

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

Mexico

THE PROTECTION OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

We have received from Mr. Alemán Velasco, member of the Central Committee of the Mexican Red Cross, an article which we have pleasure in reproducing below. We extend our thanks to the author for giving his own views of a topical subject likely to interest our readers.

We would also point out that he has just sent us a study in which he aptly defines the present tasks of the Mexican Red Cross, the important place it holds in the life of the country and the transformation of its activities brought about by present developments in Mexico.

In Mexico there exists no national organization nor any legislation for the protection of the civilian population. However, in view of the fact that the Mexican Government is preoccupied with the constantly increasing rate of accidents resulting from growing industrialization and development in the country, the Ministry of Health and Public Welfare, in agreement with the World Health Organization and according to the standards established by the latter, decided in 1961 to form a national Council for the prevention of accidents.

Deaths due to accidents are more numerous in Mexico than those from other causes, especially between the ages of 5 and 19. A temporary, permanent, partial or total incapacity for work is the toll paid for accidents which evidently represent a decrease in production. In a developing country which is seeking to reach a first stage in industrialization, these are factors which do serious damage to the family budget, social insurance benefits not being everywhere prevalent.

In the country, amongst the peasants, it is not rare to find that bites from insects, dogs, rats, or still more, from snakes prove mortal in many cases.

Because of the low standard of living, a large part of the population is short of shoes, which results in cuts on the feet, frequently complicated by tetanus.

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Accidents occurring in the schools have special characteristics, which tend to repeat themselves. It is therefore in this field that it is easiest to obtain satisfactory results as regards prevention and protection.

In Mexico, traffic accidents represent 27 % of the general total of accidents. There are only 299,536 vehicles in circulation, to which should be added 1,400 trams and trolleybuses, as well as motors driven by tourists and travellers in transit. The Traffic Department of the Federal District daily registers thirty new vehicles each day.

Accidents in the home are manifestly the most frequent. They represent by themselves 50 % of the total. In the capital district accidents can be divided as follows: 25.8 % amongst children from 1 to 4 years old; 20.6 % amongst children from 5 to 9; the remainder amongst house-wives and the aged. Furthermore, it has been noted that 22.2 % of accidents in the home occur in living rooms, 20 % in corridors, 9 % in kitchens and 8.9 % on staircases.

The most frequent accidents in order of importance are the following :

<i>a)</i> Traumatism	85.5 %
<i>b)</i> Burns	7.9 %
<i>c)</i> Poisoning	4.2 %
<i>d)</i> Electrocutation	1.4 %
<i>e)</i> Asphyxiation	1.0 %

The most frequent injuries are :

<i>a)</i> Cuts	16 %
<i>b)</i> Bruises	16.7 %
<i>c)</i> Fractures	14 %
<i>d)</i> Wounds (fire-arms)	3.2 %

In the sphere of civil protection, apart from the National Council for the Prevention of Accidents, the action of the following can be noted: the Mexican Red Cross, the Mexican Association of Hygiene and Safety, the Automobile Club, the Association of Road Safety, Social Insurance, the Mexican School of Hotels and Tourism and, in addition, an industrial organization of the town of Mexico. All these bodies unfortunately, however, work without

co-ordination, each one concerning itself, on its own, with its own circle and, according to its means, with one section of the civilian population. We would here stress the fact that only the Red Cross and the Army have drawn up plans of intervention in cases of natural disaster.

Like Japan, Yugoslavia and some parts of the United States and Chile, Mexico is constantly subjected to strong earthquakes. Its coasts, particularly on the Gulf of Mexico, are often struck by cyclones which have already devastated entire towns, as was the case with Quintana Roo and Chetumal on the Yucatan peninsula. On such occasions, the Mexican Army, previously dependent on the Ministry of War, but since 1940 on the Ministry of Defence, lends its help. Now, it has no other rôle than to guarantee the institutions and the defence of Mexican national sovereignty. Moreover, Mexico prides itself on possessing more teachers than soldiers and the national education budget, a serious problem which all Mexicans are attempting to resolve, is on a higher level than that of the armed forces. Furthermore, and perhaps to our own disadvantage, the possibility of nuclear attack on Mexico has never been considered. We in fact possess no legislation nor any ordinance on protection against radiation, nor even a law on civil defence in the meaning in which it is understood in Europe, for example.

At the instigation of the National Red Cross Society and conscious of the fact that civil protection is a new task which should devolve on the State to ensure the permanent safety of the population, Mr. Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, President of the Republic, has given instructions to the Secretariat of the Ministry of the Interior for it to set up a Civil Defence Directorate as it should do in a country such as Mexico. He has also asked it to prepare the study of a federal law and ordinances for the purpose of co-ordinating, with the International Civil Defence Organization, exchanges of views, comparisons of methods of intervention, instruction and exercises, the examination of equipment, the collation of information and the establishing of international contacts.

Mexico is convinced that civil protection is a necessity and a duty.

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