

The Red Cross and the 1962 Sino-Indian Conflict

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Abstract

For the Indian nation, the 1962 conflict with China has been one of the most traumatic post-independence events. For more than 3,000 prisoners of war (PoWs), the experience was particularly harrowing.

This article looks at difficult relations between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, the Indian Red Cross (IRC) and the Chinese Red Cross (CRC) Society. The ICRC's archives in Geneva helped to understand the role of the international organization as well as of the two national Red Crosses and their respective governments during the conflict.

China not only refused to officially acknowledge the Geneva Convention of 1949 on PoWs, but also committed several violations in respect of the treatment meted out to captured Indian military personnel.

27 Military officers taken PoWs during operations were taken on a tour of China and repatriated on 04 May 1963.

The rosy picture painted by the Chinese propaganda had actually been a traumatic experience for the Indian PoWs.

Introduction

For the Indian nation, the 1962 conflict with China has been one of the most traumatic post-independence event. For more than 3,000 PoWs, the experience was particularly harrowing.

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Still today some veterans who spent several months in the PoW's camps in Tibet, refuse to speak to their families and friends about these dark days. But according to Chinese records, never in the history of warfare have prisoners been treated so well.

Preferential treatment or propaganda?

An account recently published by China¹ tells us: "During the Sino-Indian border war, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) captured more than 3,900 Indian officers and soldiers² (including one brigadier general and 26 officers). In the long-term goal of striving for friendship between the Chinese and Indian people and in accordance with the principle of lenient treatment of prisoners, which had always been upheld by the PLA, the treatment of prisoners of war by the Chinese side had far exceeded the provisions of the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, and many touching deeds had taken place".

I shall cover the Geneva Convention and the role the Red Cross played in getting the PoWs released in several batches in 1962/63 a little later. This article looks at difficult relations between the Indian Red Cross (IRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross ((ICRC) in Geneva with the Chinese authorities represented by their Red Cross Society (CRC). It is often said the winner writes the history, but it is then with a deep distortion: "China released all Indian prisoners of war in a short period of time, playing an important role in winning over rivals, turning enemies into friends and promoting the restoration of friendly relations between the Chinese and Indian peoples," mentioned the Chinese report.

Interestingly, China terms the Sino-Indian border conflict, a 'counter-attack', as if it was India who attacked China in NEFA or Ladakh. "In late October 1962, the General Political Department of the Chinese People's Liberation Army issued several provisions on the question of prisoners of the invading Indian Army," further explaining that the PLA "emphasised that captive officers and soldiers should not be killed, mistreated or insulted, or tied up and their private property should not be confiscated. The injured should be treated. At the same time, it was also required to take care of the living habits of all prisoners, and to find out the names and army numbers of dead bodies on the battlefield as far as possible,

to bury them properly and to set up signs. Prisoners had to fill in medical records and death certificates signed by military doctors.” These principles were hardly followed.

No Declaration of War

An important legal element needs to be noted; there was no formal declaration of war between China and India. The Chinese said that they called the captured Indian Army personnel ‘captives’ and not ‘PoWs’; the camps were ‘captive shelters’, an euphemism. This was indeed part of the Chinese propaganda.³ The Chinese account does not mention the constant indoctrination sessions to which the Indian jawans and officers were subjected; China just says that meetings were organised to discuss “according to the wishes of the Indian prisoners ...on the right and wrong issues in the Sino-Indian border dispute.” One can guess who was said to be right and who was wrong.

The Chinese described thus the departure of the PoWs from Tibet: “The captured Indian officers and soldiers, carrying clothes and souvenirs from the Chinese side, reluctantly bid farewell to the Chinese personnel. ...the Indian captives in farewell with the Chinese Red Cross staff cheered their arms: ‘Long live the friendship between the Chinese and Indian people!’” The facts were, however, different.

The Role of the Red Cross

Having often heard the distressing accounts of the Indian PoWs, and having been unable to find any records in the Indian archives, I decided to visit the seat of the ICRC in Geneva, Switzerland.

State signatories to the Geneva Convention of 1949 have given the ICRC the mandate to protect all victims of international and internal armed conflicts; this includes soldiers who have been war wounded, prisoners, refugees, civilians, and other non-combatants.⁴

During my visit to Geneva, I could consult the ICRC’s archives and reconstitute the role of the international organisation as well as of the two national Red Crosses of India and China during the conflict. I came across a file⁵ containing most of the correspondence with the Indian Red Cross (particularly the IRC’s President,

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and its General Secretary, Maj Gen CK Lakshmanan)⁶, the Chinese Red Cross ('Honghui' in Chinese), as well as the Indian authorities mainly through Ambassador Amrik S. Mehta, the Indian Permanent Representative to the European Office of the United Nations in Geneva and Chao Hsing Chih, the Consul General of the People's Republic of China in Geneva.

