

CENTENARY OF THE PERUVIAN RED CROSS

In the October 1879 issue of the *Bulletin international de la Croix-Rouge*, the ICRC printed an item of news under the heading « South America—the Red Cross makes progress », in which it announced that the Geneva Convention had been signed on 2 May by the Peruvian Government and that Chile had acceded to the Convention on 28 June.

In 1879, Peru and Chile were at war. The ICRC, therefore, saw with satisfaction that, during the hostilities, the provisions of the 1864 Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field would be observed. It went on to say: “We had given some hints to our readers of a likely extension of the Red Cross on the American continent and were happy that it should be so, because, so far, it had not managed to obtain a foothold there. . . . And yet, many attempts had been made. . . .”

Shortly after the Peruvian Government had signed the Convention, the ICRC was informed that a Red Cross Society had been founded in Peru, on 17 April 1879.

Later, in a letter dated 3 March 1880, the President of the Central Committee of the Red Cross Ambulances of Peru asked the ICRC to incorporate it into the Red Cross movement. The letter very briefly summarized the society’s activities. A short passage from the letter is given here, because it is characteristic of a situation which has frequently been observed elsewhere: “The Central Committee of Peru has already got together four civilian ambulances, which are presently in the theatre of war and have rendered signal service to the wounded of the belligerent countries. As there has been some delay in getting ready the military ambulance service recently formed by the Peruvian Government, all the burden of the service in both military and civilian hospitals has been placed on the shoulders of the civilian ambulances, which have also followed the army to provide aid during the engagements. . . .”

The ICRC announced its recognition of the new society and stated, in a circular to the "Central Committees of relief to wounded soldiers", dated 8 May 1880, "After a period of three years during which no new Red Cross society had been created, we have pleasure to announce to you that a new society has just been formed in Peru. So far there had been none in America; we therefore welcome the foundation of the Peruvian Society, which heralds the dawn of an era of development for our work in that part of the world.

It has been observed that every outbreak of hostilities has led to the creation by the belligerents of a new Red Cross association. Here again, it was due to urgent needs, bred by a long drawn out war, that Peru decided to have its own Red Cross Society.

The International Committee has checked, when it examined the rules of the Peruvian Society—whose creation goes back to April 1879—that its constitution is founded upon the essential principles common to all Red Cross Societies. We therefore invite all existing Central Committees to embark upon regular and friendly relations with the Peruvian Central Committee and to consider it as a member of our general federation."

Judging from the documentary material available, the Peruvian Society appeared to be very active: it rapidly raised a considerable sum of money, which enabled it to go to the aid of the wounded through its four "ambulances", which were in fact four medical teams comprising a large number of persons despatched to the theatres of military operations. In addition, the society conducted negotiations to repatriate the wounded and to allow the "sisters of mercy" (as the nurses were called) to cross the firing lines. In June 1880, it entered into talks requiring considerable delicacy: "The President of the Lima Committee appeals to the Admiral in command of the Chilean Squadron blockading the port of Callao. . . The Red Cross wishes to transport to Lima, where good hospitals are available, the helpless wounded of the recent fighting at Tacna. To this end, it has asked the Peruvian Government to lend to the Society a naval transport vessel, remove all its armament and convert it to a hospital ship, if the Chilean admiral would kindly recognize the vessel's neutrality and authorize it to cross the blockade. . . The German colony in Lima has supplied 400 mattresses and as many blankets towards the conversion of the vessel into a hospital ship. . ." After discussions lasting several days, requiring an intermediary to go back and forth several times, "the admiral sent his reply to the President of the Red Cross, giving his assent to all the various points set forth in the petition and sending a safe-conduct for the steamship Limeña, which will sail henceforth under the

Red Cross flag. . .” The vessel returned to harbour in July with a number of wounded, the bodies of some of those who died and several persons who today would be called refugees.

