



"Always Needed, Always There"



The Role and Plight of the Red Cross during Apartheid

BACKGROUND

Since its establishment in the 1800s, the Red Cross in South Africa has been closely intertwined with the government, reflecting its discriminatory nature. It was often seen as a tool of the apartheid regime, serving its interests. However, as the political landscape in South Africa began to change, the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) faced challenges. Its humanitarian efforts were hindered by the discriminatory practices and violence of apartheid.

- The governance and senior management structures of SARCS were predominantly made up of white individuals, excluding people of color.
- This lack of diversity in leadership perpetuated the unequal distribution of humanitarian services. White citizens received preferential treatment, while black and colored communities in rural and peri-urban areas were neglected.
- As South Africa transitioned away from apartheid, SARCS had to adapt to the new reality. The organization faced pressure to address its discriminatory practices and work towards serving all communities equally. This period of change marked a turning point for SARCS, as it sought to redefine its role in a more inclusive and equitable national society.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The founding document of the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) posed a significant barrier to the fair and inclusive participation of all citizens, leading to the exclusion of a large portion of the population. In the late 1980s, protests erupted within the SARCS, prompting the intervention of the International Red Cross Movement and a call for urgent change.

Judge John Trengove's report on the discriminatory practices within the SARCS sparked the development of the organization's first democratic constitution. This new constitution emphasized principles of equity, equality, and alignment with the Seven Principles of the Red Cross Movement: Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity, and Universality. It is worth noting that the SARCS Constitution was established before the democratic South African Constitution.

This pivotal moment paved the way for the appointment of black individuals to senior positions within the SARCS and marked the beginning of a more diverse leadership. The first SARCS Presidents of colour, such as S. Samson and R. Ka Msengana, were appointed, along with a Governing Board that accurately reflected the demographics of the country.



SARCS INTERVENTIONS IN BLACK TOWNSHIPS

As political tensions mounted on the apartheid government, townships erupted into violent clashes between the oppressed and the oppressors. Township communities faced the threat of being shot and injured during skirmishes with the police, or having family members arrested under strict conditions.

These townships became dangerous areas, with SARCS white paramedics too afraid to enter for fear of being attacked.

In response to this crisis, Community Organisers (CO) were recruited, employed, and trained by SARCS with funding support from the ICRC and Federation. These volunteers, including nurses and teachers from the township, worked to educate the community on the role, history, and principles of the Red Cross in order to gain the trust and cooperation of those affected.

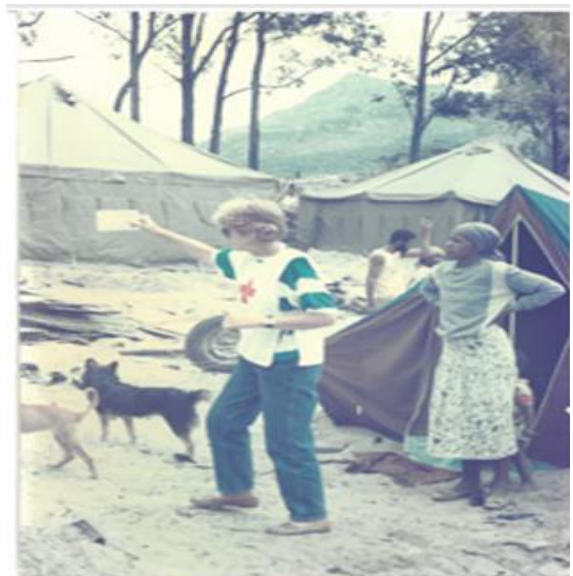
Despite the diverse political affiliations present, all parties had to acknowledge the neutral and impartial humanitarian mission of SARCS.

The CO's trained community members in basic first aid, caring for the sick, and preventing injuries. In instances where rioting youth were shot by the police and feared arrest if taken to the hospital, some CO's were compelled to provide medical care.

Volunteer doctors even went as far as removing bullets in their private homes and surgeries to ensure the safety and well-being of those in need.

COMMUNITY ORGANISERS AND VOLUNTEERS IN ACTION

















INTERVENTIONS DURING POLITICAL RALLIES



The impending liberation of the country and the release of Mandela from prison had a profound impact on various political organizations. Each group would host rallies in an effort to gain support from communities, but these events were often disrupted by opposing factions.

This led to clashes, resulting in violence and casualties, sometimes even fatalities. In these chaotic situations, the SARCS emergency teams were the only trusted medical and health service providers, despite the risks they faced. Emotions ran high, and some factions showed no regard for the Red Cross neutrality during the intense fighting.