A Note Verbale

On 28 December 1962, the ICRC handed over a Note Verbale to Chinese Red Cross; it has to be noted that most of the correspondence was carried out in French, but most of the time, official translations were provided to the Indian and Chinese authorities.

Referring to earlier correspondence⁷, the Note gave a summary of the events of October-December 1962. It puts the issue in perspective. "During the fighting which took place in October and November 1962 between Chinese and Indian forces, more than two thousand Indian military personnel were taken prisoners. About 600 wounded and sick were repatriated at the beginning of December 1962.⁸ The Chinese Red Cross has in addition transmitted to the Indian Red Cross the addresses and news of the health of 528 Indian prisoners."

The *Note Verbale* continues: 'The Indian authorities reported that no Chinese prisoner was held by them. On the other hand, on 20 November 1962, they interned about 2,000 civilians of Chinese nationality or origin. Whilst diplomatic relations between the two countries were not broken off, the Indian consular representatives at Lhasa and Shanghai had been recalled.'⁹

Later on, the Chinese Government focused on the fact that war had not been officially declared; diplomatic relations were existing between the two countries and therefore, it was not necessary to involve the ICRC. The contacts between national Red Crosses were sufficient, argued the Chinese.

**Chart 1 : Details of PoWs Released and Under Detention
in early January 1963**

	Wounded PoWs Released	Dead	PoWs Received	Place of Release
05 Dec 1962	64	1		Bomdila
12 Dec 1962	80			Dirang
12 Dec 1962	17			Menchuka
13 Dec 1962	78			Walong
17 Dec 1962	368	11		Dirang
22 Dec 1962			399	
30 Dec 1962	108	1		Jang
30 Dec 1962			733	
	715	13	1132	

The Note gives the chronology of the ICRC's initiatives: "On 23 October 1962, the ICRC offered its services to the IRC on behalf of all the victims of events, including prisoners. On 01 November 1962, it requested the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of India, through the intermediaries of their representatives in Geneva, to take position on the application of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949."

The Note enumerated four conventions as under:-

- 1) The amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field (First Convention),
- 2) The amelioration of the condition of wounded, sick and shipwrecked members of armed forces at sea (Second Convention)
- 3) The treatment of prisoners of war (Third Convention),
- 4) The protection of civilian persons in time of war (Fourth Convention).

The Note reminded Beijing that these Conventions had been ratified by India on 09 November 1950, and by the Chinese People's Republic on 28 December 1956. In accordance with the Conventions, the ICRC requested China for a list of the prisoners

or internees, information on their health as well as the authorisation for a representative of the ICRC to visit them in Tibet.

On 15 November 1962, Communist China was informed that the ICRC had sent André Durand, its Delegate General for Asia to New Delhi to coordinate the release of the PoWs with the IRC and the Indian Government: "The Indian authorities informed [us] that although there had been neither a declaration of war, nor a break-off of diplomatic relations, conditions as laid down by Art. 2 common to the four Geneva Conventions had been met, so that these Conventions were immediately applicable."

The Government of India informed the ICRC delegate that Delhi had given instructions to the Military Command to this effect: "It also requested the ICRC to intervene for the centralisation and the transmission of detailed lists of prisoners, lists of the dead, and all information through the intermediary of the Central Tracing Agency [in Geneva], as well as for visits to camps."

On 19 November 1962, a confirmation was given in writing by Ambassador Mehta that India would adhere to the Geneva Conventions.

The Note to the Chinese government observed: "The Government of India notified the ICRC in particular that, being a Party to the four above-mentioned Conventions, it undertook to put all their provisions faithfully into effect in the conflict which was taking place on the frontiers of India. It counted on the Government of the People's Republic of China doing the same, since it too was a Party to these four Conventions, to obtain with the least possible delay information concerning Indian prisoners, both civilian and military, in Chinese hands."

Though some of the clauses were implemented in the coming months, the Geneva Convention was never officially acknowledged by Beijing.

