

## **Role and activities of the Panamanian Red Cross in the context of the country**

### *Principal activities*

#### *Relief and emergency services*

Relief and emergency services include the ambulance service, the Emergency Operations Center, created in 1990, free first-aid service at Red Cross offices, plus rescue services at beaches, on highways, and at special events. The National Society believes that up to now it has achieved its greatest capacity and efficiency in these services.

The U.S. invasion of December 1989 put the ability of the Panamanian Red Cross to deal with emergency situations to a severe test. At that time, dozens of injured were transported in ambulances and hundreds of other people were evacuated or received medical treatment or protection from the institution. Immediately after the conflict, assistance was provided to 14,000 people who were left homeless because of bombing and the destruction of various poor districts of the capital.

A new emergency occurred in April and May 1991, the result of an earthquake in the province of Bocas del Toro, in the northwestern part of the country bordering on Costa Rica, which coincided with the rainy season. The earthquake, of magnitude 7.3 on the Richter scale, showed once again how important the provincial and district chapters—in this instance those in Changuinola and Bocas del Toro—are in providing first aid to victims since volunteers and equipment arrived from the capital only several hours later, though the Relief Operations Center (COS) had activated them immediately after the earthquake occurred. Beyond providing immediate assistance to the injured and homeless, the National Society later carried out a program to build "emergency modules" for temporary housing with financial support from the European Community and the Federation, through the Regional Delegation at San José, Costa Rica, which also sent a delegate. This

program provided basic housing for 315 families, about 10% of whom had lost their homes during the earthquake. Dwellings were awarded according to socioeconomic criteria, and most of the beneficiaries were families with limited means and from rural areas. In a large proportion of cases, they were also indigenous people who had few possibilities of repairing or rebuilding their homes themselves because they were badly damaged or completely destroyed.

A specific objective of the Five-Year Development Plan for 1992-1996 is restructuring the Relief Plan nationally to improve the operational system. One of the Plan's specific objectives is to carry out an evaluation of potential risks in disaster situations in each chapter's area in order to formulate provincial plans of action for disasters. It is also intended to increase the number of trained relief workers. With financial support from the Australian Red Cross, a program has been developed to train first-aid instructors, and in 1994 it is hoped to conduct various paramedic training activities for chapter volunteers in collaboration with social security and the Public Force (police).

In recent years the National Society has attached great importance to the ambulance service, since no other agency provided such public service after the invasion. Hospitals only provide limited service between hospitals, and the new Government did not resume the ambulance service formerly provided free by the Defense Forces, which were disbanded after the U.S. invasion. The National Society had to assume it almost alone. In 1992, however, a national emergency coordination mechanism (COSEM) was established under which the Red Cross now provides this service in close collaboration with Civil Protection and the Ministry of Health. The National Society also began in 1992 to strengthen the service through its Ambulance Program, which includes equipment repair, purchase of new units, training for the staff of the service, and development of cost-recovery methods based on agreements with state institutions. The service has 10 units, and there are plans to buy four more. It has so far been possible to provide units to five of the nine

chapters. This program has the cooperation of the German Red Cross, which has already provided some vehicles and has promised others.

Although the National Society conducts disaster preparedness activities, their profile is weak and there is concern because there is no general framework for coordinating them with other institutions and the Government through a national disaster plan. Information dissemination activities in schools, particularly in the area of first aid, are of some importance in this sphere.

The National Society is responsible for operating the Inter-American Radio Communication Network. A national network is in operation, but both networks require extension to become fully operational. The National Society submitted a SFr116,000 plan to improve the communication network to the 1993 development appeal.

### *Social assistance and welfare services*

The 1990-1992 Plan explicitly called relief services a priority of the National Society, and characterized health and social welfare services as "supplementary." In the new Development Plan, however, the National Society adopted an attitude more congruent with the Federation's strategic goal for the 1990s, which is to improve the situation of the most vulnerable. This statement continues the efforts made before the 1989 invasion and, in consequence, social welfare services have regained their importance in the institution's order of priorities. The National Society's new leaders have accordingly signaled their commitment to greater development of this area, as is reflected in the 1992-1996 Plan, in consonance with the severe social problems facing Panamanian society, which is experiencing high rates of unemployment and underemployment, much poverty, and low coverage by state social programs.