The SARCS heavily relied on their trained youth members for their dedication, agility, and ability to assess the atmosphere at rallies. These young volunteers reported back to their supervisors and seamlessly transitioned from one task to the next. With rallies occurring daily and occasional bomb scares, the situation was tense.

Even after the first democratic elections were held, SARCS and ICRC field officers and volunteers remained on standby. The threat of sporadic violence lingered, underscoring the importance of their continued presence in the community.



As political tensions reached a boiling point, we witnessed a surge in black-on-black violence between rival factions such as the ANC and IFP, particularly in the KZN and Gauteng Provinces. The battleground of choice became the single men's hostels, where clashes turned deadly.

Amidst the chaos, rumors of "third force" killings added to the turmoil. Mysterious forces would target and eliminate individuals suspected of supporting or belonging to a specific faction.

The escalating violence placed a heavy burden on families, who were suddenly faced with the responsibility of burying their loved ones. Discussions between SARCS and ICRC led to the establishment of a burial voucher project. With funding from the ICRC, SARCS field personnel would assess the needs of affected families, gather proof of their financial struggles, submit funding requests, and provide assistance for dignified burials. This initiative not only helped families in their time of grief but also helped prevent further outbreaks of violence.

Through this project, SARCS was able to forge closer ties with many vulnerable families, positioning the Society as a trusted ally during their darkest hours.



Setting the Scene: The population of the Western Cape Province was a diverse mix of individuals with varying skin tones, segregated to live outside of the City of Cape Town and its surrounding areas. They were classified as "European" (white), "Non-European" (Coloured), and "Bantu" (Black), and were required to reside in designated areas far from the central city. Removals from designated "white" areas were strictly enforced, with the majority of non-white and black families allocated to specific, controlled regions.

The harsh winters of Cape Town were particularly challenging for those living in the outlying marshy, water-logged flood plains of areas like Langa, Nyanga, Crossroads, Manenberg, Mitchells Plain, Athlone, Steenberg, Retreat, and Lavender Hills. While white individuals had unrestricted access to any area, marginalized groups required permits to enter. In Crossroads, Dr. Ivan Toms, an activist, established the SACLA Clinic staffed by medical trainees from UCT to provide healthcare to those without access to local clinics.

In 1985, riots erupted in Crossroads, prompting the SARCS Volunteer Corps to intervene and support SACLA amidst the chaos. Tear gas deployed by riot police caused breathing difficulties for many, resulting in the tragic deaths of several infants. Simultaneously, police targeted and detained teenage boys in coloured communities, instilling fear and disorder. Numerous volunteers, including students, were arbitrarily arrested on their way to school.

During the ensuing legal proceedings, the Western Cape Director and Provincial Board Chairperson, N. Paterson, visibly supported SARCS volunteers by wearing Red Cross Emblem vests and attending court hearings. Their presence served as a reminder of the volunteers' humanitarian efforts and dedication to assisting those in need.

During this period, the South African government strictly controlled national and international media. However, it was reassuring to have the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) members available to provide advice and support during this challenging time.



In a positive development, the ICRC played a crucial role in negotiating the release of President Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners from Robben Island. This demonstrates the significant impact of the ICRC in promoting humanitarian efforts.

The ICRC and members in the Western Cape Voluntary Aid Corps (VAC) showed a deep understanding of the Geneva Conventions.

We are grateful for their dedication and service, including V. Martinelli (Retired Captain, South African Navy), Mr. P. Bierman (Retired Head of Education Department, Free State), and J. del Monte (Retired Brigadier General, South African Defence Force).

"Always Needed, Always There," reflects their commitment to providing assistance in times of need.



CONCLUSION

With the advent of the country's democratic dispensation, the Society had to normalise its statutory relationship with the new Government, where Humanitarian Diplomacy had to be seen in action: support with statutory contributions to the IFRC and ICRC; cooperation with Departments of Health, International Relations and Social Development.

Despite efforts to strengthen these relationships, they remain somewhat fragile. Each new Minister and management team requires an introduction to the valuable humanitarian work that the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) conducted during apartheid and continues to provide to marginalized communities in our country. The SARCS remains committed to "Keeping Humanity Alive" through its ongoing services.

Acknowledgment and Appreciation

This report was compiled with the assistance and input of the following SARCS Structures and Members:

1. SARCS Eastern Cape
2. SARCS Western Cape
3. SARCS Johannesburg
4. Ms Mandisa Kalako-Williams
5. Ms Dalmari Steward