On 21 November 1962, the position of the Government of India was transmitted to the CRC and the Chinese Government, "to which the International Committee had proposed sending a delegate to Peking [Beijing] to examine all problems connected with application of the Geneva Conventions." Despite repeated reminders to the Chinese government, an ICRC representative was not permitted to visit the PoWs' camps in Tibet. On 28 November 1962, the Chinese Red Cross argued that normal

contacts had been maintained between the Chinese and Indian Governments “on all questions concerning Indian prisoners, and that it had itself established relations in this respect with the IRC, with the result that sending of an ICRC delegate to China was not necessary.”

One of the problems was that Delhi, for its own reasons, systematically refused to take up the issue of the PoWs directly with Beijing though the diplomatic relations were not cut; this considerably delayed the process of releasing the PoWs.

On 02 December 1962, the Indian Red Cross asked for the authorisation for its own delegates to visit the Indian prisoners of war in Chinese hands; this too did not receive a positive response from China. The easiest would have been if the Indian Consul General in Lhasa had been authorised by Beijing to visit the camps, but by 15 December 1962, the Consulate General in Tibet was unnecessarily closed.¹⁰

First PoWs Released

On 05 December 1962, first batch of wounded Indian PoWs was released from Bomdila in NEFA.¹¹ Two weeks later, the IRC, while receiving another batch of Indian wounded soldiers in Dirang, handed over 2,000 parcels of food and clothing for the prisoners. This was a major success for Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Gen Lakshmanan and their team.

Coming back to the Note Verbale, the ICRC reminded Beijing that Third Geneva Convention stipulated that PoWs “have, amongst other things, the right to send capture cards to their families and to the Central Tracing Agency¹² (Art. 70). In addition, the official Information Bureaux which each Party to the conflict is obliged to constitute,” within the shortest possible period to provide information concerning prisoners of war (Art. 122). Finally, it was pointed out that the Convention says that ICRC delegates shall be authorized to visit all places where prisoners of war may be, and to interview them without witnesses (Art. 126).” The ICRC also asked for repatriation ‘within a short space of time’ of all Indian PoWs still in Chinese hands and to inform the Central Tracing Agency organized by the ICRC, of the names of the PoWs André Durand, Swiss national, holder of diplomatic passport was appointed to pay a visit to the PoWs in Tibet.

The Chinese Internees in Deoli

Durand was authorised to visit the Chinese civilians kept for security reasons in Deoli in Rajasthan; the fact that the Indian Government detained these Chinese nationals complicated the release of the PoWs in Tibet. Durand visited Deoli on 12 December 1962. Though he found that the internees were properly treated, Delhi objected to the transmission of his report to the Chinese authorities. The ICRC explained: "The Indian government justified his request by the fact that while the report of Mr. Durand is, as a whole favourable, it nonetheless reveals some shortcomings that China might be tempted to misrepresent to fuel as controversy." It was probably a mistake not to allow the ICRC to send this report to Beijing.

On 04 January 1963, Maj Gen CK Lakshmanan wrote to Gallopin: "You will also be interested to learn that two thousand gift parcels of food and clothing sent by the Chinese Red Cross for the Chinese Civilian internees ...The Chinese Red Cross is being informed of it."

But China, the victor was in a mood to start a controversy.

On 18 February 1963, Han Nien-Lung, the director of the General Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing answered the ICRC by attacking India for the arrest of the Chinese nationals and equating their condition with the Indian PoWs kept in Tibet¹³. It requested the Indian Government "to provide information concerning the unwarrantedly arrested Chinese nationals. The Indian Government is attempting to deprive the Chinese Embassy of its legitimate right and cover up India's crime of persecuting Chinese nationals. The Chinese government absolutely will not agree to this. The Indian authorities cannot by such means cover up their crimes of persecuting overseas Chinese or the facts of lenient treatment of the captured Indian military personnel by the Chinese side."

The Chinese propaganda machinery was working full steam.

Situation in Early 1963

By early January 1963, the Indian Red Cross had received the names of only 1132 PoWs, while 715 wounded prisoners had been released and 13 bodies handed over. The names of more than 2,000 PoWs were still missing. They were 'missing in action'.

On 25 January 1963, R. Gallopin, the ICRC's Executive Director wrote to Maj Gen CK Lakshmanan to draw the IRC's attention to the announcement of China News Agency that 2,156, then 3,350 Indian PoWs were still in Chinese hands, "after the repatriation of some 700 [715] sick and wounded. May we ask if the Indian Red Cross has received sufficient information to tell which of these figures are correct?"

The released figures of the PoWs are, to say the least, confusing, but the over-all number of PoWs of 3,350 was correct (with 2,156 still to be released in February).