The main obstacle to increasing coverage, as the National Society would like, is financial. Nevertheless, its leaders note that an additional problem is the persistence of a "charitable" approach in various parts of the institution and in the very conception of the Development Plan. That

approach should be replaced in the National Society's operations by a "solidarity" approach, so overcoming the charitable approach of some programs by a promotion and development approach. In this vein, the 1992-1996 Development Plan has proposed national coverage of community development activities as a general objective of the institution. Another difficulty is the sparse rural coverage of the services since the Panamanian Red Cross is an organization whose orientation and membership are highly urban.

The Panamanian Red Cross believes that the most vulnerable groups are children and young people, because of which they are the targets of most activities in this area. One of the main social welfare activities the National Society conducts is care, feeding, and education for preschool children aged six months to six years of working mothers through its Child and Family Guidance Centers (COIF). Such centers now exist in Panama City, David, Chitré, Penonomé, Aguadulce, Colón, Natá, Coclés, Chiriquí, and Herrera. The teaching staff of the COIF belong to the Ministry of Education, while the Red Cross provides the premises. Municipalities have shown some interest in supporting this service, for which there is a growing demand by families with limited means. The allocation of funds to this activity is limited, and though the National Society considers it a priority, it also intends that it should achieve self-financing status. There are now financial problems in sustaining it, though some COIF have achieved better self-financing.

Other programs under way are the home for abandoned children, which has 24 children up to five years old, and a home for the elderly, which has 25 beds. Clothing, shoes, and food have also been distributed from Red Cross offices and in community tours. There is a missing persons service, which was very active during and immediately after the invasion.

Lastly, it must be noted that in the assistance area the Panamanian Red Cross administered the Albrook camp for displaced persons. Its purpose was to shelter 2,400 homeless people from the El Chorrillo district, which was destroyed by bombing during the invasion. The U.S. Agency for

International Development (USAID) supported it financially. The program was extended for more than a year and a half because of the lack of response and delays in implementing the Government's housing plans to resettle the displaced. The camp was finally closed in November 1991.

### *Health services*

Health activities have had a lower profile, and at times have been characterized as being only ad-hoc. The Panamanian Red Cross has been providing first-aid treatment and medical services at its offices, as well as "medical rounds" in areas and communities without access to health services. The "Child Alive" health care and nutrition program is conducted in the indigenous district of Kuna-Yala in Darién Province. The Program's activities against dengue, in collaboration with various institutions, and certain educational activities to prevent AIDS and cholera must also be noted. Between 1992 and 1996, the National Society intends to conduct a program to promote voluntary blood donation.

### *Other activities*

The Panamanian Red Cross also carries on recreational activities for young people, such as the National Youth Camps, and publicizes International Humanitarian Law. Activities in the latter area are conducted within the institution since the Panamanian Defence Forces, the traditional target of courses, disappeared after the 1989 invasion.

### *Relations with the Government*

During the 20 years before the national crisis and invasion, the National Society maintained acceptable relations with the Government, as seen in the customary collaboration in different spheres, governmental subsidies, and the tax exemption the Red Cross enjoyed. The installation of a new regime, however, led to a period of

difficult relations because of its intention to intervene in the National Society. This threat has faded because of the speed with which the National Society undertook internal reorganization, the Federation's mediation, and support from other National Societies.

Normalization of relations with the Government and internal reorganization have not only gone hand in hand but, as we have seen, have been part of the same process. The new statutes have thus made explicit the institution's "nongovernmental" nature and reinforced its autonomy, and have restated its willingness to collaborate with the public authorities. Today, relations with certain agencies and ministries, especially Civil Protection and the Ministries of Health and Education (the latter through the COIF), are very good. Other governmental institutions have asked the National Society to provide first-aid and other training courses.

Negotiations are now under way with the executive branch to obtain a building for the Panamanian Red Cross's central headquarters as part of the process of restoring real estate belonging to the United States in the old Canal Zone to the Panamanian state. The National Society considers this operation important since it would allow its now rather obsolete facilities to be improved and would provide a better location for the central headquarters. It has the support of the Ministry of Housing for that purpose.

