



HUMANITARIAN JOURNEYS

ICRC STAFF SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD
ASIA-PACIFIC



ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) employs close to 20,000 people in over 100 countries. These humanitarians face unprecedented challenges as they work in difficult circumstances and in conflict-hit places. But their passion to have a positive impact on people's lives makes them overcome obstacles while travelling thousands of miles away from their families to deliver much-needed help to vulnerable populations.

COVER PHOTO: As part of an EcoSec project to support the farmers in Gaza, ICRC EcoSec generalist Maria Goreti Ika Riana interacts with a farmer about a time-saving and innovative harvesting machine that he built.



JUNQI HE

INTERPRETER

Still new to the ICRC, Junqi has already built a treasure trove of multilingual stories from the field. A Sinhala interpreter who is also fluent in English and Mandarin, he started working with the ICRC in June 2020 and is presently posted in Sri Lanka. We catch up with Junqi to learn more about his experiences of being a polyglot.

ON BEING AN INTERPRETER WITH THE ICRC

I love studying languages and majored in Sinhala at the university. Since then, I've had a deepening interest in Sri Lanka and its people. I was already in Colombo (working in the retail sector) when I learnt about this interesting opportunity with the ICRC through a friend, who recommended that I apply for the interpreter's position. I jumped at the chance, of course! I am also learning Tamil now.

I've loved the experience so far – I know I'm still new and we've had challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But I would say it's been an enriching journey. When we carry out our official visits, the locals always get surprised first, and then delighted, that I speak their language even though I'm a foreigner. I'm glad I can be a bridge that connects people.

ON THE 'DO NO HARM' PRINCIPLE

Sometimes during our interactions with the people that the ICRC works for, we come across incredibly sad stories. People get very emotional, and of course, that can affect us too. So, we need to be careful.

During our conversations, we focus on active and empathetic listening to recognize topics that could bring up and trigger people's anxieties or painful memories. We try to put them at ease and then revisit the difficult conversations once people feel comfortable enough to share their stories.

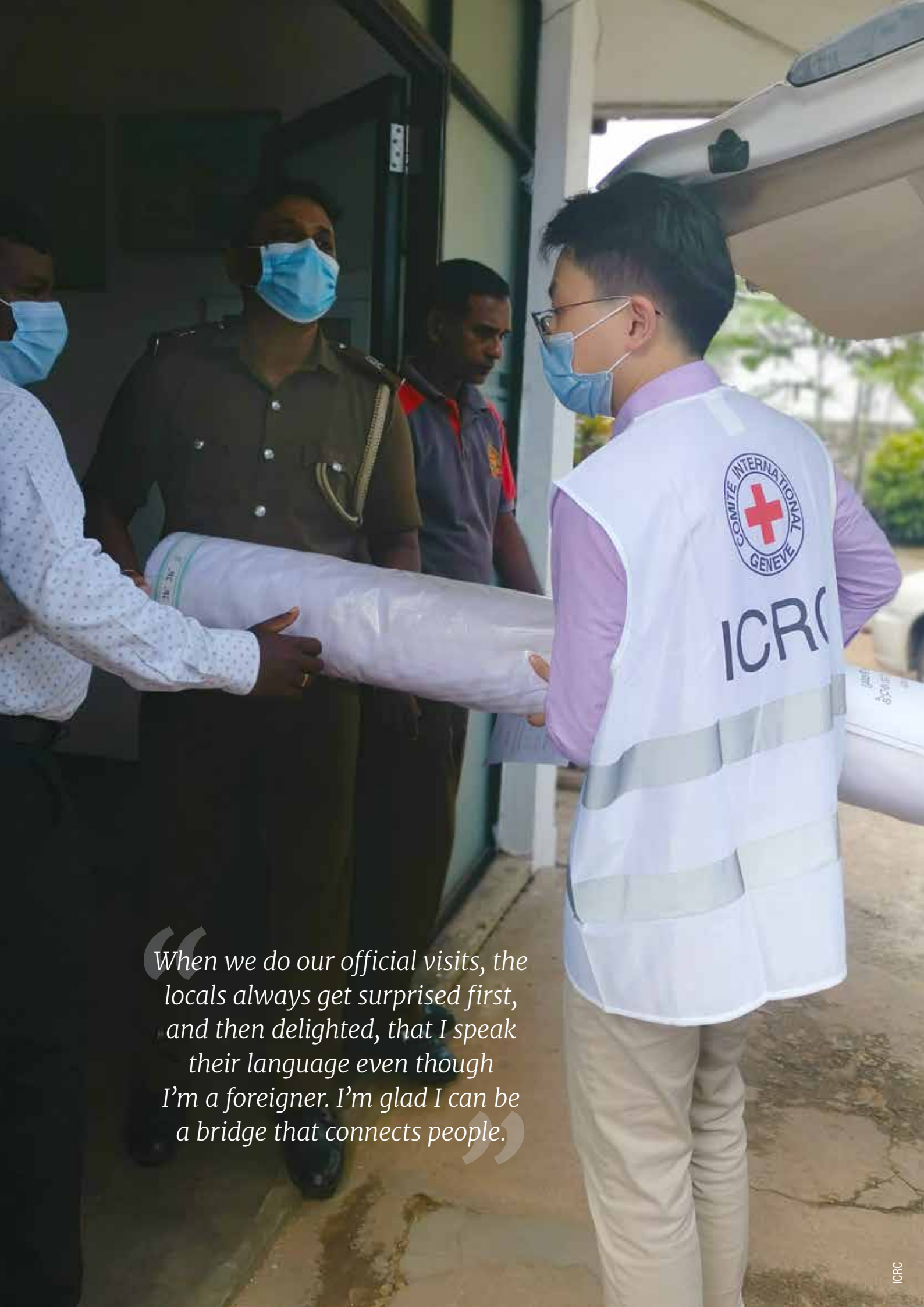
This kind of work has a deep psychological impact, but we keep going because helping people is the most rewarding aspect of it all. It feels so good when they appreciate our skills and the negotiations that we do on their behalf – that is why they say that communication is key!

