

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 30 (2003)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Humanitarian Switzerland : saving lives, relieving suffering
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907377>

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Saving lives, relieving suffering



Patrick Lüthy

For 140 years the ICRC has provided assistance wherever there is human suffering and wherever human rights are violated (the picture shows a Red Cross worker in Toluca, Mexico).

The human suffering caused by war and conflict attracts worldwide outrage. The Swiss government along with the Red Cross and a number of relief agencies help to relieve suffering throughout the world – including in Iraq.

ROLF RIBI

“THE SUN ON 25TH JUNE illuminates one of the most horrific spectacles conceivable. The battlefield is strewn with the bodies of men and horses.” So wrote Geneva-born Henry Dunant, describing the aftermath of the battle of Solferino on 24 June 1859, a decisive battle in the Franco-Austrian War which left 40,000 French, Italian and Austrian soldiers dead and wounded. Three years later Dunant published his book entitled “A Memory of Solferino”, which marked the beginnings of the Red Cross movement and modern-day international humanitarian law.

Switzerland is the birthplace of the Red Cross and was the haven to which the Bour-

baki Army fled during the Franco-German War of 1870-71. It took in refugees during World War II and founded the Disaster Relief Corps in 1973. These examples illustrate the extent to which humanitarian solidarity shapes our country’s image and is a deep-rooted aspect of the Swiss character.

Humanitarian aims of foreign policy

“Humanitarian aid is an important area of our foreign policy,” confirms Walter Fust, Head of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), part of the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (FDFA). He cites the Federal Council’s five principal objectives for Swiss foreign policy: the conservation and promotion of security and peace,

the upholding of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the promotion of welfare, and the eradication of social inequality. According to the final report published by the “Humanitarian Policy in Switzerland” working group in 1999, the humanitarian dimension of Swiss foreign policy is an overriding task that is addressed within the context of all five objectives.

“To save lives and relieve suffering worldwide: this is the aim of the government’s humanitarian aid activities,” explains Walter Fust. The mission is to implement preventive measures and provide assistance with a view to saving lives and relieving human suffering. Humanitarian aid is targeted at victims of natural disasters or armed conflict. According to Toni Frisch, Delegate for Humanitarian Relief, for years the focus has been shifting away from aid for natural disasters towards providing assistance before, during and after conflicts.

The Swiss government’s humanitarian aid policy takes various forms. In line with its

mission to prevent suffering, provide relief, save lives and rebuild infrastructures, it provides personnel (the Swiss Corps for Humanitarian Relief), financial contributions to Swiss relief agencies and international organisations (for instance the Red Cross and UN agencies), food aid and material shipments. It is also active in promoting and defending international humanitarian rights and human rights.

Approximately one quarter of the SDC's current total annual budget of CHF 1244 million is allocated to humanitarian aid, with CHF 30 million set aside for operations in Iraq. "The government is standing by with humanitarian aid to help the civilian population in Iraq," said Federal Councillor Michel Calmy-Rey back in April. Swiss diplomats firmly believe that the United Nations must play a key role in the rebuilding of Iraq, and that aid for the people of Iraq must be provided by the UN and the ICRC rather than the coalition partners. Says Walter Fust, "Reconstructing Iraqi society is more important than rebuilding the economy and the infrastructure. This is where Switzerland can contribute with its experience in development cooperation."

The ICRC in action

The letters ICRC, which stand for the International Committee of the Red Cross, are the international symbol of humanitarian Switzerland. At its headquarters in Geneva's Avenue de la Paix the organisation coordinates operations and relief programmes around the world. Some 800 persons are employed at head office in Geneva, while around 10,000 are active in some 80 countries around the world as delegates or local aid workers. The ICRC budget for this year is almost CHF 1 billion. Another CHF 200 million is needed for Iraq.

