



THE NEED TO KNOW

RESTORING LINKS BETWEEN
DISPERSED FAMILY MEMBERS



ICRC

MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

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DISPERSED FAMILY MEMBERS**

“You can hide in the shelter to escape artillery shells, but how can you avoid suffering when you have no idea what happened to your son?”

Mirvat, 65, Lebanon



Every year, armed conflicts, natural disasters and migration split up countless families. People suffer terribly from not having contact with, or any news from, their loved ones. It is scarcely surprising that their well-being and ability to cope with crisis depend to a large extent on their ability to stay in touch with family members.

The causes of separation are many. When fleeing a conflict or natural disaster, children can lose their way in the chaos. Elderly or sick people may not have the will or ability to leave. Injured people are taken to hospital without being able to let their loved ones know what has happened to them. Or people may be detained without being given the chance to inform their relatives.

People need to be able to restore contact with family members who have gone missing and to receive information about them. Under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, people have the right to know the fate of a missing relative.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent

Societies work together all over the world to assist people separated from loved ones in both emergencies and other situations. Staff and volunteers strive to ensure that they are treated with dignity, respect and compassion. Their work can continue for years after the end of a war or other emergency.

Restoring family links, or RFL, involves a range of activities. These include putting people in contact by telephone, internet and hand-written messages. They frequently entail tracing persons who are unaccounted for and registering particularly vulnerable people such as children who have been separated from their families and people being held in detention. In many cases, RFL work involves collecting information about people who are missing and possibly dead. When all goes well, the activities result in families being reunited with their loved ones.

Restoring or maintaining contact between people separated from relatives by armed conflict, natural disaster or migration is a basic service of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This brochure explains how the Movement provides this service and why it is so important to so many people.



Donevsky Valery/CRC

Restoring family links involves:

- organizing the exchange of family news;
- tracing individuals;
- registering and keeping track of individuals to prevent their disappearance and to inform their families of their whereabouts;
- reuniting and, sometimes, repatriating families;
- helping the authorities clarify what has happened to persons unaccounted for;
- collecting, managing and forwarding information on the dead.

“All persons... shall be enabled to give news of a strictly personal nature to members of their families, wherever they may be, and to receive news from them.”

Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 25

A WORLDWIDE FAMILY LINKS NETWORK

Whenever armed conflict, natural disaster or other situations requiring a humanitarian response cause people to be separated from their loved ones, or to be unable to get in touch with them, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement takes rapid, effective action to restore links.

The main responsibility for ensuring respect for the rights of members of dispersed families lies with the State. In the event of armed conflict, it is also up to any non-State organized armed groups to respect those rights.

When the authorities (or organized armed groups) are not in a position to fulfil their responsibilities, the ICRC and the National Societies may, based on their respective roles and responsibilities, offer their services, which may range from supporting the authorities to filling in for them.

The Movement has considerable experience and expertise in restoring family links. It has a worldwide Family Links Network comprising the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency, the tracing offices in ICRC delegations and National Society tracing services.

Through the Family Links Network, the Movement is able to work across national borders in full transparency and with the agreement of the authorities concerned. Thanks to long-standing cooperation between the ICRC and National Societies, the Family Links Network is in a unique position – it has a global network able to assist people who are separated from their loved ones, wherever they may be.

THE MOVEMENT'S WORK TO RESTORE FAMILY LINKS

The ICRC

The ICRC coordinates and carries out RFL activities in armed conflict or other situations of violence. The organization reminds the authorities of their obligations under international law towards families that have been dispersed or are without news of a loved one. It may also advise on how best to prevent separations from occurring in the first place.

The ICRC runs the Central Tracing Agency as provided for under the Geneva Conventions. In conflicts and other situations requiring an international response,

ICRC staff directly assist dispersed families and families with missing relatives. Also, the Central Tracing Agency coordinates the work of the global Family Links Network to ensure the most effective possible assistance for dispersed families.

The Central Tracing Agency guides and supports the work of the Family Links Network throughout the world by strengthening the capacity of its partners, promoting consistency and providing the Network with useful methods and guidelines.

National Societies

National Societies manage RFL within their respective countries. They determine what action is to be taken during natural disasters, and may call on the Central Tracing Agency when an international effort is needed. National Societies maintain their response as long as needs remain, which may be well after conflicts, natural disasters or other emergencies have ended.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The International Federation – the organization that coordinates the international work of the National Societies – carries out relief operations to help the victims of natural disaster. It strives to ensure that RFL needs are taken into account and that disaster-preparedness plans consider the importance and requirements of RFL.