ON BEING AWAY FROM HOME

It has been especially tough due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the peak months, my family members would get really worried after watching the news. We speak a couple of times a week and it's always great to connect.

ON WHAT MAKES AN "IDEAL ICRC EMPLOYEE"

I believe there are a few principles that all ICRC employees must follow, the top ones being "be faithful" and "respect accuracy", so as to avoid omissions by authorities. I would also encourage my fellow interpreters to be as expressive as possible and not limit themselves to word-by-word translations. Being empathetic and a good listener are essential soft skills for this job.



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MARIA GORETI IKA RIANA ECOSEC SPECIALIST

Maria Goreti Ika Riana is a humanitarian in the true sense of the word. With extensive experience of working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the French Red Cross, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Danish Red Cross, and now the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Maria says she has “Red Cross blood”. Having recently completed her second mission with the ICRC in Gaza Strip, Maria gives us an insight into her journey with the organization, where she has not only grown professionally, but has also met her partner.

“All my life, I’ve done humanitarian work. It started way back in 2005, after the tsunami hit Indonesia. I had just completed my studies and got involved with the aid response in Aceh. Later, during one of my non-ICRC postings in Sittwe (Myanmar), I saw how closely the organization had been involved in the response to the humanitarian crisis there. It immediately drew my attention and made me realize that I wanted to be a part of this mission and the (Red Cross Red Crescent) Movement. I learned about the ICRC from professional and social contacts during my assignment in Rakhine.”

“My initial years with the ICRC mostly centred around field work, but in the last mission in Gaza, I handled a more managerial position in terms of resource mobilization and team management. I led a well-developed and strong team of Economic Security (EcoSec) professionals and our work included helping people to recover their livelihood with resilience and dignity. The projects that we worked on are diverse, innovative and sustainable.”

“Talking about diversity, it is interesting to note that the ICRC is much more inclusive now. In fact, once you’re in the field, the differences between different nationalities get blurred. You can clearly see greater inclusion as doors continue to open for people from various nationalities, including an uptake of local and regional recruitment.”

“An important factor that motivated me to take up this role was the fact that everyone at the ICRC spoke English, compared to the previous organization that I was working with. This made communication simpler and without barriers.”

