



Red Cross rescue workers carry a calcinated corpse from a schoolbus which burst into flames as its fuel tank was hit by a sniper, on 18 April, near Beirut's greenline

SOFTLY, SOFTLY IN THE LEBANON

Few civilians would volunteer to go unarmed into Lebanon's war zones where militias battle and neutrality goes unrespected; but for members of the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) Dissemination Department, these challenges have to be faced. They risk their lives by going where few men would dare. These Red Cross Workers hope to make the job of the Red Cross safer and easier for everyone by explaining, to sometimes truculent streetfighters, why the Red Cross is needed.

In 1983, the LRC initiated a programme to acquaint Lebanon's militias and the national army with the services and principles of the Red Cross. "We realized they (the militias) didn't know what the Lebanese Red Cross was," says Dimyanos Kattar, a former Director of First Aid teams. "Under fear and stress, armed men would sometimes lose control when they saw the flashing lights of our ambulances speeding towards them."

To get the message of the Red Cross out, trainers have to go where the fighters are. Some 10,000 militiamen have gone through the programme. The LRC believes this exposure has helped gain the trust of the militias. "We now have good relations with all the military and political parties and their militias," says Hassan Kabbani, Vice-President of the Dissemination Department of the LRC. "They now understand our main goal is to treat people who need help."

Dealing with the often suspicious militiamen requires a certain personality. Not every Red Cross first aider meets the "job description." Dissemination teams are made up of first aiders who have had at least two years experience and can express themselves well. An easy going personality is also an asset. The department's eight leaders have trained 120 presenters for "action" in the field.

In 1988 the LRC had 94 requests from militias for information programmes and held 50 sessions with the Lebanese Army with a total of 7,028 participants. Six months of fighting in Beirut in 1989, meant that only 33 sessions were held for 1,418 men. There is recognition that the lives of first aiders depend on the goodwill and trust of the militias, so the programme is constantly under scrutiny; being updated and polished. Teams go through "refresher courses" twice a year.

Following a training session, the team fills out a form which asks spe-

cifically for any new questions that come out of discussions. Armed with these, the trainers quiz trainees, advising and challenging, preparing them for the real thing.

"The fighters get bored if we talk too much, so we keep our sessions to 15 or 20 minutes," said Kabbani. "Our goal is to convince the militias not to fire at Red Cross personnel, hospitals, civilians or the injured -- even if those injured are their enemies. Above all, we try to get across the message of who is outside 'the game'."

The Barrier

Walking into a room of militiamen, many of whom may have had the wrong idea about the Red Cross, can give a first time presenter the jitters. "We begin by thanking those responsible for inviting us and we say that we hope we can come back. Then we hand out a free bandage saying, "We hope you won't have need of this," Kabbani says, explaining how the bandage seems to break the ice.

The short lecture gives the history, activities and principles of the Red Cross. Time is spent on the meaning of the Red Cross emblem. The team brings a flag with them and quickly dispel some militiamen's ideas that the cross has a religious or sectarian connotation.

Another question that comes up regularly is "How much do you get paid?" There is incredulity when the militiamen are told there is no salary. Another standard inquiry concerns medicines. The National Society operates a network of dispensaries throughout Lebanon. Many people rely on them to provide hard to find, and hard to pay for drugs. Again, the point is made, the Red Cross provides to those most in need regardless of religion or other considerations.

The location of the training sessions can be anywhere. Rarely are the locations carpeted, comfortable or well-lit. Kabbani recalls using a cigarette lighter to show the visuals during one session. Several sessions have been held outdoors with the fighters sitting on homemade benches.

Groups are limited to 20 and a militia official always attends to keep things orderly.

Keeping calm

In a country where there is little in the way of psychological research, the LRC probably knows more about the motivation of militiamen than any other organization. According to the volunteers, each group has a different way of thinking and judging the Red Cross. "We don't discuss the idea of the war but rather make the point that if you make war, do it humanely," says the 23 year-old vice-director. "Some groups," he says, "already know about us and respect what we are trying to do but there is more to be done."

The volunteers say that many of the paramilitary groups are suspicious and some give little importance to what the volunteers say. Others are aggressive. "Their logic tells them that we should either be with them or against them," says one volunteer.

Since the conflict began in 1975, thirteen first aiders have lost their lives in service; 89 have been wounded and four are handicapped for life.

The Danger

The teams arrive in Red Cross ambulances wearing bright orange uniforms that display the Red Cross emblem prominently on front and

back. "We must never be caught without the right answer or the right way of handling a question," says Kabbani. "The only logic these men know is force; so we must never appear weak or unsure of ourselves."

The unexpected takes many forms in Lebanon. One session is interrupted when snipers begin firing at building two doors away. Some of the fighters excuse themselves to take their position. Others stay and when the programme is over, they offer the team cups of tea.

According to Kabbani the philosophy and the programmes are paying off. "If there is one fighter at a checkpoint who has been through the programme," he says, "he will exert influence over the rest."

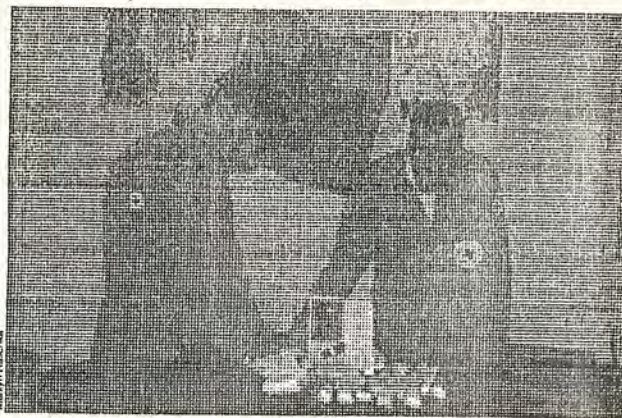
Understanding

Before the dissemination project began a common "request" by men manning checkpoints was for the Red Cross ambulances to transport armed fighters from area to area. "Now they understand that we only move the wounded and they respect that principle," Kabbani says with obvious pride in the programme. The new-found understanding of the role of the Red Cross is evident in the streets where first aiders sometimes

hear a militiaman call out Allah maakum, "God go with you".

However the occasional "wrinkle" crops up. One group of militiamen told a team: "Your work will be rewarded by God, but if we get an order to fire...." They didn't finish the sentence. They didn't need to.

The prevailing feeling the militias have of living in altogether separate worlds is cracked by a first aider who



Setting up for a Dissemination Programme. Everything from brochures to bandages

says: "Remember when you needed Type B negative blood and we couldn't find it here? Well, we brought it from the other side." Suddenly the militias don't seem so apart at the life-giving level.

Peace

Sincere concern for Lebanon (if and when peace comes), is openly expressed by the volunteers. "Some of these militiamen have been apart from society. They can't find a place in society now and society will keep them apart," says one volunteer.

LRC contacts with the fighters may well be classified as rehabilitation. Response to the ongoing dissemination programmes is overwhelmingly positive. The hope is that one day the militias will find their way out of the circle of violence that preys on the innocent civilian. In the meantime, to the men of the Dissemination Department of the Lebanese Red Cross, 'Allah maakum'.

✦ Marilyn RASCHKA



Passing a Lebanese army checkpoint it takes a certain type of personality to get the job done and to stay alive