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After the 1879 war, the Peruvian Society turned to other activities and adopted its work to the humanitarian needs in time of peace. It went to the relief of the numerous victims of natural disasters—floods, earthquakes, fires—which sometimes struck the country with terrible force. It was also active during the internal troubles in 1895 in Lima and during the hostilities with Ecuador in 1941.

We shall not enter into all the details of its history, except to note that, in 1886, by governmental decree, it took the name of “Peruvian Red Cross Society” and that it became on 17 June 1919 a member of the newly-created League of Red Cross Societies.

The Peruvian Red Cross was reorganized several times, in 1922, 1925, 1931, 1974, and its new statutes were approved by the Government on 29 December 1977. The National Society is now directed by a general assembly, which is its supreme body, and by a central committee, composed of members elected by the general assembly and by regional assemblies—who form a majority—and of representatives of the Ministry of Health, of the Ministry of Defence and of the Civil Defence National Committee. The ordinary day-to-day business of the Society is conducted by the executive committee.

The Red Cross in Peru is organized on the following lines: six regional centres, fourteen departmental committees, nine provincial committees and three district committees.

Funds for its activities are raised by public collections, lotteries, taxes levied on horse racing meetings, commercial collections, shows given in aid of the society, members’ subscriptions, donations, etc.

The Peruvian Red Cross carries out its activities in various sectors such as hygiene, social welfare, relief, blood donation. It has a youth section and a section consisting of voluntary nursing aids.

Health and social activities include safety measures to reduce accidents, first aid, medical education, vaccination campaigns, rescue exercises and home aid.

The society also dispenses instruction in first aid and handicrafts, gives literacy courses, teaches the elements of nutrition and hygiene, provides mother and child care, runs kindergartens and organizes entertainment and leisure activities for old people.

The Red Cross Youth section is a particularly lively branch of the society, in which it occupies a significant place. It organizes, among

other things, training courses in health education for school teachers. It keeps in touch with the youth sections of other National Societies and with benevolent societies such as Caritas and Iglesias Mundiales.

Since 1967, the Peruvian Red Cross has its own wireless transmitter and receiver station, which is of great help when relief operations have to be carried out.

In the field of information, the Society issues bulletins, shows first aid programmes on television and publishes articles in a Lima daily newspaper. It also works in co-operation with a cinematograph company for the production of documentary films.

International activities include the regular attendance of the Peruvian Red Cross at the International Red Cross Conferences. It has taken part in the League Board of Governors meetings and from 1973 to 1977, its delegate has sat on the League Executive Committee. The society has now been elected a member of the League's Junior Red Cross Advisory Committee for the period 1977 to 1981. It also sends its representatives to various international seminars on Red Cross activities.

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In April 1979, the Peruvian Red Cross celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its foundation. At the ceremonies, the ICRC was represented by one of its members, Mr R. Jäckli, who said: "It gives me deep satisfaction to express here all the esteem which the ICRC feels towards the Peruvian Red Cross and to convey the ICRC's congratulations on the fruitful activities performed, over the past hundred years, by the National Society, in bringing aid to the victims of disease, poverty, wars and natural disasters of all kinds. The ICRC wishes to associate itself with the thousands of men and women in this country whose dedication and selflessness have so much contributed to the alleviation of suffering and to the progress of humanitarianism. The ICRC pays warm tribute and expresses its sincere gratitude to all those volunteers who have come forward to give the best of themselves in order to help their fellowmen. Such a rich past augurs well for the future... It is with this certainty in mind that the ICRC expresses its best wishes to the Peruvian Red Cross that it may continue to be a powerful factor for peace among individuals and among nations."

The *International Review of the Red Cross* joins wholeheartedly in those congratulations and good wishes.¹

¹ The sources for this article included the *Breve reseña de la historia de la Sociedad Peruana de la Cruz Roja* (unpublished) by General Demetrio Grados Vásquez, Chairman of the Reorganization Commission, and the *Bulletin international de la Croix-Rouge* for 1879 and 1880.