But I also have a personal connect with the ICRC – I met my partner here! I met him on my first mission in Myanmar and I love the fact that we found ourselves together during my second posting as well. It's motivating to have my partner around, even if I am assigned a hardship mission.

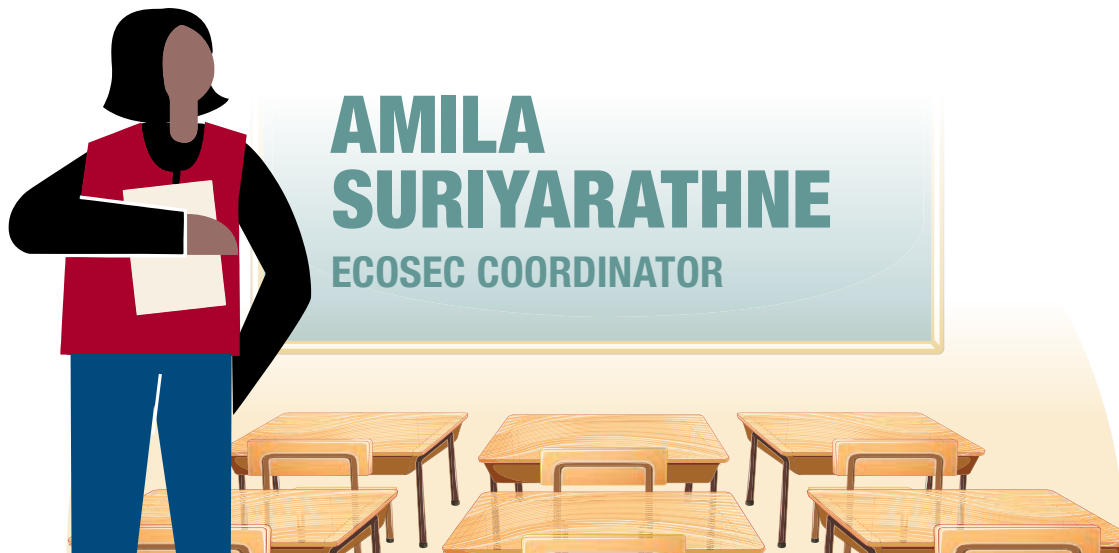
Adapting to new and local cultures has been less challenging for me because I think I was expecting it and had prepared myself accordingly. The ICRC is also very encouraging when it comes to learning new languages or adapting to different cultures.

Once during a field trip to the Gaza Strip, I was interacting with the local farmers about our feedback mechanism. Much to my surprise, one of them spoke Malay, which is similar to my language, and we could connect with each other. He was so happy when he found out about our shared dialect that he offered us rice and fish, thinking that I miss some familiar food.

It's been 13 months since I've seen my family. I miss my nephew the most! But I think it's manageable with technology and we do a video call every weekend. I feel all my needs in the field get met – except my very special need for Asian food!

My motto for continuing to work in the humanitarian sector has been 'If you can change the lives of even one or two people, why would you stop doing that?'





Amila Suriyarathne, who is currently on a posting in Ethiopia, had her first stint with the ICRC on secondment from the British Red Cross way back in 2012. She started working full-time with the ICRC as an Economic Security (EcoSec) programme manager in 2015, a position that was offered owing to her strong background in cash transfer programmes. From 2012 until now, Amila has noticed some big changes in the organization. In a chat with us, Amila reminisce about her journey so far and tells us how the ICRC of 2021 is different from the ICRC of 2012.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHANGES THAT YOU'VE OBSERVED AT THE ICRC OVER THE YEARS?

Well, accountability is something that has become more and more important as we have grown and progressed. This topic was almost nonexistent back then. Now, I often come across discussions about accountability – whether it's to the affected populations, to our donors or to each other. It takes a lot of work to maintain transparency and be accountable to our donors. I feel the institution is progressing in a positive manner in this regard. Also, our logistics systems have greatly improved.

If I look at the changes from the lens of diversity and inclusion, there's definitely a positive trend. Consistent efforts are being made and there are an increasing number of women in managerial roles. I think the trajectory looks fantastic!

HOW EASY OR DIFFICULT HAVE YOUR FIELD POSTINGS BEEN?