The Panamanian Red Cross is concerned that the current regime tends to transfer public responsibilities to the National Society without funds to pay for them as part of a policy that places priority on economic rather than social recovery, in the belief that economic growth alone would solve unemployment, marginalization, and poverty problems. This has led to some concern about sustaining the services the institution provides and which should be the responsibility of the Government, since it is believed that governmental financing should exist to sustain services of a public nature provided by the Red Cross, as already occurs with the COIF.

### ***Relations with other organizations and agencies***

Within the country, the Panamanian Red Cross maintains relations with the World Food Program (WFP) and, as part of the dengue program, with the Pan American Health Organization. It collaborated with USAID and Friends of the Americas, a U.S. nongovernmental organization, in operating the Albrook displaced persons camp. Cooperative relations were established with the European Community through the Federation to deal with relief operations after the Bocas del Toro earthquake.

There is concern about competition from other national organizations such as civic, Rotary, Lions, and Delta clubs. It is thought that such organizations have better ties with the more affluent, and so greater ability to raise funds.

### **The role of external cooperation**

The Panamanian Red Cross has received continuing cooperation from the Red Cross Movement, though that took on greater importance in 1989 and 1990 when the institution's budget was cut and the national crisis occurred. During that period both the ICRC and the Scandinavian Red Cross Societies supported the relief programs and the ambulance service, among others. The German Red Cross donated \$120,000 for the ambulance program during the 1992-1994 period, and the Australian Red Cross contributed \$36,000 for the First-Aid Instructors Training Program.

The Norwegian Red Cross financed a program to prevent AIDS with a contribution of SFr41,000. The dengue program has had the Federation's cooperation and has received funds from the European Community. The Spanish Red Cross has continued to cooperate in recent years by supporting the home for the elderly and abandoned children's programs, relief programs, the "Child Alive" program, and the farms. There are now agreements between the two National Societ-

ies providing for an increase in cooperation up to 1992, including new programs for young people.

As a result of the earthquake that hit the Bocas del Toro area in April 1991, the Red Cross received SFr544,676 through the Federation, part of which, as noted above, came from the Commission of the European Community.

The National Society has shown interest in increasing cooperation regionally and subregionally since other National Societies have useful experience and resources. This was seen during the preparation of the 1990-1992 Development Plan, when support was provided by advisers from the Colombian Red Cross and a delegate from the International Federation of the Red Cross.

Expectations about international cooperation are fairly high, as seen in the large number of projects it is hoped to finance from foreign sources and their high overall cost. Eleven of the National Society's projects totaling SFr1,368,000 in the areas of disaster preparedness, health services, community services, and the National Society's institutional development were included in the Federation's 1993 Development Appeal. Among the most important, because of the amounts required, are the purchase of transportation equipment, the ambulance program, construction of branch offices, improvements in the radio communication network, and the COIF.

### **The National Society's perception of its public image**

The Panamanian Red Cross believes that, during the last three years, it has gradually been overcoming the image problems stemming from its closeness to the former regime. From the viewpoint of the National Society, an indicator of this is the growing number of requests received to provide services at public events of all kinds and the Government's positive attitude toward the National Society. The fact that the Red Cross provided uninterrupted services during the inva-

sion and was the only institution to do so has significantly reinforced its image in public opinion. This strengthened the symbolic value of the ambulance service, which identifies the Red Cross in community eyes. Nevertheless, because of conflicts surrounding it and the situation that led to its creation, the Panamanian Red Cross's role in administering the Albrook displaced persons camp generated national and international controversies which could adversely affect the image of the Panamanian Red Cross.

The relief operations after the Bocas del Toro earthquake received extensive coverage in the

press and communications media, as a result of which the National Society's leaders believe that they helped improve its image in the eyes of the public and Government.