Other humanitarian organizations are also involved in restoring family links. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration are regular partners of the Movement. Other agencies such as UNICEF and non-governmental organizations like Save the Children cooperate with the Movement in specific cases, for example in helping unaccompanied children.

Archives shed light on the past

People seeking information about the fate of individuals in past conflicts can contact the ICRC's archives in Geneva, Switzerland. The archives, which contain information about individual prisoners of war dating back to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, may be able to pass on details in their possession, subject to the rules governing access to that information.



ARMED CONFLICTS TEAR FAMILIES APART

The reasons why families get dispersed during armed conflict and other situations of violence are many and varied. In addition to the fact that people easily lose track of one another while fleeing a conflict zone, they also get abducted and killed. Unfortunately, the bodies of the dead are often not properly identified. People are sometimes also detained without their families being informed of their whereabouts.

In the event of conflict, the ICRC's neutral and independent status makes it uniquely placed to facilitate RFL across lines of conflict and borders, with the consent of the warring parties.

In many countries affected by armed conflict and violence, the ICRC visits people deprived of liberty and strives to ensure that they have regular contact with their families. If needed, and in coordination with the detaining authorities, the ICRC facilitates family visits and telephone conversations, and enables detainees to send written messages to their families. Staying in touch with relatives can contribute to the psychological well-being of everyone concerned. And for prisoners in some countries, family visits are an essential support to ensure they receive enough food or other basic assistance.

HELPING THE FAMILIES OF THE MISSING – A PRIORITY

The families of missing people suffer terribly from uncertainty about what has happened to their loved ones, especially when they have disappeared during armed conflicts or other major violence.

People who are unable to restore contact or discover the fate of missing relatives live in an emotional limbo, not sure whether a parent or a sibling or a child is dead or alive. Even if they suspect a family member is dead, the uncertainty frequently prevents them from mourning properly or resuming their own lives until they know what has happened.

Men – whether as soldiers or civilians – are more likely to go missing than women. As the man is often a family's breadwinner, his disappearance can cause major financial difficulties for those left behind.

The needs of families differ depending on circumstances, education and economic situation. However, most families agree on their priorities: they want an answer regarding the fate of the missing and they need economic support in the absence of a breadwinner. Some families also mention justice as a priority.

People have the right to know the fate of a missing relative under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. These laws require the authorities to do all they can to establish the fate of missing persons and to inform their families.

The ICRC seeks to heighten awareness among governments and the military to ensure accountability on the part of the authorities, to better assist the families and to prevent further disappearances. Through its work, the ICRC encourages governments to rapidly provide information to the families. In many cases, it helps the authorities set up mechanisms to coordinate work and share information in order to clarify what has happened to the missing and support their families.

The ICRC also tries to locate missing family members. This may involve visiting places of detention, hospitals and





Kokic Marko/ICRC



Kozachenko Aleksandr/American Red Cross

morgues or asking the authorities to investigate. Tracing missing people can be a complex process and involve the ICRC and several National Societies in various countries. It often requires a long-term commitment.

International humanitarian law includes several provisions prohibiting forced disappearances:

- Families have the right to know the fate of a missing relative.
- The parties to a conflict must search for persons reported missing and reply to enquiries made by family members.
- Lists must be exchanged showing the exact locations and markings of graves, together with particulars of the people buried in them.
- The parties to international armed conflicts must provide information on the wounded, the sick, the shipwrecked, prisoners of war, other protected persons deprived of their freedom, and the dead, impartially and as quickly as possible.
- Captured combatants and civilians in the power of the enemy are entitled to respect for their lives, dignity, personal rights and convictions. They must be protected against all acts of violence and reprisal. They have the right to correspond with their families and to receive relief.

Malania Babenko had not seen her sister, Eugenia Kawcak, since 1943 when Eugenia was taken by the Nazis from their home in rural Ukraine. In September 2008, Malania contacted the Ukrainian Red Cross in the hope that it would be able to locate her sister, though she did not know where to start looking – or even if Eugenia had survived the war.

The Ukrainian Red Cross searched through post-war records and eventually forwarded Malania's request to the American Red Cross with information that her sister may have gone to the United States in the early 1950s. After a separation of 66 years, the sisters – Malania is now 90 – were finally reunited thanks to the searching of the Red Cross. "I am so happy for my mother," said Eugenia's son. "She's worked hard all her life. It's something special in her older years to be able to relax and see her family."