I didn't join the ICRC as a blank slate. I had worked with the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and knew the nature of work involved. I knew I will be posted to conflict areas – I came prepared for what field postings entail and was excited to carry out my work.

My first posting was to Azerbaijan, where I started as an EcoSec delegate. Then I moved to Belarus. After that, Cairo, then Somalia, Myanmar, and now Ethiopia! It's been a great ride.

WERE YOU ABLE TO EASILY ADAPT TO THE LOCAL CULTURES AND CUSTOMS?

To be honest, moving to Azerbaijan was a bit of a "culture shock", so to say. With their lives so entwined with socialism and capitalism, it was as strange for them as it was for me. They had never seen anyone like me and language was a barrier. I was based in Barda subdelegation, so English was spoken only within the ICRC. So, I did struggle for the first few months.

In Egypt, Somalia and Ethiopia, things were much easier, and my family and I fit in well. Even in Myanmar, I was fairly well-integrated.

WHAT'S THE ONE MEMORY FROM THE ICRC THAT WILL ALWAYS STAY WITH YOU?

It was my first mission to Azerbaijan when I unfortunately lost my mother. It was very sudden. My two young children were staying with her at the time and I really didn't know how I would manage and was thinking of quitting. But the ICRC management stood up for me – they told me I could take as much time and leave as I needed and come back to work on a family mission because they really wanted to keep me – they needed my knowledge and experience. It really made me feel like I was among the "real humanitarians". They thought about and deeply felt for their employees.

On my last day in Azerbaijan as I was leaving, the entire Barda subdelegation came out to say goodbye to me! I was really touched. It's something that will always stay with me.

HOW HAS THE ICRC HELPED YOU GROW?

Today, I'm a completely different person than when I had joined. I think most of it is to do with my experience. I have developed soft skills, which I believe are as important as technical skills. My management skills have also greatly improved. The ICRC really helps you grow as an individual.

WHAT ARE THE THREE QUALITIES THAT AN IDEAL ICRC EMPLOYEE MUST HAVE?

First, you ought to be flexible. You should be ready to work in an instant, especially in emergency contexts, because you never know how things might change in conflict and violence-affected areas.

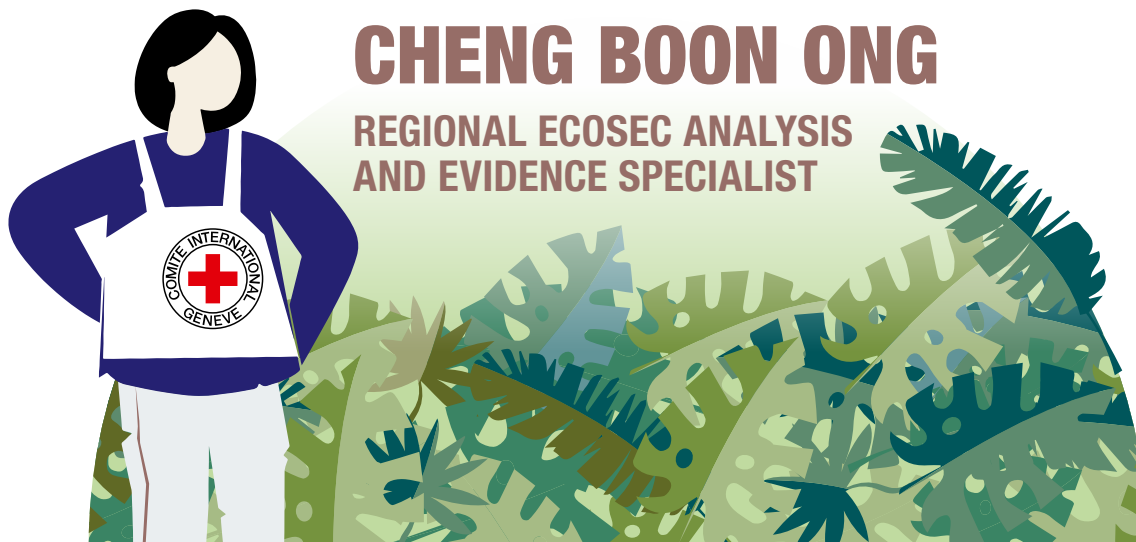
Second, commitment is very important. In a humanitarian organization like the ICRC, we work to help affected populations, and not for the money. To help people, you have to be humane. I am where I am because I am fully committed to my work and to the communities I work with.

