

Colombian Red Cross Seminar on the

Contribution of disasters to development

From 28 February to 4 March 1989, the Colombian Red Cross organized a technical seminar entitled *Contribution of disasters to development*, which brought together representatives from all the National Societies of Latin America, the Spanish Red Cross, the American Red Cross, the League, the ICRC and the Henry Dunant Institute. EEC and UNDP specialists, people with academic backgrounds and from Colombian public and social institutions also attended. The seminar examined the following three questions:

- To what extent did a natural disaster make it possible to do development work in the region affected?
- What was the relationship between a natural disaster, the reconstruction process, long-term development and the prevention of further disasters?
- How did the Red Cross contribute to relief operations and to rehabilitation and development programmes?

The work of the seminar will be published. During the discussions, a broad consensus emerged on the importance of preventive, or at least contingency action (disaster preparedness). In this respect, coordination with other non-governmental organizations and with government services was essential. Moreover, even in the event of a disaster, the affected community must be encouraged to join in overcoming it (work *with* and not just *for*): external aid should help strengthen internal capacity and avoid creating or maintaining a state of dependence.

Those present also agreed that the Red Cross should retain its specificity and should not overdiversify by taking on tasks for which other organizations were better prepared. Within their terms of reference (emergency operations in the event of disasters), the National Societies still had much to do to improve their operational capacity. In this respect, greater co-operation between the

continent's National Societies was called for: many of them had considerable experience in relief operations when disaster struck, and that experience should be shared.

The development of *all* National Societies and, within each Society, of each of its branches was an important prerequisite for Red Cross efficiency. As an indivisible, unified body, both nationally and internationally, the Red Cross would find the strength to meet other major challenges: poverty, ecological devastation, drug abuse, i.e. all those ongoing disasters which are also of concern to the Red Cross, especially in Latin America.

The seminar ended with a visit to Armero, the village destroyed by an avalanche of mud in November 1985 when the Nevado del Ruiz erupted. The reconstruction work (institutions, hospitals, workshops, etc.) and the job-creating projects run by the Colombian Red Cross much impressed the participants, who were able to observe first-hand the importance and value of Red Cross work for the victims of a disaster.