Some people, of course, never receive answers, and suffer greatly from this. Cruz del Carmen lost her two sons during the 1996–97 conflict in Colombia. "My eldest son was 22 years old when they took him away, and my other son was only three months from his 18th birthday. It's so hard. It's a very difficult experience you never get over," she says. Cruz del Carmen sold everything she owned to try and find her children. She made many inquiries but never received concrete answers. Some people told her they were dead, that an armed group had tried to recruit them and they were killed because they didn't want to go. "I can't quite believe it, simply because I have no definite proof. I didn't see it happen. I can't say for sure whether they're alive or dead. I can't even say that I know where they are. No one has ever called me to say I saw your son in such and such a place – nothing. It's a void that can never be filled. It's very painful."

NATURAL DISASTERS SCATTER FAMILIES



Earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, floods, droughts – these disasters force people to leave their homes and communities in a rush. People scatter to find safety and sometimes entire communities are evacuated. Injured people may be taken to hospitals without their families being informed of where they are. The dead are not always properly identified.

Communication systems may break down, preventing people from contacting their relatives inside or outside the affected areas. Many people are anxious to get news of and restore contact with their loved ones, especially if they were not at home when the disaster struck.

In addition, natural disasters frequently overwhelm the local systems to deal with the dead. The proper management and identification of dead bodies is closely related to enabling families to learn the fate of their loved ones. Failing to do this has a profound and long-lasting effect on the mental health of survivors and communities. Correct identification of the dead also has legal significance for inheritance and insurance purposes, and these have a lasting impact on relatives.

Assisting families who have lost touch with their loved ones in the wake of a natural disaster is one of the key activities of the National Societies. Often the Movement's efforts complement government action and are coupled with the emergency response and repair and development work of national or local organizations.

In order to quickly meet the need for family news when disaster strikes, careful planning is critical. The Movement has specially trained staff who are able to analyse and respond rapidly to people's needs.

Following the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, thousands of people were left without news of their loved ones and lived in constant anxiety.

Although it was impossible to estimate how many people had lost contact with relatives, the flood of requests received from families abroad provided some indication of the scale. Far too many people were unsure whether their relatives were buried under the rubble, or alive but unable to communicate.

A rapid-response team including RFL specialists swung into action.

Less than 24 hours after the quake struck, the ICRC established a Haiti section on the ICRC's Family Links website. As people outside the earthquake area posted names of relatives they were seeking, people in the area began to be confirmed as alive – either on their own initiative or by Red Cross staff on the basis of information obtained in hospitals, shelters and other places. Within two weeks, more than 26,000 people were registered on the website.

Staff were on the ground shortly after the quake, helping people trace their relatives. They made satellite phones available so people in the quake-hit zone could telephone relatives. Claudel, a 13-year-old boy, was flown out of Haiti just after the disaster, in pain from a leg broken by a falling concrete block. "I was really afraid," he recalled. "I didn't know where they were taking me or when I would see my mother again. But then we were able to talk to each other by phone."

When he was well enough to travel, Claudel was returned to Haiti, where his mother was overjoyed to greet her son. She had lost her house and most of her possessions. But her son was back. "We're living from day to day. But I'm happy despite it all. My family survived, and now the Red Cross has brought my child back to me," she explained hugging her son tightly.

THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION



Kokte Marko/ICRC



García-Burgos Marina/ICRC

Managing information on the dead

Conflicts and natural disasters can kill large numbers of people. The deceased may be transferred to mortuaries or buried without relatives even knowing about it.

Information collected on the dead as well as proper and dignified management of bodies can help prevent those killed from vanishing without a trace, and also help bereaved families to overcome their grief.

In any given crisis, the Movement's role in dealing with mortal remains is agreed with the authorities. It may involve:

- advising the authorities;
- collecting information on the dead;
- handling, storing or burying remains;
- providing support for the families of the victims.

In recent decades an increasing number of people have left their home countries for social, economic and environmental reasons. Today, migrants can be found in every part of the world.

Unlike people forced to leave their homes as part of mass movements provoked by disasters and conflicts – often amid widespread disruption of transportation and communication services – migrants usually have access to means of communication. Nevertheless, some find themselves in situations where they are in urgent need of humanitarian aid and protection.