Lastly, teamwork! You cannot work alone in this organization.

The ICRC is a rare organization that really reaches the affected populations directly and is not lost in the system. It goes to the people. It is already on the ground and ready to serve. You are able to see the difference that you are making and that's what keeps me going.

“To help people, you have to be humane.”





Having started her journey in the humanitarian sector in 2014 in Thailand, Cheng Boon Ong has been with the ICRC for three years, more recently as the Regional EcoSec Analysis and Evidence Specialist. A Malaysian national and currently posted to Juba in South Sudan, Cheng has extensive experience and background in data analysis from her previous work as a researcher in Netherlands.

The last year saw plenty of changes, both organizationally and individually, quips Cheng. She has seen the ICRC adapt its operations to function differently during the COVID-19 pandemic – whether in the interaction with interlocutors or aid distribution and working with communities (both found aplenty in EcoSec).

“It’s a good thing most EcoSec activities happen in the outdoors. This helped us maintain physical distancing measures while being able to continue our work towards affected populations. Shaking hands is a common way to greet someone here but we had to refrain from it and instead disseminated messages on handwashing, wearing masks and other protective measures,” she says.

Technologically, Cheng feels, the organization has evolved. Mobile and remote data collection are now common practices in the field, along with digital beneficiary management tools. A part of her job has been to oversee needs assessment, as well as monitoring and evaluation exercises. Her role also includes sensitizing the organization's management on evidence-based decision making, ensuring each programme is designed and built on the best available evidence and reaches the people most in need of humanitarian assistance.

In addition to digital improvements, Cheng has seen a consistent increase in the number of women who are assigned to management roles. Even in EcoSec, she says, there has been an upward trend.

“The ICRC invests tremendously in its employees – we have multiple training opportunities like the Staff Integration Programme and iDevelop programme. There’s so much to do and the organization supports you in furthering your education and upskilling yourself.”

Cheng speaks English, Malay, Cantonese, basic French and basic Japanese, and has been posted to Nairobi and Juba in the last three years. Adjusting to the local cultures and customs hasn’t been too hard for Cheng – “You just adapt!” she says, adding though that she has felt “a lot more visible as a minority” during some of her postings. She thinks one’s expectations change as you start travelling extensively.

“It’s been a rewarding experience,” Cheng says as we talk about her years in the humanitarian sector. “And being away from your family is hard, but it is manageable,” she smiles.



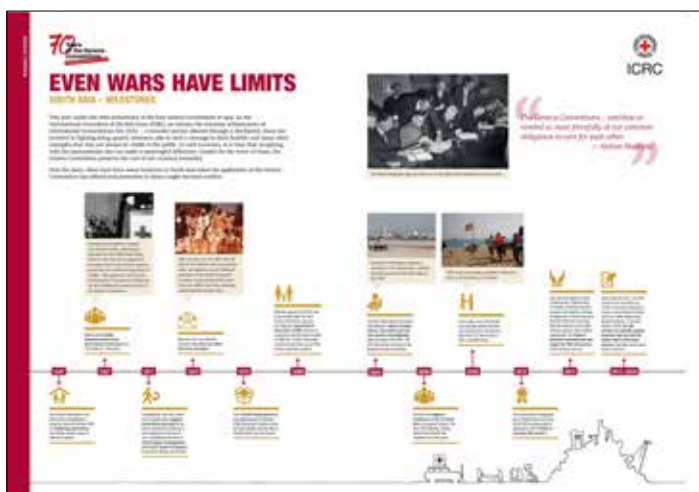
KNOW YOUR REGIONAL COMMUNICATION CENTRE

Hosted at the New Delhi Regional Delegation, the Delhi RCC works with delegations in the Asia-Pacific to build on the ICRC's positioning and acceptance in the region. We provide strategic communication advice and services in various regions. Our scope of work often extends to global support, especially in the areas of digital communication, graphic designing and language services. We work in close coordination with other RCCs as well as our regional and headquarter counterparts to ensure fruitful collaborations.

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