

8th MRTD Symposium:

ICRC travel document: The Future of a long-Standing Humanitarian Service

11 October 2012

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is the first participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross to a Symposium organized by ICAO MRTD Programme. I feel very privileged to be in front of you today. You will certainly understand what I may feel today, speaking in front of you, when the emergency travel document we issue are not even machine-readable...

Benghazi, Libya

In March 2011, an Eritrean girl, aged 16, flees the combat around Misrata town in Western Libya. She is raped on her way to the eastern city of Benghazi. This city is controlled at the time by revolutionary brigades. They put her in a camp where sub-Saharan Africans are under watch as they are routinely suspected of supporting Colonel Kaddafi's forces. The ICRC starts providing humanitarian assistance to this displaced community. It appears quickly that our young Eritrean girl is again at high risk of sexual assault.

Recognised as a refugee by the UNHCR, she is eligible for resettlement abroad as part of a scheme offered to refugees facing immediate live threat. But she has no valid papers, only an UNHCR reference number. Within 24 hours, an ICRC delegate delivers her an ICRC Travel Document and drives her to the Egyptian border. From there she travels with the support of IOM to a UNHCR-sponsored refugee transit camp in Romania. She is later resettled in a Western country.

This story shows the humanitarian value of the ICRC Travel Document which serves the specific humanitarian needs of asylum seekers, refugees, vulnerable migrants, displaced or stateless persons who, due to the lack of appropriate identity papers, cannot return to their country of origin or of habitual residence or go to a country willing to receive them, either permanently or for temporary asylum. The ICRC Travel Document is issued only for a one way trip and after the completion of visas and travel requirements.

Today, ICRC Travel Documents are used mainly

- to enhance the protection of individuals, who are granted temporary or permanent asylum, by facilitating their departure and travel;
- to facilitate the repatriation of individuals or their return to their country of habitual residence;
- to facilitate family reunification, in particular for children and other vulnerable individuals, who have been separated from their family by armed conflicts and other situations.

ICRC Travel Documents have therefore been welcomed by the many States that have been requested at various times to stamp exit, transit or entry visas on it. **Since 1945 around 600'000 refugees, displaced or stateless persons carrying ICRC Travel Documents** have been able to reach the country of their choice thanks to the understanding of the concerned governmental authorities.

From 2000 to 2011, the ICRC has delivered 51'364 ICRC Travel Documents that benefited individuals of 121 various nationalities to make a single journey from 114 countries of departure to 114 countries of destination.

You will notice from the tables shown behind me that the main destinations are resettlement countries (USA, Canada and Australia) while the main nationalities of bearers are war-torn countries (Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia).

Historical background and legal basis

The ICRC Travel Document was devised in 1945, when many prisoners of war and internees were released without identification papers. In the absence of any diplomatic or consular services at their disposal, they turned to the ICRC for a document which would enable them to solicit the appropriate authorities for repatriation. From the onset, the ICRC Travel Document was handed to persons who had no identification papers, and who were unable to obtain new ones.

The legal basis for the establishment of the ICRC Travel Document is not explicit in International Humanitarian Law but derives from the role expressly attributed by States to the ICRC to protect prisoners and civilians in armed conflicts.

Conditions for issuing an ICRC Travel Document and procedural requirements

An ICRC Travel Document shall only be issued when the following conditions are met:

- 1) The applicant does not have a valid passport and is unable to obtain or renew any other document which might permit travel. Furthermore, it is impossible for the receiving country to provide a travel permit.

- 2) The country to which the applicant wishes to travel and the transit country/countries have promised or already granted entry and transit visas.

- 3) An exit visa or safe-conduct to leave the country, if required, has been promised by the country whose territory the applicant wishes to leave.

These conditions make it clear that ICRC Travel Documents are issued only upon completion of all visas and travel arrangements. This requires the collaboration of all concerned authorities and of the relevant organisations. Most of the ICRC Travel Documents are notably issued following UNHCR and IOM official requests, as a final step before the journey, after these organisations have completed all visas and travel requirements. Often countries, via their embassies, that wish to welcome refugees on their territory ask the ICRC for Travel Documents as well.

ICRC Internal Policy further defines the limited use and scope of ICRC Travel Documents:

1) The validity of the ICRC Travel Document is **limited to a single journey** to either the holder's country of origin, habitual residence or to a receiving country. Its validity is short, generally 3 months. All expired ICRC Travel Documents should be returned to the ICRC Headquarters in Geneva.

2) The ICRC Travel Document is **neither a passport, nor an identity card**. It is also distinct from the Convention travel documents issued by the States signatories to the Conventions relating to the status of refugees or stateless persons which replaces passports or ID card.

3) The ICRC Travel Document **does not establish, nor alter the status or nationality** of its holder.

4) The ICRC Travel Document is prepared on the basis of the applicant's statements and of any document he can produce. It contains **two sections enabling visa authorities to verify that the applicant and the bearer are one and the same person**: one of these sections contains the applicant's fingerprints, the other his photograph. The Travel Document also contains the holder's description and the specification of the documentary evidence he may have furnished (as for instance a drivers licence) or testimonies establishing his identity (as for example a reference file number issued by government authorities, immigration services or the UNHCR).

5) ICRC Travel Documents are **issued free of charge by ICRC delegates only**.

Fraud and security

In 1951, Klaus Altmann is issued a travel document by an ICRC delegate based in Genoa, Italy. He had produced an exit visa from Italian authorities and an entry visa for Bolivia. He had as well and ID card from Allied High Commission identifying him as a mechanic from Kronstadt. It later turned out that this man was a Nazi criminal and his real name was Klaus Barbie.

It is acknowledged that some Nazi officials and their secret supporters took shameless advantage of a humanitarian service which benefited half a million people, mostly survivors of concentration camps and refugees from Eastern Europe.

Today as yesterday, the ICRC relies on States to minimize the risk of forged identity or misuse of its travel documents.

In addition to the restrictions detailed before regarding conditions and process for issuance, the ICRC document contains the following security features:

- two-colour guilloche background
- rainbow printing
- unique document number
- UV inks
- checks of supporting identity documents
- records search capability
- register of lost and stolen documents
- good physical security arrangements
- serial number on blank documents
- secure transport of blank documents

This is certainly not sufficient in today's world. We are willing to improve the security and are therefore happy to contribute to the work of a subgroup of the New Technology Working group of the ICAO MRTD programme that is examining the current practices regarding issuance and acceptance of emergency travel documents. Such documents are for the time-being excluded from ICAO DOC 9303 and not subjected to any standard.

We welcome the ICAO initiative to set standards or recommended practices in this matter insofar it helps maintaining trust in emergency travel documents and secure a wider acceptance by States of documents such as ours. We are seeking assistance from ICAO and the wider "MRTD community" in helping us to adapt to forthcoming standards striking a right balance between different factors:

- security
- flexibility and rapidity for use in emergencies
- decentralized individual issuance

- bearable costs for a bit less than 5000 one-way documents per year

In other words, I would hope to be able to tell you another happy ending story for the next 16-years old unaccompanied girl caught in the midst of the next humanitarian crisis.

Thank you.

Olivier Dubois