

SWISS DISASTER RELIEF

The idea of a Swiss disaster relief organization was born as a result of motions put forward by various members of our parliament. Their efforts led to the creation of a central office for domestic disaster relief in 1970 and to the appointment of a Federal Council delegate for disaster relief abroad in 1972. According to the aim laid down in the Federal Council's report of 11th August 1971, the delegate was set the task of creating a Swiss Volunteer Corps with the necessary personnel and equipment, which was to be organized and kept ready for action in case of natural disasters and for humanitarian work after armed conflicts.

The Swiss Volunteer Corps

Switzerland has broken new ground with the organization of a volunteer corps for relief abroad. Similar experiences in other countries, studied on the basis of several examples, could only in part serve as models, the reason being that those countries as a rule employ military units, which have moreover the advantage of being very quickly ready for action. Switzerland, on the other hand, has chosen the solution of the volunteer corps, not only because this is in keeping with the situation in our country, but also because this form corresponds better to the actual conditions in the critical area. So the volunteers will not wear uniforms as a rule, and the proportion of personnel and equipment required can be kept at a relatively flexible level.

The Swiss Disaster Relief Corps, set up in 1973, today consists of about 1'000 volunteers, chosen from over 4'000 applicants. The volunteers are specialists, divided into the following fields of action : medical services (doctors, nurses, etc.), structural engineering (engineers, architects, fitters, foremen, bricklayers, carpenters, etc.), provisions (storekeepers, cooks, bookkeepers, etc.), communications (radio operators, electricians, technicians, etc.), transport (drivers, mechanics, etc.) and finally specialists for general administrative duties.



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Recruitment takes place irrespective of political or religious affiliation and according to certain criteria : professional competence, physical and psychical resistance, sense of responsibility, adaptability, good knowledge of languages, team-spirit, experience abroad, etc. The volunteers must undergo a thorough medical examination and a comprehensive vaccination program before signing a general contract which is countersigned by the employer if necessary. The contract stipulates the time-limit within which the volunteer can be available for relief work, the length of his participation (from a few days up to three months and over) and the salary (paid by the Federal Government if the employer is unable to do so).

In addition to this the volunteers receive the appropriate practical and theoretical further instruction they require in specially organized courses.

Supplies (personal equipment, corps material, tools, machines, etc.) as well as transport and equipment for transmission and administrative purposes are always available.

A filing-system, soon to be supplemented by a planning board (Dispograph) facilitates quick location of the specialists required. From this stock, made up of men and women of all ages and professions, it is therefore possible to choose the necessary personnel for relief operations of all kinds and on varying scales.

Sahel Operation

This operation took place in the Lake of Chad basin from October 1974 to January 1975, and was the result of an appeal from UN General Secretary Waldheim on behalf of this region that had been so badly hit by the drought. About 100 volunteers of the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps took part in this operation, which also provided an opportunity to test the functioning of the new organization and to learn from the first practical experience. In spite of the difficulties that arose in this first operation, which took place in four countries as well as in Gewani (Ethiopia), the Corps, assisted by several hundred native workers, succeeded in reaching practically all its goals : curative and preventive medical care, the vaccination of several

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thousand nomads, distribution of 354 tons of relief goods, repairs to 12 hospitals and medical stations, construction of 3 hospitals, of water reservoirs, of five large storehouses for agricultural products in collaboration with the FAO model-development projects, as well as four other public buildings, overhauling of runways, excavation of wells, installation of a ferry and a water-station, etc. The cost of this operation amounted to about five million Swiss francs.

Turkey

After the Lice earthquake in September 1975, which claimed more than 2'000 victims, the Turkish government replied favourably to a Swiss offer of help by the Disaster Relief Corps. The operation took place in two phases. In October a group of 15 volunteers, mostly building specialists, built 50 houses in Yünlüce, a mountain farming village in the eastern part of Anatolia, in less than six weeks. They used prefabricated building elements that had been transported from Switzerland by road. In summer 1976 a new group of volunteers completed these constructions by work on infra-structure and public buildings, such as school-houses, a mosque, a town-hall, a medical station, a water supply, as well as 150 stalls, divided among Yünlüce and the surrounding villages. These constructions, costing 2,5 million francs, were officially handed over to the Turkish government on 18th November 1976.

