



Published on *How does law protect in war? - Online casebook* (<https://casebook.icrc.org>)
Home > ICRC, Tracing Service

[Source: International Committee of the Red Cross, *Restoration of Family Links: Waiting for News*, Geneva, 2002; available at <http://www.icrc.org> ^[1]. Footnotes omitted.]

**Population in flight, children lost, families dispersed, displaced,
forced to become refugees...**

Soldiers wounded, taken prisoner, missing or killed in battle...

**Houses destroyed, front lines impassable, communications
disrupted...**

[...] The activities of the High Contracting Parties, of the Parties to the conflict and of the international humanitarian organizations mentioned in the Conventions and in this Protocol shall be prompted mainly by the right of families to know the fate of their relatives. (Protocol of 1977, Article 32)

Of all the suffering caused by war, perhaps the most bitter anguish is not knowing what has happened to a son or brother gone off to fight, a wife or grandfather left behind in a village, a child separated from its relatives.

Ever since its origins, the Red Cross has placed this mental suffering at the centre of its concerns. To alleviate it the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) takes the action described in this brochure.

[1.] Writing a Red Cross message is an expression of hope that relatives will be found

In time of conflict, postal and telephone communications are often disrupted and direct contacts may be impossible. In these circumstances, anyone who wishes to do so may send news of a strictly personal nature to his or her family and receive such news by means of a Red Cross message. This is a standard form with space for about 30 lines of text and the addresses of the sender and the recipient. Red Cross and Red Crescent staff collect, forward and distribute the messages by various means:

- door-to-door delivery;
- contacting neighbours, village elders or clan chiefs;
- posting lists in Red Cross and Red Crescent offices, refugee camps and public places where the people sought are likely to go;
- publicizing addressees' names in the press, on radio programmes or on public communication networks. In the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda the BBC, in cooperation with the ICRC, broadcasts the names of people being sought by their relatives, and in Zaire "*Reporters sans frontières*" broadcasts a similar programme on "Radio Agatashya".

Exchange of correspondence through the Red Cross continues until normal means of communication are restored.

[2.] Unaccompanied children a tragic phenomenon

Just like adults children flee from fighting and take the road to exile, but in the general panic they all too often lose their way, become separated from their parents and end up in a refugee camp with no one to take care of them. Also too often, they become orphans and prey to unofficial adoption or trafficking.

Children shall be provided, with the care and aid they require, and [...] all appropriate steps shall be taken to facilitate the reunion of families temporarily separated. (Protocol II of 1977, Article 4, para 3(b))

In order to preserve the family unit and to reunite children with their parents, the ICRC:

registers and follows up all unaccompanied children, wherever they may be;

records the identity of each child (name and age, parents' names, previous and present addresses);

photographs, in most cases, each child (a photo is often the only identity document that can be placed in the file of a baby or a very small child);

sets in motion a mechanism for tracing the parents, which includes:

- posting the names of the relatives sought in refugee camps and much frequented public places;
- broadcasting the names on local or international radio networks;
- launching appeals to parents who are looking for their children, urging them to contact the nearest Red Cross or Red Crescent office;
- sending Red Cross messages written by children to their parents' former addresses;
- visits to and enquiries in the children's villages of origin by volunteers of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and other humanitarian organizations;
- approaches to authorities which may be able to supply useful information.

All these efforts often culminate in their immense joy of being together again.

In the Cambodian conflict, 4,167 unaccompanied children were registered between 1979 and 1982.

[3.] The long road to family reunification...

The High Contracting Parties and the Parties to the conflict shall facilitate in every possible way the reunion of families dispersed as a result of armed conflicts [...].

(Protocol I of 1977, Article 74)

Reuniting members of families split up by war often entails lengthy administrative procedures. Before organizing a family reunification, ICRC delegates must make sure that such a move will improve the situation of everyone involved, particularly in conflict areas. The agreement of each person concerned must be obtained and the family relationship verified. In addition, the ICRC must obtain the necessary authorizations and visas from the warring parties and the countries involved, including countries of transit.

Delegates give priority to people requiring special protection, such as unaccompanied children, elderly people living alone and released detainees, and the next of kin.

... or back home

In the chaos of conflict many people lose their identity papers and have no means of obtaining new ones. Such cases were particularly common at the end of the Second World War, and that was why, in 1945, the ICRC used its right of initiative to establish an internationally recognized temporary travel document.

This is issued to refugees and displaced or stateless people who do not have or no longer have any identity papers and consequently can neither return to their country of origin or residence nor enter a host country. The document is not a substitute for a passport or for any other identity papers, and is valid only for the duration of the journey.

A worldwide network

To restore family links between people affected by war, the ICRC cooperates with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies all over the world.

In areas affected by conflict and in neighbouring countries, the ICRC works with staff and volunteers of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the countries concerned.

Over 160 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout the world make up the global network for restoration of family ties, which collects and forwards messages then delivers them, often after considerable time and effort have been spent tracing the addressees.

