

Colombia

The Review of the Colombian Red Cross (Bogotá, May 1965) includes an article concerning the relief action undertaken by that National Society in favour of Colombian nationals in May 1965 during the crisis in the Dominican Republic. It describes the resolution and courage of those who decide to give immediate help under the protection of our common emblem. A summary is given below :

When the aircraft bearing the Red Cross emblem left the airport of Soledad in the morning, its occupants were not sure of reaching their destination, Santo Domingo. They had been unable to make contact with the capital, which was going through one of the most tragic episodes of its history. On board were four and a half tons of food, serum, antibiotics and other medical supplies for first aid, for refugees at the Colombian Embassy. A representative of the Colombian authorities and the Director of the Red Cross were also aboard the aircraft.

The pilot tried in vain to make radio contact with the airport of the Dominican capital in order to land. No one replied ; the civilian airport was closed. He tried to reach the military airport of San Isidro. Again no response. Military planes flew around the Red Cross plane. Bogotá had cabled ICRC headquarters at Geneva, but no one knew if it had been possible to relay word to the Dominican Red Cross. The passengers were tense, and only a few moments before the plane was above the airstrip was landing permission received. The Red Cross, symbol of peace and co-operation, had allowed part of the mission to be accomplished. This was the first relief aircraft to reach the war-torn country. But it was yet necessary to get through to the capital, some five miles from the airport.

The engines had not even stopped before military forces came aboard with greetings and an invitation to the air base headquarters. The delegation informed the authorities of its objective and requested authorization to contact the Colombian Embassy and the Dominican Red Cross. Permission was granted, but the delegates had to wait for hours... Had the trip been in vain ? The Colombians decided to go directly to the capital, ignoring the risks. Their

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

mission had to be accomplished at any cost, although they were told: "We are not responsible for your lives if you go into the city."

The five mile drive into Santo Domingo was made over a road congested with troops and truck loads of material. The delegates had gone no more than a hundred yards before shooting began, but the car continued on its way, finally arriving at the capital in the throes of war. It stopped at the hotel being used as headquarters for the Control Commission of the Organization of American States. Together with this Commission, it was decided that a group working with the Dominican Red Cross would assume distribution of the Colombian relief supplies.

But another mission remained to be carried out: transporting to either Puerto Rico or Colombia those refugees who wished to leave. Again a difficult situation, and more time lost in waiting. At seven that evening the return trip to the airport began, while sporadic shooting continued on all sides. This time a helicopter was available. It was only a speck in the night sky, below which lay nothing but complete darkness, for Santo Domingo was without electricity, without water, without means of transportation.

At the airport they found it was impossible to take off immediately as had been planned, for the Red Cross plane had yet to be unloaded. The next morning, despite the still encumbered runway, the plane took off.

A brief stop at San Juan, and on May 7 seven people returned to their own country, Colombia. The Red Cross mission had been successfully accomplished.