



ICRC

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UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL 5319th meeting

Protection of civilians in armed conflict

Statement by
Mr. Jacques Forster, Vice-President
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva
New York, 9 December 2005

Mr. President,

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Security Council on an issue – the protection of civilians in armed conflict – that is at the core of the ICRC's mandate and operational priorities.

In contemporary conflicts civilians are often the victims of the deliberate disregard shown by bearers of weapons for the strict obligation they have under international humanitarian law to spare those not taking part in hostilities. Unarmed men, women and children are intentionally targeted for what they are.

The lack of political will to fully respect humanitarian law and other applicable rules remains the main impediment to protecting civilians in times of armed conflict. The prime responsibility for providing protection and solutions falls upon State authorities and all those who bear weapons. Humanitarian endeavours like those of the ICRC can never be a substitute for political action.

Article 1 common to the four Geneva Conventions clearly stipulates that States have an obligation not only to respect but also to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in all circumstances. This duty encompasses measures ranging from purely preventive action to the repression of serious violations of humanitarian law.

The ICRC has a duty to act on behalf of all persons affected by armed conflict and other forms of violence, without distinction. However, it takes into account specific vulnerabilities and needs such as those of internally displaced persons (IDPs), women, missing persons and their families, and children – for whom the Security Council so strongly expressed its deep concern in the recent past.

The plight of IDPs is of primary concern to the ICRC, whose priorities in this area centre mainly on challenges such as how to prevent displacement, how to alleviate the suffering caused by displacement once it occurs, where and how to relocate IDPs, how to take into account the needs of the resident population in areas hosting IDPs and how to ensure security and protection for returnees.

The ICRC is convinced that enhanced cooperation is crucial to addressing the protection needs of IDPs. Its efforts to coordinate with other humanitarian actors in this area are reality based and action oriented. We also believe that it is extremely important for humanitarian organizations to work in a complementary manner. This approach has sometimes led us to focus on preventing displacement, particularly in remote areas, and might lead us to do so again.

In times of armed conflict, women are the victims of various forms of violence due to violations of international humanitarian law. Many are wounded or killed. Others are marginalized and suffer anguish and deprivation after losing or being separated from family members. Sexual violence is too often used as a weapon of war, targeting not only women, but through them, the entire community. It is one of the most difficult issues for humanitarian organizations to address. The social repercussions of rape are totally devastating for women if the community responds by stigmatizing the victim rather than prosecuting the perpetrator.

Another issue I would like to refer to is the plight of countless families whose relatives have gone missing as a result of armed conflict. These families make desperate attempts to ascertain the fate of their loved ones and are often unable to overcome their pain and rebuild their lives again, even years after the events. Any infringement of their right to know what has happened to their relatives hampers reconciliation and peace efforts.

The authorities must spare no effort to prevent people from disappearing and to deal with the consequences when they do. The ICRC takes a comprehensive approach to this issue, endeavouring to make a decisive contribution by carrying out preventive activities, visiting detained persons, advocating for and taking part in mechanisms to elucidate the fate of missing persons, promoting forensic activities and the return of human remains, and also providing support for families.

Mr President,

To build acceptance, establish dialogue and play its humanitarian role effectively, the ICRC believes that it must continue to be – and be seen to be – neutral and independent. While recognizing that there are other approaches to humanitarian action, we believe that neutral and independent humanitarian action has a clear added value for the protection of civilians in times of armed conflict and that it is essential to avoid misperceptions that political, military and humanitarian actors all pursue the same objectives. Building trust and acceptance among all the parties to a conflict is an arduous undertaking that may be rapidly destroyed with lasting consequences if doubts arise as to the independence of a humanitarian actor.

Let me conclude by stressing how important it is for the international community to prevent armed conflict and to support actions aimed at addressing its underlying causes in an effective and sustainable manner, thereby making the renewal of hostilities less likely.

Finally, I have the pleasure of drawing your attention to the adoption, on Thursday December 8th by a Diplomatic Conference, of the third Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions. The creation of an additional emblem is a very important step which will enable the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to at last achieve universality, and thus more effectively protect civilians in armed conflicts.

Thank you, Mr President.