Humanitarian cooperation in action

Other humanitarian organizations are becoming involved with increasing frequency in activities for restoring family links. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, are regular partners of the ICRC in nearly all conflict situations. Other agencies, such as UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations like the Save the Children Fund cooperate with ICRC delegates in dealing with certain specific issues, including that of unaccompanied children in Rwanda.

Computer technology for the restoration of family links

All the information on war victims collected by the ICRC is managed in databases which are capable of processing millions of entries and are compiled in delegations throughout the world.

The information is made available as needed to other humanitarian organizations

cooperating with the ICRC, on condition that the protection of personal data is guaranteed.

The ICRC has over 60 databases, the main ones concerning Rwanda (details on 270,000 individuals); the Gulf war (120,000); Israel, the occupied territories and the autonomous territories (101,000); the former Yugoslavia (92,000); Sri Lanka (58,000); Somalia (25,000); and Peru (20,000). In Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996, two years after the conflict in Rwanda, seven ICRC delegates and 80 other employees were still processing thousands of data every day in connection with the individual files of 270,000 victims of those events. The items were entered in a database on 50 interconnected computers.

[4.] Deprived of their freedom

Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated. (Third Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 13)

Soldiers captured on the battlefield, civilians arrested when a town is taken, interned for security reasons, detained by an occupying power or because they do not belong to the same ethnic group, do not practise the same religion, or hold different political opinions ... all these categories of people deprived of their freedom are visited by ICRC delegates the world over.

During the Second World War, the ICRC delegate in Berlin took the initiative of using capture cards filled in by the prisoners themselves to draw up lists of names and thus to facilitate family contacts. All the details were kept at the ICRC's Central Agency for prisoners of war in Geneva; without them the list of the missing would have been very much longer.

This method has since been extended to all conflicts. Thus during the ten years of war between Iran and Iraq, ICRC delegates recorded the identity of over 90,000 prisoners of

war. The purpose of ICRC visits to POW camps is to ascertain that the prisoners are properly treated, in accordance with the requirements of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Additional Protocols of 1977.

- In order to combat disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and to improve the material and psychological conditions in which detainees are held, the ICRC delegates endeavour to:
- determine and record the identity of all persons deprived of their freedom;
- follow up each prisoner individually so as to monitor his or her treatment by the authorities throughout the period of captivity;
- restore contacts with relatives by informing the prisoner's family of his or her capture.

The ICRC expresses no opinion on the reasons that prompt the authorities to make arrests and never interferes in decisions to release captives. It requests release only for vulnerable categories of people, on humanitarian or medical grounds (children, pregnant women, the elderly, the seriously ill and the seriously wounded). At the end of the hostilities, the ICRC calls for the release of all detainees.

Maintaining family contacts

Thanks to Red Cross messages, persons deprived of their freedom can inform their families of their situation and keep in touch with them throughout the period of their detention.

Family visits to places of detention may be organized by the Red Cross, since prisons are often very far away from the family home and travel is expensive, or there may be front lines to cross. The ICRC facilitates such family visits in cooperation with the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society concerned and the prison authorities. This is the case in the Philippines and Indonesia, where the National Societies arrange for the transport of families to prisons which may be more than a thousand kilometres away from their homes.

Guaranteeing release

The ICRC is responsible for organizing the return of released prisoners to their countries or regions of origin at the end of hostilities, or sometimes even earlier. Its delegates interview the prisoners individually to ascertain whether they wish to be repatriated or transferred to the other side of the front line, or whether they prefer to remain in the place where they are released.

The ICRC tries to ensure that all prisoners are repatriated at the end of hostilities. During the conflict it encourages the simultaneous release of all captives in the hands of the belligerents, in order to avoid bargaining in human lives, or the making of arrests for the sole purpose of increasing the number of people to be released to match that of the adverse party, or for purposes of “ethnic cleansing”.

[5.] Assistance to families

Parties to the conflict shall record as soon as possible, in respect of each wounded, sick or dead person of the adverse Party falling into their hands, any particulars which may assist in his identification.[...] Parties to the conflict shall prepare and forward to each other, [...] certificates of death or duly authenticated lists of the dead. (First Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 16)

Certifying captivity

In conflict situations, the ICRC draws up, where necessary, documents certifying that each detainee has been followed up by its delegates throughout the period of detention. Thousands of such certificates are issued every year by ICRC delegations all over the world. These documents often enable former captives or their families to receive compensation or State pensions under national legislation.

Certifying death

In accordance with its mandate, the ICRC tries to obtain notification of persons who have died during a conflict, in order to ensure that their families have been duly informed.

Setting minds at rest

One of the most distressing effects of war is uncertainty about the fate of close relatives: have they been taken prisoner, are they wounded, or dead? If the family link cannot be restored by means of Red Cross messages and no information can be obtained about the capture or death of the person sought, the ICRC approaches the authorities concerned, submitting lists of persons unaccounted for whose fate the authorities might help to elucidate using information at their disposal.

After certain conflicts (Cyprus in 1974, the Gulf war in 1991, the former Yugoslavia in 1991-1995), special commissions were set up under ICRC auspices to help the former belligerents carry out the necessary searches.

Source URL: <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/icrc-tracing-service>

Links

[1] <http://www.icrc.org>