Increasingly restrictive migration policies have resulted in large numbers of processing and detention centres. In addition, trafficking and smuggling of persons are two of the fastest-growing international criminal activities. Women seeking jobs as domestic workers or as factory workers, and those who are victims of sex trafficking, represent a significant percentage of the migration flux. They risk finding themselves cut off from their families and unable to communicate with the outside world.

The Movement recognizes that some migrants and their families are particularly vulnerable and may need help restoring family links.

SOME PEOPLE ARE ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE

In emergencies, some people are especially vulnerable. They include anyone who relies on family, the authorities or others for support. These people are particularly at risk if they are separated from their families or from care-givers. Examples of especially vulnerable people are unaccompanied children, elderly people, sick people and prisoners.

Protecting children

Children separated from adult family members are likely to be traumatized by the sequence of events, and are usually at greater risk than other children of suffering physical or psychological harm and of being orphaned or falling prey to unofficial adoption or trafficking.

The ICRC and its National Society partners register unaccompanied children wherever they are found, and follow up their cases. They record the identity of each child and collect any information that might help locate his or her family. In the case of children who are very young and unable to provide information, photographs may sometimes be the only way to identify them and help return them to their parents or relatives.

The information collected is spread through the Family Links Network and, if appropriate, broadcast through local media and displayed in public places. Often, photos are shown at Red Cross branch offices and in places such as markets that draw crowds.

Red Cross and Red Crescent staff also visit children's home towns and villages in the hope of finding family members and in order to contact the authorities and others who may have useful information.

Shakuru is one of hundreds of children who lost touch with their families when fighting flared in eastern Congo in 2008. Like many others he was feared dead. "We had heard that armed men were taking children to be their porters," said Shakuru's aunt. "Some of the children came back. We were told that others had died. We did not know whether our children would return one day." Six months after he lost contact with his family, the ICRC found Shakuru in Beni. The organization then located his aunt and uncle and asked if they were willing to take him into their home. They happily agreed. The ICRC brought Shakuru to his aunt's village. After taking him in her arms, she exclaimed: "We had lost hope. We thought he was dead. I am so happy."



De La Guardia Virginia/ICRC



Von Togggenburg Christoph/ICRC

Detainees and their families need news

Every year, the ICRC visits about half a million detainees in more than 70 countries worldwide.

The ICRC works to monitor and improve conditions of detention, to ensure that detainees are treated with dignity and that their fundamental rights are respected. Regular visits to prisons enable the ICRC to keep track of the prisoners' well-being and whereabouts and to make recommendations to the authorities about any improvements in conditions or treatment that may be required.

The rights to be visited by one's family and to communicate with relatives are part of the fundamental rights of detainees in accordance with a number of international legal instruments. The ICRC always strives to ensure that detainees can restore and maintain contact with their families. For thousands of detainees and their families, Red Cross messages are an important means of maintaining regular contact. They provide a chance to exchange personal and family news which can help to alleviate feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

Forwarding Red Cross messages between detainees and their families is a major logistical undertaking, involving a number of ICRC delegations and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the detainees' home countries. Every message is delivered by hand to the addressee. Given the constraints involved, message collection and distribution can be a time-consuming process.

Another way that detainees and their families can communicate with each other is by means of a video-call system. A video link enables detainees to see and talk to their loved ones. The system proved to be particularly useful in Afghanistan at a time when family visits were difficult to organize.

Family visits to places of detention may be organized by the ICRC, especially if those places are far from the

"One thing I will never forget is the first time I received a Red Cross message with the handwriting of my family and drawings from my children. Tears were streaming from my eyes. I could not believe that I was actually holding a message from them."

Sami Elhaj, a journalist from Al Jazeera Arabic TV, who was detained at Guantanamo Bay for almost six years.

family home, travel is prohibitively expensive, or there are front lines or borders to cross. The ICRC facilitates these visits in coordination with prison authorities and often with the National Societies concerned.

Lal Padshah's brother, who went to south-eastern Afghanistan to take part in mourning ceremonies for a dead acquaintance, never came back. Four months after he went away, the ICRC delivered a Red Cross message to Lal Padshah. It was hand-written by his brother, who informed him that he was alive and well, and in custody at Afghanistan's Bagram airbase "The day I received that message I was profoundly relieved, and grateful to God to learn that my brother was OK," said Lal. He wrote back and from then on kept up regular correspondence with his brother through the ICRC. Later, he used a videophone at the ICRC delegation in Kabul to communicate with his brother. "It was wonderful to see my brother for the first time in almost two years, even if it was only on a television screen."