The ICRC monitors adherence to humanitarian rights in armed conflicts, as set down in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. As the depositary state of these conventions, Switzerland bears a special responsibility for the observance of international humanitarian law. Even before the war in Iraq broke out, the ICRC was urging the coalition partners to "protect the civilian population and adhere strictly to the principles of international humanitarian law."

During the conflict in Iraq the ICRC was the only humanitarian organisation on the spot, apart from Caritas and Médecins sans

frontières (Doctors without borders). Efforts are primarily aimed at protecting the civilian population and the rights of prisoners of war, providing assistance for displaced persons, and securing the water supply and hospital supplies, according to Balthasar Staehelin, ICRC General Delegate for the Middle East.

Essential relief agencies

Alongside the Swiss government and the ICRC, Swiss relief agencies are essential providers of humanitarian aid.

"Switzerland provides a great deal of humanitarian aid, not only in hotspots that make headline news, but also in forgotten conflicts and ongoing crises such as the famine in southern Africa," says Caritas Coordinator Hans Staubli. Beyond immediate emergency assistance, one must not ignore the importance of long-term support. The Caritas network has been active in Iraq for twelve years, and Caritas Switzerland has set aside CHF 1.5 million to provide initial emergency assistance. According to Hans Staubli, Caritas health centres play a particularly important role as contact centres for people in need. Here they receive first aid, clean water, blankets, medicines and food. "The medical situation is shocking. A great many children are traumatised. Once more the civilian population is the hardest hit."

Rolf Stocker, Head of Humanitarian Relief at the Swiss Labour Relief Agency (Schweizerisches Arbeiterhilfswerks SAH), estimates Swiss humanitarian relief to be in the region of CHF 300 million. Currently around CHF 12 million is available for Iraq. His institution has earmarked CHF 0.75 million for aid to Iraq. "We believe that Swiss humanitarian aid is very good, professional and efficient." The SAH is active with partner organisations in Kurdish Northern Iraq, where it runs a refugee camp and health centre, performs mine clearance projects and conducts related awareness campaigns. The agency intends to remain in post-war Iraq for the medium term, delivering medical supplies, caring for internally displaced persons and refugees and helping them to return to their homes, as well as clearing land mines and anti-personnel mines.

According to Seta Thakur, Communications Officer of the Swiss Evangelical Church Relief Agency (Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz, HEKS), "Compared to the rest of Europe, Switzerland has decades of experience in providing humanitarian assis-

tance and emergency aid." Nevertheless she regrets the fact that the government will almost certainly fail to reach the 0.4 percent of GNP for humanitarian aid which it has defined as its objective for 2010. In Iraq the HEKS collaborates with Caritas Switzerland and a local partner to provide emergency aid in the area bordering Iran and Iraq. In city mosques, churches and schools, where people seek refuge, the agency distributes food, water and first-aid kits. Post-war the priority is on caring for refugees. CHF 0.5 million is currently reserved for aid to Iraq. "This war is affecting a nation which for years has been suffering from an unscrupulous regime and international sanctions," says Seta Thakur.

The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) works closely with the International Red Cross movement, providing support to the ICRC in countries at war as well as to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Organisations for natural disasters and refugee relief. According to Information Officer Karl Schuler, it has an annual budget of some CHF 15 million for humanitarian assistance, and has already spent CHF 1 million on providing aid to the Iraqi population, initially for setting up refugee camps and now for ensuring water supplies and medical aid. The SRC will continue to provide medical assistance in the future, by constructing health centres for the Iraqi Red Crescent. "The SRC believes that the principles of the Red Cross, and particularly the principles of humanity and non-partisanship, are absolutely binding," stresses Karl Schuler.

Names and accounts

Caritas Switzerland, Account 60-7000-4
www.caritas.ch

Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz (HEKS), Account 80-1115-1
www.heks.ch

Schweizerisches Arbeiterhilfswerk (SAH)
Account 80-188-1, www.sah.ch

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www.redcross.ch

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