The chief problem in this area is the lack of an on-going publicity and image-building program that would help strengthen the institution's image. The 1992-1996 Development Plan therefore includes certain concrete activities, such as conducting a national campaign to bring about suitable use of the emblem.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

The U.S. invasion of Panama and the change in Government immediately thereafter in December 1989 were a turning point in the history of the Panamanian Red Cross. On one hand, the National Society had to deploy its entire relief, assistance, and protective capacity since it was one of the few organizations that, under extreme conditions, provided immediate aid to the combatants and the large civilian population uprooted by the confrontations and bombing. On the other, the National Society entered a period of severe institutional instability caused, among other things, by the adverse attitude of the new regime, which believed that before the invasion the National Society had been excessively close to the one that had preceded it.

During the last three years the National Society went through a period of normalizing its institutional life and redefining its relations with the Government and its role in Panamanian society. During that period, adhering to the guidelines in a biennial development plan, the National Society managed to restate its independence and autonomy, and avert the threat of governmental intervention. It was also able to carry out an internal reorganization, replace its leaders, reform its statutes, and reestablish most of its operating capacity, activities, and services, as seen in its response to the Bocas del Toro earthquake of April 1991. According to the National Society itself, it has also been possible to restore its image and credibility with society and the public authorities.

The formulation and implementation of a new Development Plan for the 1992-1996 half-decade is a sign that the Panamanian Red Cross's process

of normalization and reorganization has ended, and that the National Society has entered a new phase in which its priority is development, both institutionally and in activities and services. As part of a fairly diverse profile of activities characterizing the Panamanian Red Cross, some importance is being attached to developing relief and social action services, in the latter case with the goal of overcoming the traditional charitable orientation in favor of a solidarity approach.

Expanding and reorienting social programs can help the Panamanian Red Cross play an important role in its country in improving the situation of the most vulnerable. For this to happen, however, it is necessary to overcome the obstacles and limitations that still exist in the organization and its environment. Financial restrictions are undoubtedly among the most important since they seriously limit possibilities for expanding programs and extending their coverage, but they are not the only ones. Other limitations lie in the 1992-1996 Plan itself, which has not been adequately developed as to concrete goals and responsibilities, and in the fact that traditional and at times inadequate approaches and notions persist regarding, among other things, the function of protection, disaster relief, and the function of promotion. There is a strong need to expand and diversify training so that human resources with the necessary skills will exist to carry out the Plan's objectives. Some chapters are weak, which requires common support by the rest of the National Society so that they may develop their self-sufficiency and operational capacity. In sum, these factors, among others, constitute the working agenda that the Panamanian Red Cross will have to tackle during the 1990s.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Rigorously orient the Panamanian Red Cross's activities toward the most vulnerable
2. Carry out the 1992-1996 Development Plan
3. Develop the National Society's financial capacity
4. Adopt a human resources development strategy
5. Improve the public image

### 1. Rigorously orient the Panamanian Red Cross's activities toward the most vulnerable

- 1.1 Review the strategic guidelines in the Development Plan, modifying those not suited to the Red Cross's strategy for the 1990s, which places priority on improving the situation of the most vulnerable. Prepare an updated version of the plan for the three-year period 1994-1996 that makes explicit and deepens the orientation toward the most vulnerable adopted by the National Society.
- 1.2 Increase the Panamanian Red Cross's social action by aiming programs toward the extremely poor and most vulnerable. Undertake new programs related to emerging social problems and those that are most urgent such as AIDS, juvenile marginalization resulting from unemployment, drug addiction, and marginalization of indigenous people.
- 1.3 As part of the Plan, conduct community health activities dealing with health problems linked to poverty and situations of vulnerability in the framework of the primary health care (PHC) strategy. In this context, increase the "Child Alive" program's coverage by extending it to the rural areas where extreme poverty is concentrated and there is a higher incidence of child malnutrition
- 1.4 Redefine the National Society's strategy, policies, activities, and concepts in the disaster field. To that end:
  - Adopt a new approach to disasters by taking a broader view of vulnerability and paying attention to components of disasters, such as social and environmental ones, that so far have not been taken sufficiently into consideration.
  - Conduct prevention, preparedness, and planning activities, emphasizing chapter activities and low-cost strategies such as education and community organization.
  - With the public authorities, promote the formulation of geographically oriented emergency plans based on "risk areas" by defining the roles of the various organizations involved more precisely.
- 1.5 Broaden the concept and scope of the protection function by conducting mediation and defense activities on behalf of the most vulnerable with society and the public authorities, confronting all kinds of discrimination and promoting values of solidarity in Panamanian society

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.6 Gradually replace charitable approaches with promotion approaches by adopting new working methods that promote community participation, organization, and education.

