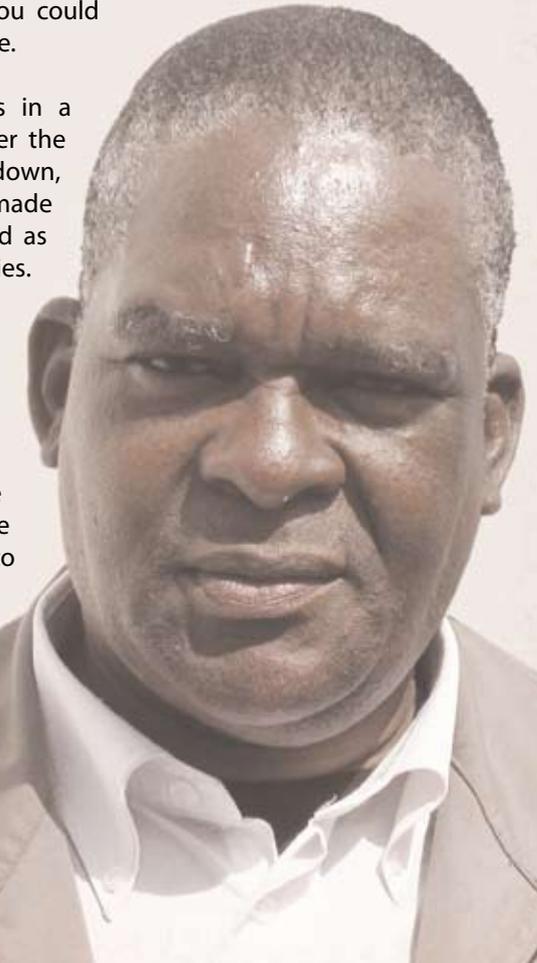
*ICRC employee 1990 - 2010*

"As a driver, I was doing many deliveries across the country and meeting different people with different backgrounds. Sometimes it was difficult because the Red Cross was unable to help everyone. We would deliver food parcels to specific families and camps around the country and seeing that the communities had nothing was very sad. The most difficult camps were ones in Malalani and Giyani. These were the camps where you could notice the suffering of the people.

At first, we did the deliveries in a 'bakkie' (utility vehicle) but after the Mozambique office closed down, we received the truck. This made it easier because we could load as much as possible for the deliveries. We were sometimes faced with challenges but that never stopped us from doing our work. I remember a time when we had to deliver some food parcels and we were unable to get to the community because of flooding. We were unable to cross the river so we had to arrange a helicopter to make

sure the people received their parcels.

I enjoyed working with the Red Cross, I still do. The travelling is always a highlight. The organisation has done so much for many and it is a pity that we are not operational anymore because those were the years where our work was really noticed and appreciated."





South Africa. Robben Island. Visit of the prison, the "H" block. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Robben Island. Stone quarry. Group of prisoners pulling a large piece out of the bottom with a steel rope. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Robben Island. Stone quarry. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Robben Island. Stone quarry. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Robben Island. The bottom of the quarry.  
10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Durban. Township in Bambayi.  
01/05/1993. ICRC/CHESEX, Luc. © ICRC



South Africa. Pretoria. An ICRC delegate visits detainees in police cells.  
01/11/1992. ICRC/SIDLER, Roland. © ICRC



South Africa. Homelands of Gazankulu and Kangwane. Distribution of assistance to newly arrived Mozambican refugees.  
01/11/1992. ICRC/SIDLER, Roland. © ICRC



South Africa. Natal Province. Assistance being handed out by the South African Red Cross Society and the ICRC.  
01/11/1992. ICRC/SIDLER, Roland. © ICRC



South Africa. Cape Town. An ICRC delegate having discussions with the wife of a prisoner.  
01/10/1987. ICRC/GASSMANN, Thierry. © ICRC



South Africa. Xitlakathi. An ICRC delegate gives an information session to Mozambican refugees in a refugee camp.  
01/01/1992. ICRC/GRUNDER, Ralph. © ICRC



South Africa. Sebokeng township, Johannesburg. Distribution of food parcels.  
27/01/1992. ICRC/GRUNDER, Ralph. © ICRC



Robben Island. Stone quarry. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



Robben Island. Stone quarry. In the background the group of prisoners who smash the stones with hammers to gravel-size. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



Robben Island. Drying of seaweed. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



Robben Island. Visit of the prison, the "H" block. A block has four sections, two of which are visible. 10/04/1967. © ICRC



South Africa. Hlupekani near Giyani. The Soweto Branch of the South African Red Cross Society and the ICRC gives assistance to refugees. 1992. ICRC/GRUNDER, Ralph. © ICRC



South Africa. Katlehong (East Rand). Old Cross Road Squatter camp. Distribution of relief goods. 01/1991. ICRC/BRIDGER, Graeme. © ICRC

**The ICRC Regional Delegation in Pretoria wishes to thank the former detainees for their contributions, as well as the Robben Island Museum, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Luthuli House for their assistance with this project.**

*The ICRC is mandated by the international community, under the Geneva Conventions, to visit prisoners of war and civilian internees to verify whether they are being treated according to relevant international standards. In addition, it seeks to visit those held in situations of internal violence. ICRC detention visits aim to ensure respect for the life and dignity of the detainees and to prevent torture, ill-treatment or abuse.*



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