On 29 January 1963, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur wrote to Leopold Boissier¹⁴, the IRCR president to say: "a large number of Indian personnel continue to be prisoners in Chinese hands, some for over three months, we hope that the ICRC will wish to remind the Chinese authorities of their obligations under the Geneva Conventions and to urge again that a delegate of the ICRC be permitted without further delay to visit the Indian POWs in order to ensure that they are treated in accordance with the Conventions."

Two days later, the IRC received a letter from the CRC which partially answered Geneva's queries: "The captured Indian military men in China are well treated in every respect. They have been given every facility for keeping correspondence with their families, postage of all their letters were paid by the authorities of the Centre for Captured Indian Personnel [a Chinese organisation]."

Finally on 06 February 1963, Boissier decided to write directly to Marshal Chen Yi, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs: "to repeat the appeal to Chinese Government to grant permission for one of ICRC delegates to visit Indian PoWs in China." The name of Andre Durand was again suggested.

At the same time, the IRCR urged again Delhi to officially write to Beijing suggesting that the ICRC should be the intermediary; but for unknown reasons the Nehru's government was reluctant to take up the issue with Beijing. Boissier told the Rajkurmari: "In the absence of such notification, it must be feared that the Chinese Government will continue to take advantage of the fact that diplomatic relations not having been broken off, there would be no reason for the ICRC to intervene." The situation was stagnating.

An Answer to Marshal Chen Yi's Cable

On 18 February 1963, an answer came to the cable sent to Marshal Chen Yi: "Since the Sino-Indian border clashes, the Chinese government has all along given good treatment in every respect to the Indian military personnel who were captured in the course of their attacks on the Chinese frontier guards."

Beijing kept repeating that it was India who attacked China; Beijing stated: "the Chinese government have already provided to the Indian government and the IRC lists of the names, addresses and the state of health of all the captured Indian personnel; assisted these captured personnel in establishing communication with their families and transmitted to them packages sent from India. China has also released on its own initiative the captured wounded and sick Indian military personnel. At present, direct contact is continuing between the CRCS and the IRC, and questions concerning the captured Indian military personnel should of course be handled directly by the Chinese and Indian sides."

Beijing's conclusion was it was not necessary for the ICRC to take the trouble to visit the prisoners. However; it found most regrettable that the India PoWs "captured in the course of the Chinese frontier guards' counterattacks in self-defence" were equated with the "law-abiding overseas Chinese illegally detained by the Indian authorities."

On 27 February 1963, the IRCR confirmed to Gen Lakshmanan that "the total number of Indian prisoners of war still in Chinese hands is 3,319, excluding 716 wounded and sick who have been repatriated and the 13 bodies returned by the Chinese Red Cross."

Announcement of Release of all PoWs

Finally on 04 April 1963, the CRC officially wrote: "Our government announced on April second its decision to release all Indian military men whom Chinese frontier guards in Tibet and Sinkiang regions captured during their counterattacks in self-defence stop we have contacted indcross [IRC] directly to make arrangements for their repatriation stop thanks for your concern."

The same day, during a meeting, Maunoir, who had been instrumental in putting a constant pressure on the Chinese, diplomatically told Amb AS Mehta: "It must not be ruled out that the insistence of the ICRC on the Chinese government to obtain

permission to visit the Indian PoWs played a role in the decision that the CRC [to release them].” The letter to Chen Yi probably helped to unlock the situation.

The minutes of the above meeting added: “Mr. Mehta shares this opinion, adding that the Indian authorities had made no attempt to obtain this repatriation.”

During the following weeks, all the PoWs detained by China would be released in batches as this chart shows.

Conclusion

On 24 February 1964, the Permanent Indian Mission in Geneva issued a Memorandum, pointing out to the Chinese violations of the Geneva Conventions “in respect of the treatment meted out to captured Indian military personnel in their hands. ...The specific articles of the Geneva Conventions 1949, which have been violated by the Government of the People’s Republic of China in the treatment of captured Indian army personnel have been evidenced also in the affidavits ...obtained from Indian military personnel following their repatriation.”

It cited a large number of articles of the Conventions and provided the affidavits of eleven PoWs corroborating these facts¹⁵. The rosy picture painted by the Chinese propaganda had actually been a nightmare for the Indian PoWs.