### **2. Carry out the 1992-1996 Development Plan**

- 2.1 Guarantee the Plan's execution in provincial and district chapters by establishing objectives, goals, and exact terms in each of them.
- 2.2 Establish follow-up and evaluation methods for the Plan in order to adjust its goals and activities to a changing environment.
- 2.3 Based on such evaluations, draw up annual plans of action that precisely define the activities and measures to be carried out in the short term to achieve the Plan's general objectives

### **3. Develop the National Society's financial capacity**

- 3.1 Establish agreements with state and local public authorities, or renegotiate existing ones, in order to:
  - Eliminate operational deficits and guarantee full financing of the most costly services of a public nature, especially the ambulance service.
  - Begin providing specific services and programs important to the community within the framework of the state's current social policies which are carried out by institutions such as the Social Emergency Fund (FES) and focused on the most vulnerable.
  - Adopt measures to guarantee long-term financing of the COIF, such as agreements with local governments or the FES.
- 3.2 Expand and modernize fund-raising campaigns and systems by establishing new fund-raising methods aimed at businesses and obtaining sponsors. Apply professional and up-to-date marketing and publicity methods.
- 3.3 On the basis of current experiences, identify new revenue-producing and/or commercial projects that are profit-making, respecting the nonprofit nature of the Red Cross.
- 3.4 Expand the number of contributing members and support their interest through suitable symbolic rewards and image-building campaigns.
- 3.5 Provide technical assistance to the branches in the fund-raising sphere.
- 3.6 Adopt measures promoting greater branch self-sufficiency by establishing, at the same time, compensatory or "internal solidarity" methods for redistributing resources raised by the central headquarters or the most developed branches to branches that have less self-sufficiency and lower revenue due to the lesser economic development of their geographic areas.
- 3.7 Create a permanent fund-raising office or department with its own plans of action and professional staff

### **4. Adopt a human resources development strategy**

- 4.1 Undertake a continuing campaign to recruit volunteers which is linked to image-building campaigns, emphasizes young people, and uses more up-to-date messages in order to improve the social esteem of volunteer work. Establish different kinds of affiliation with the institution.



- 4.2 Design systems for assigning volunteers to activities according to their expectations, motivation, skills, and professional knowledge.
- 4.3 Review current training systems, considering the advisability of systematizing and unifying the training curriculum and training activities in CENACRUZ.
- 4.4 Diversify training activities for volunteers and paid staff in areas such as community development, primary health care, planning, evaluation, and management, and "trainer training." Create "health promoter" and "social promoter" training programs for the volunteers.
- 4.5 Review and redefine the organizational structure of the volunteer corps, favoring their assignment to programs rather than "bodies" and particularly avoiding their segregation and specialization in given kinds of activity because of their sex.
- 4.6 Adopt measures to increase the participation of women in all volunteer units and leadership positions in the National Society's different governing bodies, where women are in the minority, taking into account the feasibility of discriminating positively in their favor.

## 5. Improve the public image

- 5.1 When possible, conduct a study or survey of opinion about the Panamanian Red Cross's image in order, on the basis of reliable data and after the normalization period has ended, to determine the current public image of the institution.
- 5.2 Design a plan based on such data to improve the image, with professional support and using up-to-date publicity and marketing methods and strategies.
- 5.3 Extend information dissemination activities to the formal education system and community organizations working with specific segments of the population.
- 5.4 Conduct promotion and social awareness campaigns about specific situations of vulnerability and social problems, such as AIDS, drug addiction, disaster preparedness, promotion of basic rights, and promotion of groups against which discrimination is practiced.
- 5.5 Strengthen the department responsible for public relations and information dissemination by giving it greater resources and a larger staff.
- 5.6 Carry out the campaign to ensure proper use of the Red Cross emblem.

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