

Red Cross Ends Some Vietnam Visits

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GENEVA, Dec. 28—The International Committee of the Red Cross has suspended indefinitely the visits it had been making to political prisoners in South Vietnam.

The suspension was decided upon because the South Vietnamese authorities have denied the Red Cross delegates the right to see the prisoners in the absence of all witnesses, a spokesman for the all-Swiss committee said today.

However, Red Cross visits to prisoners of war in South Vietnam continue in the normal way as provided in the 1949 Geneva conventions on the protection of war victims, the spokesman said.

The prisons in which civilians are held are officially called

"re-education centers." Because the term "political prisoner" is frowned upon by the authorities, the Red Cross refers to the inmates only as persons held "because of the events" in South Vietnam.

Red Cross delegates had been visiting the national centers in Saigon and in the provinces on an irregular basis for a number of years, the spokesman said.

Occasional Private Talks

No general authorization for private talks with the prisoners was ever granted, but occasionally such discussions without witnesses were permitted by the official in charge of a provincial center.

The Red Cross source said that he did not know how many political prisoners there were

in South Vietnam but that it was estimated that there were 22,000 in the centers that the committee's delegates visited last year.

The visits were continued until last August in the hope that the authorities in Saigon would eventually grant the authorization to see the prisoners without witnesses as provided for in the Geneva convention dealing specifically with civilian war victims.

But after making another appeal for such an authorization the Red Cross decided against pursuing the visits without it. "We felt that if the prisoners could not speak freely in the absence of witnesses we could not determine precisely what the prisons' conditions were like," the Red Cross spokesman said.