Chart 2 : Release of PoWs

	Wounded Released	Dead	PoWs Received	PoWs Released	Place of Release
1962 till Dec	715	13	1132	715	See Chart 1
1963 Feb-06			453		
1963 Feb-06			820		
1963 Feb-16		1	915		
1963 Apr-14				144	Bumla
1963 Apr-17				131	Lohit sector
1963 Apr-24				146	Lohit sector
1963 May-04				27	Kunming
1963 May-05				447	Bumla
1963 May-10				450	Bumla
1963 May-15				353	Bumla
1963 May-17				4	Siang
1963 May-17				160	Spanggur
1963 May-20				498	Bumla
1963 May-25				382	Bumla
	715	14	3320	3457	

As can be seen, there are some discrepancies between the figures.

**Chart 3 : List of Captured Indian Officers Handed-Over
in Kunming (China) on 04 May, 1963**

Name	Serial No.	Rank
John Parashram Dalvi	IC 739	Brig Gen
Balwant Singh Ahluwalia	IC 1778	Lt Col
Krishen Kumar Tewari	IC 520	Lt Col
Maha Singh Rikh	IC 2057	Lt Col
Rattan Singh	IC 3414	Lt Col
Gurdial Singh	IC 1880	Maj
Har Phul Singh	IC 1638	Maj
Sharan Singh Sethi	IC 6085	Maj
Dhan Singh Thapa	IC 7990	Maj
Shreekant Sitaram Hasabnis	IC 6233	Maj
Bejoy Mohan Bhattacharjea	IC 1338	Lt Col
KK Chandran	IC 2636	Lt Col
Gurdial Singh	IC 1979	Lt Col
Hasta Bahadur Rai	IC 4053	Maj
John Emanuel Lawrence Brito	IC 4823	Maj
Lahiri Ajit Chandra	IC 9235	Maj
Vinod Kumar Singh	IC 7709	Maj
Vithal Vaikuntha Rajadhyaksha	IC 4864	Maj
Surendra Nath Dar	IC 5441	Maj
Madiha Chiriapandra Nanjappa	IC 9714	Lt Col
Namdevrao Bandoba Jadhav	IC 1339	Lt Col
Babur Singh Thapa	IC 5058	Maj
Bimalanga Chatterji	IC 2262	Maj
Darbara Singh	IC 9741	Maj
Kanwar Jit Singh Grewal	IC 4918	Maj
Nar Bahadur Chand	IC 2215	Maj
Rupendra Singh Virk	IC 8091	Maj

Endnotes

¹ *The Truth About The History of The Sino-Indian Border War*; I am indebted to Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina (Retd), Secretary, Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research of the United Service Institution of India for showing a translation of this book.

² As we shall see, the exact figure of PoWs differs according to the sources. The correct figure was probably around 3,300.

³ Even though there was no official declaration of war and diplomatic ties were not severed, during the months following the war, there were only few direct interactions between the Governments of India and China. Probably the Prime Minister felt betrayed and he preferred non-aligned countries to act on behalf of India. On its part, China was keen to negotiate directly. This certainly hampered an early solution of the PoWs' issue.

⁴ The ICRC has today 190 National Societies, including the Indian and Chinese National Red Crosses. The ICRC is an old and highly honoured organization, most widely respected the world over, having been awarded thrice the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917, 1944, and 1963.

⁵ I am grateful to Fabrizio Bensi, the Archivist of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, for his help during my visit.

⁶ Maj Gen Cheruvari Kottieth 'CK' Lakshmanan (5 April 1898 – 3 October 1970) was an Indian sportsman who represented British India in the 1924 Summer Olympics held in Paris, participating in the hurdles race. He served in the Indian Army and subsequently joined the Indian Red Cross Society, first as the Secretary General and later as Director General.

⁷ A letter and memorandum on 02 November 1962 and another letter on 21 November 1962

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⁹ It is not clear if the Indian Consul General in Lhasa was recalled or left on his own. His presence in Lhasa could have made a difference during the following weeks.

¹⁰ There was no logic in the Indian position. Why keep up the diplomatic relations with China, as if nothing had happened and at the same time unilaterally close the Consulate in Lhasa? But a wind of panic was blowing over Delhi during those difficult months and logic was not prevalent.

¹¹ A first batch of 64 Indian PoWs was released on 05 December 1962 at Bomdila. Most of the PoWs had suffered from gunshot wounds. Dr. Ahluwalia headed the Indian Red Cross team which brought back the

wounded men from Bomdila. During a brief function, a speech commending Sino-Indian friendship was read out by Wen Jong-chung, the leader of the Chinese Red Cross team. Interestingly, the whole ceremony was photographed and filmed

¹² Located at 7, Avenue de la Paix in Geneva.

¹³ The civilian internees could not be considered as PoWs.

¹⁴ The ICRC president always calls her 'Princess'.

¹⁵ Unfortunately not available in the file.