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT

A RANGE OF TOOLS TO CONNECT PEOPLE



A consistent approach

Successful RFL requires close contact with the people concerned. Frequently it is necessary to thoroughly understand their circumstances and the factors affecting their safety and well-being, as well as to appreciate the deep physical and psychological scars left on people by separation and disappearances.

It is essential that there be the same skills and approaches throughout the Movement, so that services are as consistent and effective as possible all over the world. To achieve this aim, the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency coordinates work at the international level and advises National Societies.

Protecting individual data

In all situations, care is taken with the use of personal data. The information is collected with the informed consent of the person concerned. Individual safety is the priority and no information is used or published that could cause harm.

Staff and volunteers handling personal details follow the rules and principles of international law and national data-protection legislation. Access to databases containing personal information is restricted and transfers of sensitive data within the Family Links Network are secure.

Every situation is different and it is essential that the most appropriate tools and approaches be used to restore contact between people who have been separated.

www.familylinks.icrc.org

The ICRC's Family Links website helps people restore contact with one another. This easy-to-use public site is a valuable tool for people affected by conflict or natural disaster – people often desperate for news of family members. Those living outside the area concerned can post the names of the relatives they seek. Then, gradually, information appears about people confirmed alive. The website also enables users to share and obtain information on those being sought or to convey information on their well-being.

Unlike other media, the Family Links website has a global reach and data can be constantly updated. The information is not confidential and can be consulted by anyone, anywhere in the world, who has access to the internet.



Telephones connect families

The use of telephones is often the most direct and rapid means of restoring family links and reassuring families.

In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly North-West Frontier Province), hundreds of thousands of people fled their homes in 2009 and were living in camps or with host communities. Communication was difficult, so any piece of news was precious.

Understanding the desperate need for communication, the Pakistan Red Crescent Society and the ICRC provided free telephone service. More than 6,000 calls were made between displaced people and their families.

Mohammad Rasool burst into tears when he finally heard his son's voice. The boy had fled his home more than a month earlier with eight other family members. Mohammad Rasool was so relieved to learn that his son, his wife and the rest of the family were safe that he could barely speak. After the call he whispered quietly: "They are alive!"

Tracing requests

A tracing request is a formal request from the family of a missing person. The search initiated by a tracing request can take various forms such as matching and cross-checking information, visits to communities, hospitals and mortuaries, and enquiries made to the authorities. Any information collected will be shared with the family and if possible used to restore contact.



Following the earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, local radio stations regularly broadcast messages advising people how to search for their relatives:

"Listen friends, here's a message from the International Committee of the Red Cross

Are you looking for a member of your family?

Do you want to let your family know that you're alive?

The International Committee of the Red Cross has set up a free tracing service on the internet.

You can register members of your family and yourself at this address: www.icrc.org

If you don't have access to the internet, you can go to the Haitian Red Cross office at:

1, angle rue Muguet et Route de Desprez

Don't forget!

Whether you want to let people know that you're alive,

or are searching for a family member: you need to register!

You'll need to accurately write the name of your relative and your own name

The more people register family members and themselves

The greater the chance that they'll find one another."

Message from the International Committee of the Red Cross with support from the Haitian Red Cross.

Red Cross messages

Red Cross messages are brief, written messages that enable people separated from their loved ones to exchange family or private news.

For Ma Ohnmar, a Red Cross message gave her peace of mind. She had lost everything when the cyclone struck Myanmar in 2008. Her village had been largely destroyed and, though all the members of her immediate family had survived, she had lost touch with her sister in Yangon.

Ma Ohnmar and her family made their way to a monastery in Maubi, where the Myanmar Red Cross Society gave her the opportunity to write a Red Cross message which they would deliver to her sister. Meanwhile, her sister was becoming increasingly anxious about Ma Ohnmar, whom she had not heard from for three weeks. When Ma Ohnmar's niece received the message for her mother, she said: "She will be so happy. The cyclone itself was terrible, but not knowing what happened to my aunty made it even worse."





Kokic Mariko/ICRC



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ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross
19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
T +41 22 734 60 01 F +41 22 733 20 57
E-mail: shop@icrc.org www.icrc.org
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