A few days later a new earthquake devastated the eastern part of the country. First-aid, above all medicine, winter clothes and tents, to the value of Fr. 485'000.-, was immediately sent by air. At the request of the Turkish authorities, a group of volunteers transported and installed two large prefabricated general-utility buildings from 12th December 1976 to 5th January 1977. These are to serve as the administrative centre of the future town. This work will be completed by further building assistance in the higher situated mountain villages in spring 1977

Guatemala

In Switzerland nearly 12 million francs was collected on behalf of the victims of the earthquake that occurred in Guatemala on 4th February 1976,

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causing the death of 24'000 people as well as the destruction of 250'000 houses. After immediate help had been guaranteed, the four large Swiss relief organizations, including the Swiss Red Cross, together with the Swiss Disaster Relief, decided to carry out a mutual aid program. This foresaw the rebuilding of 2'500 houses, whereby approximately half of the money collected was destined for the community of Santiago Sacatepequez, an almost completely destroyed village of about 6'000 inhabitants situated 40 kilometres from Guatemala City. Since July 1976 groups of volunteers have been working in relays, with the goal of constructing, in a simple yet definitive manner, 1'000 houses and several public buildings; in doing so they are striving to retain the Guatemalan building techniques while providing better protection against earthquakes.

Italy

Shortly after receiving news of the earthquake that had largely destroyed Friaul, the Swiss Disaster Relief sent half a million francs worth of medicine, vaccines and tents by air and land, as well as two military helicopters which carried out 21 flights and 200 landings in the disaster area of the province Udine between 17th and 29th May. Finally, on the basis of arrangements made with the provincial and communal authorities, the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps rebuilt a part of the mountain village Subit from August to December 1976 and, with financial participation of the Swiss Red Cross, the village of Borgo Cancellier. Thus two-storeyed, largely earthquake-resistant concrete houses could be built, providing 40 flats as safe and permanent accommodation for as many families. The work, the cost of which amounted to 2,6 million francs by the end of 1976, is being continued in spring 1977.

In September 1976 the Volunteer Corps was responsible for the organization transport and distribution of 62 tons of building machines and other building materials - concrete mixers, cranes, etc. - which had been put at the disposal of the population of Friaul by numerous members of the Swiss Association of Builders.

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After renewed heavy earthquakes in the month of September 1976 the operation "Barracks" was launched in response to a call for help from the Italian authorities. This operation consisted of the purchase of 60 barracks in Switzerland, their transport to the damaged region of Attimis and their installation as dwelling-places for 600 persons. All this for approximately 900'000 Swiss francs.

Parallel to this operation the Volunteer Corps finally carried out the "Caravan" campaign. The appeal directed at the Swiss population found a good echo : 120 caravans - 85 per cent of which were definitively donated - could be sent to Friaul, where they now serve as accommodation for about 400 people.

Other operations

Since the creation of the Swiss Disaster Corps about 50 volunteers have carried out technical or organizational duties for other organizations abroad, above all for the FAO (six railway experts in Senegal and Mali), for the ICRC (various specialists and doctors in Vietnam, the Near East and Angola as well as six delegates for relief in Lebanon), for the League of Red Cross Societies (one administrator in Niger), on behalf of the High-Commissioner for Refugees (one architect in Guinea-Bissau), In addition, 18 radio operators were in action in the Indian subcontinent from 29th September to 22nd March 1976.

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Up to now, the Swiss Disaster Relief Corps has not intervened in the first phase directly after a disaster, when immediate measures have to be taken in order to save human lives, but in the second and third phases. In these phases the chief task is to overcome the crisis in the damaged area by re-establishing the essential conditions for survival and then to proceed to reconstruction and the subsequent return to normal living conditions.

The Federal Council Delegate for Disaster Relief is however examining the possibility of the creation of small, predominantly surgical and transmission

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units that could enter into action immediately. In order to settle the legal and administrative conditions for the earliest possible participation of the corps, he is at the same time striving for the conclusion of agreements - such as already exist with Greece, Turkey and Pakistan - with those countries that can regularly expect disasters. Moreover, the Federal Council Delegate is working on improved relations with international organizations, especially with UNDRO (UN Disaster Relief Organization). He greatly appreciates the information on world-wide disasters supplied by this organization as well as its efforts on behalf of better relations between countries possessing operational units, such as Western Germany, France, Great Britain, Holland, Sweden and Switzerland.

The delegate is convinced that solidarity is one of the most important maxims of our foreign policy, and he hopes to mould the corps into a flexible, fast-working and efficient instrument that will guarantee an increasingly effective dimension of Swiss humanitarian foreign aid, especially in the Third World.

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Berne, the end of February 1977