

## **HABITAT II: Statement by the ICRC**

*The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II) was held in Istanbul from 3 to 14 June 1996. On behalf of the ICRC, Mr Jacques Forster, member of the Committee, gave an address entitled "Survival of the civilian population in wartime". The Review is publishing part of his statement.*

In time of peace, cities already suffer from overpopulation, social problems and a decaying environment, with run-down housing, infrastructure and services. In time of war, however, they are affected by even more dramatic problems resulting from the destruction of elements vital for the survival of the civilian population, such as housing and sources of food and water. Since the ICRC has been entrusted by the international community with a mandate to take action in situations of armed conflict, it is on this specific topic that I should like to speak today. (...)

### **Development of new forms of assistance for war victims**

In order to respond to all this suffering, the ICRC, like other organizations, has had to develop new forms of assistance. However, the structures which have recently been set up are intended not simply to cope with the pressing problems of the moment but also to seek a solution from within, to ensure that the situation does not persist and that displaced populations are able either to rebuild their lives in new surroundings or to return home and pick up the threads again in an environment which has been devastated to greater or lesser degree by man-made disasters.

As it was no longer possible to cope with emergencies such as these by traditional means, specialized units had to be established with skills in the areas of water supply and sanitation, agricultural engineering, veterinary science and the like. Moreover, traditional aid programmes were extremely expensive in the long term and could provide only partial responses. What was needed was a vision of aid in terms of sustainability,

so as to avoid creating permanent dependency and offer these millions of victims the hope of embarking on a new life.

### **The serious problem of water**

An example which graphically illustrates this approach is the programme to supply drinking water which the ICRC has been conducting together with UNICEF in Iraq. Under this programme, as many as 90 water pumping or treatment stations were put back into operation in 1995. This year, a budget of around five million Swiss francs has been allocated to cover a further 62 stations — 11 in the three northern governorates, nine in Baghdad itself and 42 in another 13 governorates.

Elsewhere we are facing problems of similar magnitude. In Rwanda, for example, ICRC programmes conducted with National Red Cross Societies are bringing drinking water to millions of people in 35 communes of eight prefectures. At the same time, public awareness-raising programmes are making Rwandans conscious of the importance of this resource.

I could cite other examples in places such as Bosnia, Somalia (particularly Mogadishu) and the Russian Federation (Chechen Republic), where programmes like these are not only supplying drinking water to populations living in difficult circumstances but also restoring and maintaining water-supply installations so that conflict victims can gradually return to something approaching a normal existence.

### **The transition from emergency to rehabilitation and development**

Water, however, is just one of the elements necessary for maintaining health, the fundamental prerequisite without which no development is possible. Health — or more precisely public health — is becoming an increasingly important factor in every ICRC operation undertaken, whether in response to an emergency or with a view to the long term.

Thus there is an overall aid strategy in which emergency assistance is accompanied by programmes in other fields just as vital as water supply and sanitation or the distribution of food and other relief. When one considers the ICRC veterinary programmes in southern Sudan and Somalia, which provided vaccinations and treatment for millions of cattle and camels — the sole resource of semi-nomadic populations, and the agricultural aid programmes in Burundi, southern Sudan, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia, the importance the ICRC attaches to these

programmes is immediately apparent. They extend far beyond the immediate emergency situation, helping to ensure a smoother transition from war to peace and giving the affected populations new hope for a better life in the future. Accordingly, the ICRC finds itself increasingly involved in programmes with a development aspect or, more precisely, a strong focus on the long term. (...)

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