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“After talking to other wives in my group, whose husbands are missing, I feel lighter, happier. I find myself advising other women like me. Our group has formed a close bond, and we even talk to each other over the phone, between our weekly meetings.”

- Wife of a missing husband

MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organisation whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



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FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS HELP EACH OTHER

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“My son has been missing for 26 years. We didn’t talk about it with anyone outside our family, until we joined this group. Before, even though we lived in the same village and saw each other often, we didn’t talk about our shared pain. We would just greet each other in passing. Now, we know each other well, and talking about our missing children has relieved us all of a heavy burden we’ve carried for years.”

- Mother of a missing son

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THE ACCOMPANIMENT PROGRAMME

Between October 2014 and November 2015, the ICRC carried out an island-wide assessment to understand the multifaceted needs of families of missing people in Sri Lanka. We submitted a report on the findings of the assessment, with recommendations to address the needs, to the Government of Sri Lanka in January 2016, and published it in July 2016 to allow other actors working in favour of missing persons and their families to find ways to support them through their own programmes.

The assessment found that what these families wanted most was to know what happened to their loved ones, and need emotional support to cope with the uncertainty caused by their absence. They also need help to restart their livelihoods, and need support with their legal and administrative matters.

As part of our humanitarian action for missing persons and their families in Sri Lanka, the ICRC started the Accompaniment Programme to help these families deal with their emotional and wider social difficulties.

The Accompaniment Programme is a comprehensive support programme, implemented through local organisations. It aims to provide closely-related family members of missing people with:

- emotional support to help them cope with the uncertainty caused by the absence, and other related social difficulties;
- assistance to resolve legal, administrative and economic needs by referring and guiding them to relevant government and/or local resources; and
- support to restart or expand the livelihoods of the most economically vulnerable (when government and/or local resources are unavailable).

The ICRC launched the programme in Anuradhapura in November 2015, in Mannar in December 2015, in Trincomalee in March 2016, and is in the process of replicating it in other selected districts in the country.

THE ACCOMPANIER

The Accompaniment Programme is carried out by close relatives of missing people. Referred to as ‘accompaniers’, they work directly with other families of missing persons in their own communities. The ICRC trains accompaniers to assess families’ needs, provide emotional support through home visits and peer support group sessions, and guide families to the resources that are available to resolve their legal, administrative and/or economic difficulties. As such, the accompaniers function as ‘helping friends’ who guide the families to focus on their present lives as well as the future, while they wait for answers.

HOW THE PROGRAMME WORKS

The ICRC partners with local NGOs so that their expertise can enhance the implementation of the programme. We select local NGOs to partner with us based on their experience in providing psychosocial support to different groups of people both during and after Sri Lanka’s armed conflict, and ensure they possess the necessary technical expertise and background knowledge to understand the families’ situation. Partnering with local NGOs also ensures the programme is sustained in the long term.

Accompaniers are first trained on how to provide basic psychosocial help, assess needs, and map resources. Thereafter, they spend 5-6 weeks meeting families, forming relationships with them, assessing their needs, and mapping locally available resources required to meet those needs.

They also guide families to the resources. For instance, if a person requires assistance with a legal or administrative procedure, the

accompanier will identify the relevant local government or non-governmental body, provide the information and, if needed, accompany the person to the office at which they can resolve their issue. The accompaniers also support the families throughout the process of applying for and accessing the various assistance schemes available (e.g. Samurdhi, housing loans, micro-credits). Through access to local services, if needed, the families can obtain documents necessary to address their administrative difficulties such as transfer of land ownership, access to their missing relative’s assets or pension, or a certificate of absence.

The next phase is training on how to conduct peer support groups. The accompaniers set up peer support groups of 6-8 people from the same area, which then meet for three months. The sessions give people an opportunity to share their grief and day-to-day struggles, and to discuss ways to cope. Relatives of missing

persons talk about their roles in their households as wives, mothers, fathers, sisters, or daughters, and this helps them realise their significance in their family units and their communities. They share the emotional, psychological, physical and relational struggles that arise from the absence of a missing relative, and remember them through positive memories. Participants talk about their support network through illustrations, which often enable them to realise that they are not alone. They share tributes to the missing person with the group, in the form of a poem, a song, or even the missing person’s favourite food.

“During group sessions, we share our sorrow and agony, and at the end of each session we go home with a light heart.”

– Wife of a missing husband